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# Messianic Perspectives®

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

## The Olive Tree Speaks

Part One

BY GARY HEDRICK



The standoff between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism shows no signs of being resolved anytime soon. Theologians continue to churn out books defending one or the other of these viewpoints.

If we're honest about it, there are good points on either side. So, which position is closer to the truth? That's the big question. The conversation may not seem like it's all that consequential, but it is. In fact, it's critical because so many important issues depend on our answer.

Ironically, people on both sides of this debate appeal to Romans 11 as a proof text for their viewpoint. For instance, replacement theologians (supersessionists) say this chapter proves that the Church has replaced ethnic Israel in God's plan.<sup>1</sup> We, on the other hand, believe we can show that it proves just the opposite.

So, again, who is right? Well, when we listen carefully to Paul's Olive Tree in Romans 11, the answer should come through loud and clear.

After all, in Jewish culture, the olive tree was a well-known symbol for national Israel, the seed of Abraham. This imagery of a tree recalls Isaiah's comparison of Israel's experience of divine judgment to "the shaking of an olive tree" (17:6; 24:13).<sup>2</sup>

So, in Paul's argument in Romans 11, he gives voice to a special "natural" Olive Tree. If we listen carefully, this remarkable Tree will teach us a few things about the relationship between Israel and the Church.

At the outset, we note that some commentators recognize only one olive tree in this chapter. However, that's not technically correct. There are two trees here—a "natural" (carefully cultivated) Olive Tree and a "wild" olive tree that grows on its own.

The natural Tree represents God's People, ancient Covenant Israel (established and maintained by God's promises to the Patriarchs, who are the "roots"), and the "wild" olive tree represents the Nations (*haGoyim*, the Gentiles). Gentiles are transplanted from the wild tree into the natural Tree by exercising faith like Abraham did: *For what does the Scripture say?* "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3).

Paul compares this process of transplantation (from one tree to another) to "grafting," a well-known procedure in horticulture even today.

<sup>1</sup> This is where the term "Supersessionism" comes from. It's the view that the Church has *superseded* Israel in God's plan of the ages. One of their underlying assumptions is that the Church is now "New Israel" (for example, see O. Palmer Robertson in *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*). As the new and upgraded "Israel," the Church fulfills the purposes God set for His people Israel in ancient times. Threads of this view can be found as far back as Justin Martyr (AD 100–165), one of the early Church Fathers, who argued in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that the Church follows in ancient Israel's steps and succeeds where the Jewish people failed. He wrote, "We, who have been brought near to God by this crucified Christ, are the true spiritual Israel."

<sup>2</sup> The shaking of the Olive Tree is a reference to the harvesting process. It wasn't practical to climb up into an olive tree to pluck off one olive at a time. Instead, they would simply shake an olive tree, sometimes rather violently, so the riper olives would fall to the ground where they could be gathered up.

## TWO OLIVE TREES, FOUR PORTRAITS

In Chapter 11, Paul offers four different portraits or snapshots of these two olive trees, each one taken during a different timeframe. Let's consider these four portraits, along with their symbolism.

### SINS OF ISRAEL

Many Christians, when they think about Israel's failings over the centuries, focus mainly on the Sanhedrin's rejection of Jesus' Messianic claims in AD 30.

Sadly, however, that's only part of the story. Israel had many sins and shortcomings prior to that time. One of her most flagrant and recurrent sins, for example, was idolatry, the sin of putting other gods, such as Baal or Asherah, before Yahweh (e.g., 1 Kings 11:33; Jer. 2:13).

Other sins involved various violations of the Sinai Covenant—like their failure to observe commandments such as Sabbath-observance, dietary laws, and judicial precepts (Ex. 32:8; Jer. 11:10). They were frequently admonished for tolerating social injustices such as exploiting the poor, corrupting the justice system, and neglecting the widow and the orphan (Amos 5:11–12; Isa. 1:17; Micah 6:11–12).

According to the prophets, Israel and her leaders were also guilty of religious hypocrisy. They offered sacrifices while they were living in moral corruption (Isa. 1:11–15; Amos 5:21–24). At other times, the Israelites were unfaithful to the Lord by engaging in dishonest practices and by their failure to trust in His promises and protection (Hosea 6:7; Zeph. 3:2).

Nonetheless, the Sanhedrin's rejection of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century was unquestionably the nation's most consequential failure of all.

## PORTRAIT ONE—THE NATURAL OLIVE TREE IN THE PAST

This first portrait represents Israel during the Older Testament (OT) era. It's described as "natural" because it points us to the ethnic descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the natural, genetic progenitors of the Jewish people (11:24).

During this time, the natural Tree was unfruitful and largely emaciated due to national sin, but it included a few scattered, ingrafted sprigs here and there. These wild sprigs were joined to the natural Tree and represent non-Jews who joined up with *Am Yisra'el* ("People of Israel") in biblical times.

Notable examples of non-Jews who joined the Jewish people during the OT era include Rahab (Josh. 2; 6:17–25; cp. Matt. 1:5), Ruth (1:16–18), and the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:24–27).

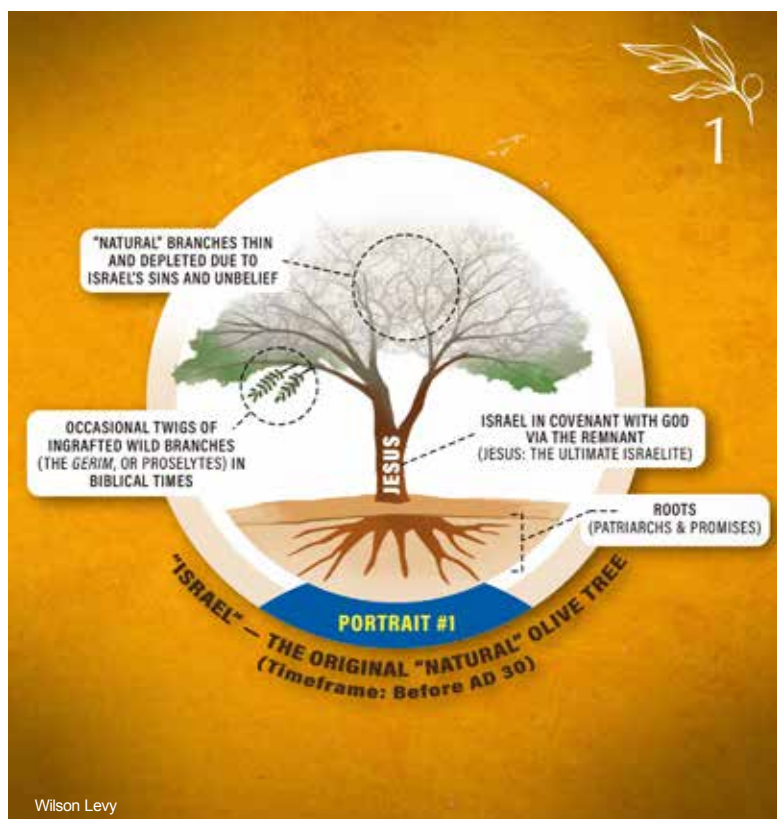
Furthermore, Moses calls our attention to "a mixed multitude" of non-Jews who chose to join Israel at the time of the Exodus (Ex. 12:38). This vast multitude of non-Jews left Egypt with the Israelites.

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Of course, this was centuries before the rabbis codified the requirements for the conversion of proselytes (Heb., *gerim*), but we are quite certain that this “mixed multitude” from Egypt was fully integrated into what later became the Commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12).

Some of these ingrafted OT individuals (namely Rahab and Ruth) even became ancestors of the Messiah and show up in the NT’s Messianic genealogy (Matt. 1:5). They, too, were “wild” sprigs that were transplanted into the natural Tree.

This original natural Tree represents OT Covenant Israel (Rom. 11:1), established as the People of God by the covenant God made with Abraham.

The sorry spiritual state of the Jewish people is reflected in the thinned-out natural “branches” (vv. 16–19, 21, 24), most of which have been pruned and “broken off” during this timeframe due to their idolatry and unbelief (vv. 17, 19).

The roots of this natural Tree represent the promises God made to the Patriarchs—the promises that form the basis of the Abrahamic and New Covenants. No one in any age can be made right with God apart from these promises.<sup>3</sup> The trunk of the Tree represents God’s Covenant People Israel who were connected to God by His unconditional covenant promises. Those promises looked forward to the Messianic fulfillment later made possible by Jesus, the Ultimate Israelite.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> We use the term “Covenant Israel” to describe the OT People of God whose divine connection was based on the unilateral covenant He had made with the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:1–6; 17:1–8, 15–21). The unconditional nature of the covenant promises meant that even though the faithful remnant was vastly outnumbered, “all Israel” remained connected, despite her sins.

<sup>4</sup> In rabbinic theology, Israel is said to have become a nation at Mount Sinai, where the people, without hesitation or debate, accepted the responsibilities of the Mosaic Law: “All that the LORD has said, we will do, and be obedient” (Ex. 24:7b). However, they quickly demonstrated that they were incapable of keeping that Law. They repeatedly “broke” the terms of the Sinai Covenant (Jer. 31:32). By definition, a bilateral covenant becomes null and void if either party violates its terms. The New Covenant came later and was essentially a restatement of the original unilateral Abrahamic Covenant. Contrary to traditional thinking, the “roots” of the nation go back to Abraham, not Moses.

The original Tree (vv. 16–18) wasn’t contaminated by the people’s shortcomings because their status was settled, not by their behavior, but by God’s promise to the Patriarchs (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). He told them, “*I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians*” (Ex. 6:7).

What was often contaminated, however, was Israel’s fellowship with *HaShem* and her enjoyment of His blessings. But her covenant relationship with Him was never disrupted because it was unconditional.

That’s why both the “root” and the “branches” are said to be “holy” in Romans 11:16. Nothing can cancel that covenant relationship. While blessings may be forfeited and exile imposed as divine discipline, the Israelites have never ceased to be God’s Covenant People (cf. Proverbs 3:11–12; Hebrews 12:3–11). Through every age—whether in judgment or restoration—God has preserved a believing remnant in Israel (Romans 11:5), a testimony to the enduring faithfulness of His promises. Indeed, as verse 4 reminds us, God never leaves Himself without a witness among His ancient people.

The Abrahamic Covenant made this possible. Through this unconditional covenant, God revealed how sinful people can become rightly related to Him. The only way was (and still is) to trust Him like Abraham did (Rom. 4:1–3). Abraham’s faith is seen in the fact that he was willing to uproot his family and move to another part of the world.

God responded to Abraham’s faith with a series of divine “I wills” in Genesis 12:1–9. The modifier “if” is nowhere to be found in the text. Human works—whether good or bad—played no role whatsoever.<sup>5</sup>

## **PORTRAIT TWO—THE NATURAL OLIVE TREE DURING THE CHURCH AGE**

This second portrait is the same as the first one—but viewed in a later timeframe. It has existed throughout the Church Age (from the Day of Pentecost in AD 30 to the present). With the unbelieving branches pruned from the Tree during the biblical period, it has been left depleted and emaciated except for a scattering of believing natural branches (i.e., the remnant).

### **THE OLIVE TREE SPEAKS TO THE GENTILE CHURCH**

*Do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Rom. 11:18).*

The metaphor teaches humility, unity, and continuity in God’s redemptive plan—one unified People of God, drawing life from the same root (Covenant Israel), even as new “wild” (non-Jewish) branches are grafted in.

*Grafting is not replacement.  
It is union without confusion.  
It is shared life without erased identity.*

<sup>5</sup> Bad behavior disrupts our *fellowship* with God, but it doesn’t negate our divine *relationship*. Sinful acts result in discipline, but not disinheritance (Heb. 12:7–11).

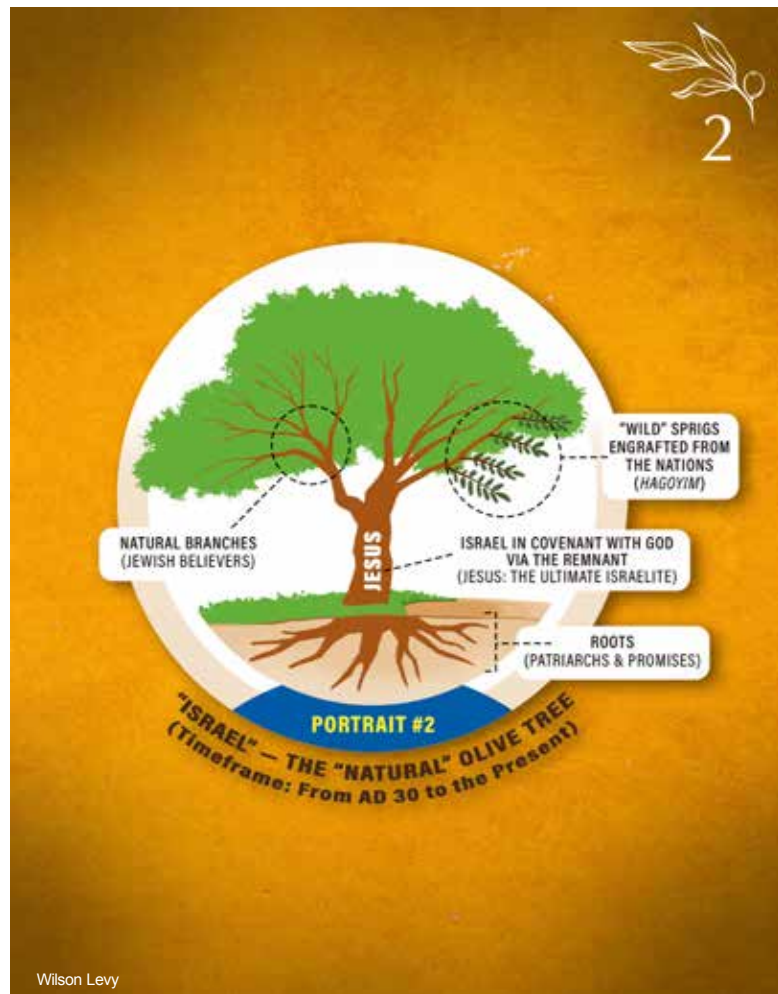


Here's where this gets a little tricky. The first portrait was the natural Tree prior to AD 30. Now, this second portrait represents that same natural Olive Tree, only later, during the Church Age.<sup>6</sup> The trunk/roots of this Tree are still the Jewish Patriarchs and their covenant connection with God.

That's what makes them "the People of Israel" (*Am Yisra'el*). They comprise the initial expression of "the People of God" (Heb. 11:25; 2 Peter 2:10). Later, "the People of God" would be expended to include the NT Church (Acts 2).

However, this cannot be misconstrued to mean the Church has replaced OT Israel and become a new and upgraded "Israel," to the exclusion of the Jewish people. Both entities (Israel and the Church) are included in the unified "People of God."

Paul isn't talking about replacement here. What he's teaching is just the opposite. Ethnic Israel was set aside *temporarily* due to unbelief (Rom. 11:25), but she hasn't been *permanently* replaced by anyone or anything, as we are about to see.



## One New Man

Does God's unconditional acceptance of sinful Israel mean that He has lowered His standards or compromised His holiness? Not at all. In fact, Jesus the Messiah fulfilled the Law perfectly and succeeded in every point where ancient Israel failed. Then He died on Calvary to pay for the sins of the world. In this way, God's justice was satisfied. No compromise was involved.

<sup>6</sup> We believe the Church Age began on the Day of Pentecost in AD 30 (Acts 2:1-4).

In the NT, Gentile believers are grafted into the Olive Tree of OT Covenant Israel. This is possible because of Jesus, who brings believing Jews and Gentiles together in "one body":

*For He Himself is our peace, **who has made both one**, and has **broken down the middle wall of separation**,*

*having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself **one new man from the two, thus making peace**,*

*and that He might **reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross**, thereby putting to death the enmity.*

*And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.*

*For through Him we **both have access by one Spirit to the Father*** (Eph. 2:14-18, emphasis added).

Paul's "one body," then, consists of both Jews (OT Israel) and Gentiles (the NT Church) comprising the unified "People of God." They are on separate tracks (with Israel's track being mostly inactive) during the Church Age, but the two tracks converge in the coming Millennium.

In this second portrait, the branches are being replenished (1) by the flourishing of natural branches (an influx of Jewish Jesus-believers), and (2) by the ingrafting of branches from the nearby "wild" tree (whose branches represent non-Jewish Jesus-believers).

*You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in."*

*Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear.*

*For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either.*

*Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.*

*And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.*

*For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom. 11: 17-24).*

Here in this second portrait, the remaining viable branches of the natural Tree represent Jewish believers, or Covenant Israel (Jer. 31:31; Rom. 9:6-8; Gal. 3:28-29).

In Romans 11, unbelievers are the disobedient "branches" that have been pruned (broken off) from the Tree.

Now we come to the final two portraits of the Olive Tree. The first one is a snapshot of the natural Tree as it could have been described before AD 30. The second one is that same Tree as it will someday appear after Romans 11:26 comes to fruition and "all of Israel [is] saved."

## PORTRAIT THREE—THE "WILD" OLIVE TREE

In this third portrait, we have the second tree, a "wild" tree representing the Gentile nations (*haGoyim*). This tree has always existed—from biblical times up to the present time. The natural tree and the wild tree are two entirely different trees, each with its own distinctive features. This wild tree provides branches of Gentile believers that are grafted into the natural Tree (i.e., ethnic/genetic Israel).

Paul addresses his comments here to the believers at Rome (“you”), many of whom were not ethnic Jews. They were Messianic Gentiles, non-Jewish believers in Jesus, and he says they came from the wild olive tree. In the analogy, the previous natural Tree (representing Covenant Israel) is one that’s carefully nurtured and cultivated in a grove while this wild tree grows randomly almost anywhere.

## Grafting

In Paul’s metaphor, branches from this “wild” (non-Jewish) tree have been “grafted” into the “natural” Tree (Abrahamic Israel). Grafting is a technique used to join two plant parts together, so they grow as a single plant. However, this surgical procedure doesn’t change the character of either plant.<sup>7</sup>

In grafting, the “scion” is the branch or twig that’s cut out of a tree or plant and surgically inserted in another plant known as the “rootstock.” However, each plant retains its own genetic identity. So, when sprigs are grafted from the “wild” (non-Jewish) tree into the original Olive Tree, it doesn’t change the natural Tree. That original Tree is still Jewish (Covenant Israel)—and the basis of its connection to God is still the Abrahamic Covenant. Nothing in that regard has changed.



This raises questions about our conception of the Church. Some dispensational writers have gone to great lengths to show that the Church is superior to ancient Israel—like when they say that the Church is God’s “heavenly people” while Israel is merely His “earthly people.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> A common practice among growers of fruit trees is to graft sprigs (scions) from pear trees into apple trees. After the minor surgery, the apple tree (the rootstock) will flourish if it’s properly cared for, and if the growing tissue (cambium layers) from both trees (pear and apple) make contact. Pears will grow on the engrafted branch while the original tree provides nourishment and continues to produce apples.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 25.

But are we listening to the trees here in Romans 11? According to Paul, the trees tell us that both OT Israel and the NT Church are connected to God in the same way—that is, by exercising Abraham-like faith! One is not better than the other; one is not more spiritual than the other. Both are God’s People by grace, through faith.

In horticulture, it is common to graft pear branches onto apple trees. This process can strengthen and enhance the host tree, but it does not alter either trees’ fundamental identity. The apple tree will continue to bear apples, not pears, because grafting does not change its genetic makeup. And while some might imagine otherwise, the resulting apples will still taste like apples—not pears.

Some dispensationalists are uncomfortable with the notion of Gentile believers (the “Church”) being grafted into the natural Tree of Israel. They think it diminishes the Church’s unique identity by saying it’s part of ancient Covenant Israel. However, it’s hard to avoid that association if we take Paul’s analogy seriously—as we listen intently to the trees.

Remember what many dispensationalists today say: Israel and the Church are distinct in *identity* but complementary in *function*.

As we saw earlier, horticulturalists remind us that in grafting, the scion retains the genetic makeup of its donor plant, even after it’s been engrafted into a new plant or tree. As we noted earlier, its identity remains the same, even though it is now drawing nourishment from another root system.

Note that Paul tells these Gentile believers, *You, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them* [i.e., the natural branches], *and with them you became a partaker of the root and fatness of the natural olive tree* (v. 17).

He doesn’t say, “You supersede the native Olive Tree.” He doesn’t say one replaces, continues in the role of, swallows up, expands, or fulfills the other. Instead, he says the wild branches follow the natural branches as partners (“partakers”). They now function in perfect harmony, as one “People of God”—Israel in the OT and the Church in the NT.

The wild branches are Messianic Gentiles, and the natural branches are Messianic Jews. Together, we could say they comprise Abrahamic (or Covenant) “Israel”—the unified “People of God.”

This grafting process is “contrary to nature” because the normal routine would have been to graft a twig from the natural (cultivated) tree onto the “wild” (uncultivated) tree. This would help the “wild” tree thrive and benefit from the strength of the bigger, stronger tree from which the ingrafted branch came.

In this case, however, it’s the other way around. Sprigs from the “wild” tree (Gentile believers) are grafted into the natural Tree (Israel, God’s People). That’s why Paul says the procedure is contrary to nature.

The trees are telling us that both Israel and the *Kehilah* (Church) retain their distinctive identities. Their successor roles are complementary, and they co-exist in perfect harmony—first as Covenant Israel in the OT, then as the Church in the NT. At the end of this age, after having functioned in succession over a roughly 4,000-year period, the two entities finally converge and share in the blessings of the Millennial Kingdom.



## The New Covenant

The voice of the Olive Tree in Romans 11 rises to a crescendo and shouts out the Good News that the gates of salvation have been opened wide to the Gentiles! Jeremiah's New Covenant (31:31) would make it possible for both Jews and Gentiles to internalize God's Law and become rightly related to Him (Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15).

However, "new" doesn't necessarily mean "different." The New Covenant is not a different kind of covenant. It is simply a reaffirmation and amplification, after the failure at Sinai, of the original Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–14).<sup>9</sup> It consists of a series of divine "I wills" and forms the basis for the Gospel of God's grace.

Paul seems to be fully aware that some people might wrongly assume that God's inclusion of the Nations in His Plan means He is finished with ethnic Israel. However, he makes it clear that those people are mistaken. The Lord has not cancelled His arrangement with the Jewish people.

On the contrary, they continue to be the evidence of God's providential Hand in the world. As he writes in Romans 11:17–18, Gentile believers have been "grafted in" to Israel's Olive Tree and now "share in the nourishing root"—a vivid reminder that the Church's blessings flow from Israel's covenants, not in place of them.

Here's what we need to understand: Even in Israel's state of unbelief, while suffering divine discipline, they are still His People. John Walvoord writes:

The contingency of disobedience on the part of his descendants was faced. God promised that if they forsook His covenant and His commands, He would punish them but **He would not reverse the covenant:**

*"But I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.*

***"I will not violate my covenant** or alter what my lips have uttered.*

*"Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—*

*"that **Israel's line will continue forever** and his throne endure before me like the sun;*

***"it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky"** (Ps. 89:33–37, emphasis added).<sup>10</sup>*

One cannot help noticing the similarities between the chant of Ethan the Ezrahite in Psalm 89 (above) and these words of the Prophet Jeremiah:

*Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, Who disturbs the sea, And its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is His name):*

***"If those ordinances depart From before Me, says the LORD, Then the seed of Israel shall also cease From being a nation before Me forever."***

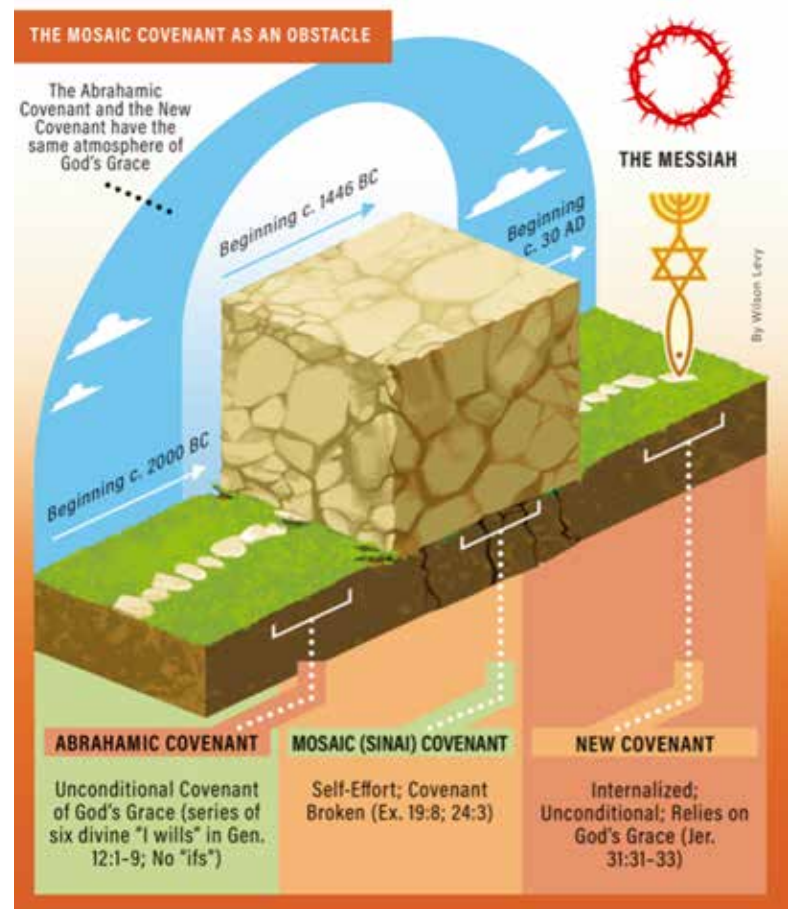
*Thus says the LORD: **"If heaven above can be measured, And the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel For all that they have done, says the LORD"** (Jer. 31:31–37, emphasis added).*

<sup>9</sup> We're not saying that the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant are identical. If they were, one of them would be unnecessary. They differ in timing, scope, administration, and focus, but they share a common foundation in God's unconditional, grace-based promise. That's why many theologians see the New Covenant as the fulfillment or continuation of the blessings promised to Abraham and validated by Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah (John 8:56; Gal. 3:16; Heb. 8–10).

<sup>10</sup> John Walvoord, *Every Prophecy about Jesus* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 31.

When the writer of Hebrews says "the first covenant" has been superseded by the New Covenant (8:13; 9:15), he's talking about the works-based Sinai Covenant—not the grace-based Abrahamic Covenant. That covenant has never been superseded or changed.<sup>11</sup>

The New Covenant was inaugurated by Messiah Yeshua, "the Ultimate Israelite," when He offered His blood as payment for our sins (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).



## Israel's Mistake

When God offered to change the basis of His relationship with Israel in the Book of Exodus, the people should have known better than to agree to such a change. They could have said, "Lord, that sounds awesome—and we're grateful—but we're good with the Abrahamic relationship. We would rather not make a change right now. But thanks anyway."

Regretfully, that's not what they said. Instead, when God laid down the Law, they answered with pride and self-assurance, "All that the LORD has spoken, we will do" (Ex. 19:8). Later, they were given another chance, and their answer was the same: "All the words which the LORD has said we will do" (24:3).

<sup>11</sup> "The first covenant" was the one that prescribed "gifts and sacrifices . . . as Moses was divinely instructed" (Heb. 8:3, 5)—that is, the Mosaic Covenant. Israel entered into this agreement at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:7–25) but quickly violated its terms and suffered God's judgment (32:1–35; but cp. Jer. 31:32). Now Israel has been offered a New Covenant where God would write His Law on their hearts instead of on cold, hard tablets of stone (v. 33). *Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart* (1 Cor. 3:3). This New Covenant sets aside the works-based Sinai Covenant in favor of the original, grace-based Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:16–18, 29; Rom. 4:13–14; Heb. 8:6–13).

## The Critical Difference

When they were under the grace-based Abrahamic Covenant, their faith and confidence were safely and securely in their God. When they stumbled (as they often did), He would reach down and pick them up again. But when they agreed to the stringent terms of the Sinai (Mosaic) Covenant, they were placing their faith and confidence in themselves—and in their ability to please God through their own efforts. That was the disastrous difference.

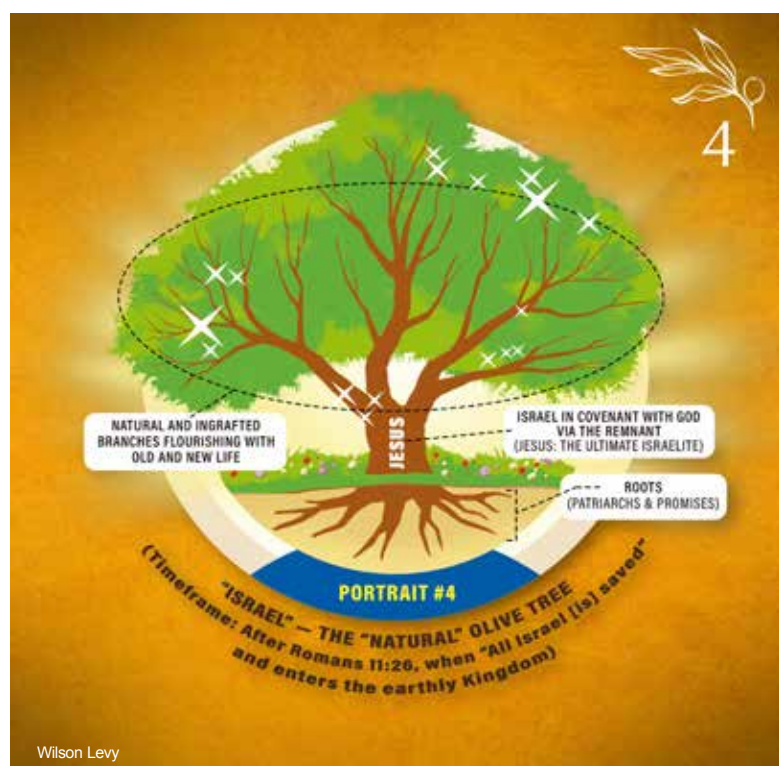
Non-Jewish Jesus-believers, however, have helped enhance and revitalize the original, natural Olive Tree by their most welcome ingrafted presence. However, the original Tree hasn't changed its character. It is still pre-Sinai Covenant Israel, which rests on God's grace and the unshakable foundation of His promises to the Patriarchs. This is all made possible by Jesus who, in the NT, stepped in and kept the Law perfectly on behalf of His People. He succeeded where they had so miserably failed.

## PORTRAIT FOUR—THE ORIGINAL NATURAL TREE IN THE FUTURE

This final portrait brings us back to the first tree, the natural Olive Tree (Israel), and gives us a snapshot of its future—*after* “all Israel is saved” and comes to faith in Messiah Jesus (11:26). In this timeframe, the Tree is no longer depleted and emaciated! Now, as it enters the Millennial Kingdom, the Tree flourishes in all its glory like never before!

Lift up your heads, O you gates!  
And be lifted up, you everlasting doors!  
And the King of glory shall come in.  
Who is this King of glory?  
The LORD strong and mighty,  
The LORD mighty in battle (Psalm 24:7–8).

This final version of the first Tree consists of its own natural branches in combination with wild branches that have been grafted from the non-Jewish tree into the Olive Tree of Covenant Israel. A further contribution will be the “grafting back in” of previously unbelieving natural branches (Rom. 11:23).



Paul describes this regrafting of branches that had previously been cut off (or, pruned) as “life from the dead” (v. 15). Spiritually speaking, this will be Israel’s resurrection as she enters the Millennial Kingdom.<sup>12</sup> At this point, Israel will exist in tandem with the Church as their destinies converge as a joint “People of God” in the coming Kingdom.

## After “All Israel Is Saved”

Here, the original Olive Tree will, at a yet-future time, flourish with the original branches bursting forth with fresh life (faith in Jesus) and with new branches (Gentiles) having been grafted in, enhancing and strengthening the original Olive Tree. At the close of the future seven-year Tribulation Period, after considerable persecution, the natural branches will skyrocket from a minuscule percentage of the nation up to nearly one hundred percent, virtually overnight.

Who has heard such a thing?  
Who has seen such things?  
Shall the earth be made to give birth in one day?  
Or shall a nation be born at once?  
For as soon as Zion was in labor,  
She gave birth to her children (Isa. 66:8).

Paul was looking forward to that blessed future Day:

And **they** [i.e., ethnic Israel] **also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.**  
For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, **how much more will these, who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?** (vv. 23–24).

Again, when Israel recognizes and receives her Messiah (Zech. 12:10), *she will be grafted back into her own Olive Tree*. She doesn't become something different from the original natural Olive Tree (the first portrait). Supersessionists like to call this regrafted entity “the Church,” but according to Paul’s metaphor, she is still Covenant Israel, party to the redemptive covenant God made with the Patriarchs. This regrafting takes place at the conclusion of the Church Age, when “all Israel” comes to faith in her Messiah.

## Is the Church “New Israel”?

Many dispensationalists, understandably, are reluctant to acknowledge the Church as a spiritual “partner” (or “partaker”) with ancient Israel. Yet it’s reasonably clear that the two (i.e., the Church and Israel) are linked by their common grounding in Jesus the Messiah and the unconditional, grace-based Abrahamic/New Covenants.

Moreover, Paul clearly says that all believers—whether Jewish or Gentile—are (in a spiritual sense) children of Abraham:

Therefore know that only **those who are of faith are sons of Abraham.**

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.”

So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham (Gal. 3:7–9).

<sup>12</sup> Some people wonder if the pruning of unbelieving branches here means that it’s possible for believers to lose their salvation. Does God “prune” us from His “tree” when we fail Him in some way? This highlights the danger of *over-allegorization* when we’re trying to decipher parables or other symbolic teachings. It’s tempting to assign significance to even the smallest details, sometimes to the point of it becoming ridiculous. It’s better simply to focus on the primary truths God is showing us and leave it at that. In this instance, the teaching is *eschatological* (about Israel’s future) rather than *soteriological* (about personal salvation).



Notice that Paul says that we are “blessed with believing Abraham” (v. 9). He believed God and it was imputed to him for righteousness. Even today, we are saved on that same basis—and it’s all by God’s amazing grace.

He tells the “wild” branches (Gentile believers) not to be jealous of the natural branches (Israel) because it is “*the root that supports you*” (Rom. 11:18). The Church is supported by Covenant Israel in a divine partnership as joint “People of God.”<sup>13</sup>

This is important. The Church (not an institution with cathedrals, steeples, and stained-glass windows, but the universal, ecclesial community, the *Kehilah*) is “supported” by the ancient root and trunk of Covenant Israel. All who come to Messiah in faith—whether Jew or Gentile—are grafted into this ancient promise and become children of Abraham by faith, thereby enjoying the nourishing sap of the promises God made to the patriarchs.

Messiah Jesus is the One through whom those promises come to fruition.

Paul’s point that the Church is supported by Israel implies that the two entities are distinct. They are related, but not the same. They perform different functions at different times, so they are always distinct in *identity* but complementary in *function*. They support each other and their destinies converge in the eschatological Kingdom of God.

The phrase “Spiritual Israel” is sometimes used to describe the Church, but this designation is theologically imprecise and potentially misleading. Here are several reasons why:

1. **The term “Israel” is not merely spiritual, nor is it synonymous with the Church.** What we’re calling “Covenant Israel” (or the unified “People of God”) is composed of both Jews and Gentiles who trust in Jesus, and it has both spiritual and ethnic dimensions. While the Church likewise includes both Jews and Gentiles, the term “New Israel” carries covenantal and prophetic significance that extends beyond the Church’s identity and role.
2. **The “New Israel” does not replace or supersede OT (ethnic) Israel.** God’s covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—including the Gentiles grafted in during the OT era—remains intact. Israel’s historic and prophetic claims (including the Land) are not negated by the Church. Instead, as Paul explains in Romans 11, ethnic Israel will be re-grafted into the Olive Tree when she turns to Messiah at the end of the age (Rom. 11:26).
3. **God has not abandoned ethnic Israel—even in her current state of unbelief.** Paul writes, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:2). A faithful remnant has always existed—even in Israel’s darkest hours (vv. 2–5). Today’s Messianic Jewish believers represent that ongoing remnant. One could say that the uninterrupted presence of the believing remnant in Israel over the past 4,000 years provides the continuity that our Covenant friends say they yearn for.

<sup>13</sup>The Greek word that’s translated “support” in 11:18 is *bastázō* (βαστάζω) which has a semantic range that includes (according to *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*) “to sustain, carry, uphold, or support.” Covenant Israel, then, with Messiah Jesus as its Head, may be said to sustain, carry, uphold, and/or support the NT Church.

4. **Israel and the Church are distinct yet united partners in God’s redemptive plan.** Though they function differently in various stages of salvation history, they are not mutually exclusive. Paul describes their shared status as “partakers” of the same spiritual blessings (Rom. 11:17; cf. Eph. 3:6). They are joined together in Messiah as “one new man” (Eph. 2:15)—a unity that preserves rather than erases their unique identities.

5. **Grafting illustrates union, not replacement.** In horticulture, a grafted branch does not lose its identity, nor does it transform the tree’s original nature. Instead, both entities retain their distinctiveness while sharing in a common life source. Likewise, in redemptive history, the Church and Israel are organically joined yet remain distinct entities. Just as God shepherded His People Israel during the OT era, so now (in the Church Age) Israel waits “in the wings” as God fulfills His purpose among the Gentiles. The “one new man” in Ephesians 2:15 is a union without confusion—a shared covenantal destiny without collapsed identities.

Calling the Church “Spiritual Israel” tends to blur important covenantal distinctions and can be used to support replacement theology, even when that’s not the intention. Instead, Scripture presents a more precise picture: a unified yet differentiated people of God, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, brought together in Messiah, each retaining their identity and participating in the promises without erasing the other.<sup>14</sup>

The above five points align closely with what some describe as *remnant-inclusive ecclesiology* or *eschatological inclusion*—a viewpoint characteristic of Progressive Dispensationalism. This perspective soundly refutes Replacement Theology while affirming both the spiritual continuity of God’s covenant purposes and His irrevocable promises to national Israel.

Three of the core issues that distinguish Dispensationalism from Covenant Theology are (1) Futurism, (2) the distinction between Israel and the Church (and their complementary roles in God’s ongoing program), and (3) national Israel’s future role in the Kingdom of God.

## The Good News

Ultimately, Paul’s Olive Tree metaphor underlines that *God’s promise to Abraham is the basis on which salvation has come not only to Israel but to the whole world*.

It’s unfortunate that some Christian writers have felt the need to portray Israel as being inferior to the Church—in flagrant disregard of Paul’s warning (vv. 18–21). They have said, for instance, that even though saints like Abraham, David, Solomon, Moses, and Elijah were saved, they didn’t have the assurance of their salvation like we do today. This is rubbish and has no basis in Scripture. Those OT men and women were just as saved and assured as we are today.

Note that Paul referred to himself as “an Israelite” even after he had become a believer: *I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin* (Rom. 11:1). Similarly, Messiah Yeshua will return someday as an Israelite, to the great consternation of antisemites and anti-Zionists who have been masquerading as “Christians” (Zech. 12:10; Acts 1:11). He will return as the Jewish Messiah, from the tribe of Judah, the Son of David, and Savior of the world. His ethnic identity was not erased by His Resurrection, nor will it be set aside at His return.

<sup>14</sup>“One” here is a compound “one” rather than a singular “one,” since it has two constituent parts.



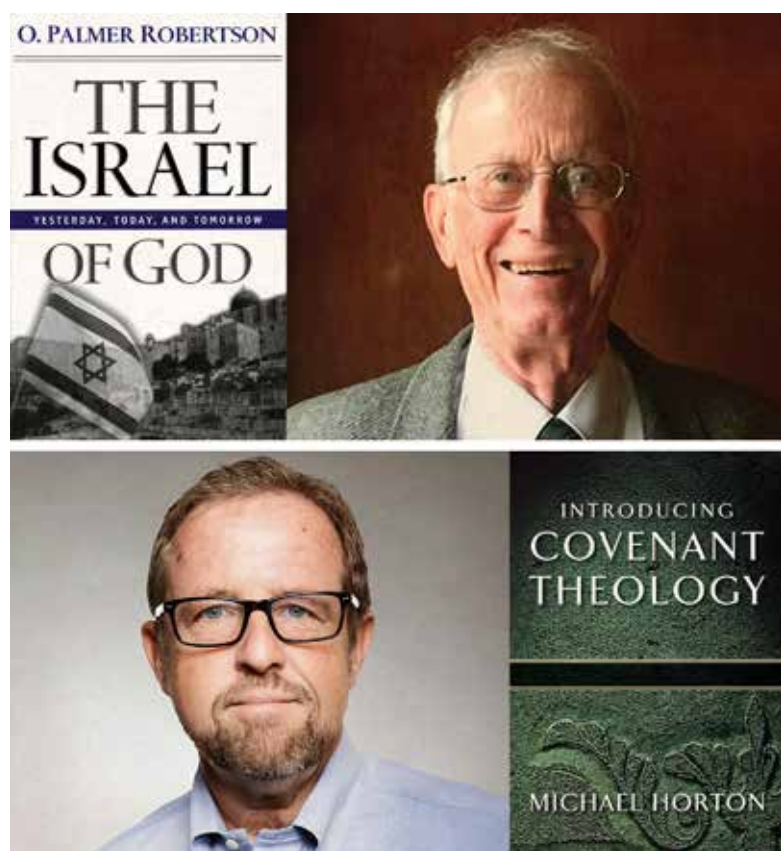
This is what the Olive Tree in Romans 11 is telling us.

## Supersessionism by Any Other Name

Sometimes Covenant writers engage in semantics that make it hard to pin them down on what they really believe about the permanence or impermanence of Israel's role in God's plan.

Supersessionists have strategically deleted the term "replacement" from their collective vocabularies. They suggest that the Church does not "replace" Israel per se, but rather that the Church is the expansion of a "New Israel," of sorts, to include non-Jews. The Church, they say, has inherited the promises God made to OT (Abrahamic) Israel. They say those promises find their "completion" in the Church, where believing Jews are joined by believing Gentiles, thus fulfilling God's Plan as revealed through the prophets.

They want us to believe, then, that the Church doesn't "replace" anything but is rather the *continuation* of God's redemptive plan. That plan began with OT Israel, and it continues with the ecclesial community (the NT Church). That's the gist of it. And if that was all there was to it, we probably wouldn't take the time to rattle their cage.



The question, however, is this: What happened to ethnic Israel once the baton was passed to the Church? Was God finished with national Israel at that point? Is she now "all washed up" as a nation as far as the Father is concerned?

O.P. Robertson, in his book *The Israel of God*, argues that the Church is the continuation and fulfillment of Israel, and that ethnic Israel as a distinct people does not have a separate future role in God's redemptive plan. He interprets the promises made to Israel as having *already* been fulfilled in Christ and in the multinational Church. He sees no distinct eschatological role for ethnic Israel as a nation. Essentially, he advocates for a typological and fulfillment view—that is, Israel was an OT type that was later fulfilled in Christ and the Church (the antitype).

Michael Horton, a professor at Westminster Seminary in California, is a bit more nuanced. He's solidly in the Reformed/Covenant camp, and like Robertson, he holds that the Church is the true Israel, where Jews and Gentiles are made one in Messiah by faith.

However, that's where the similarity ends. Unlike Robertson, Horton, in his *Introducing Covenant Theology*, acknowledges an ongoing role for ethnic Jews, at least in terms of our end-time hope. He is profoundly moved by Paul's words in Romans 11, especially the statement that "all Israel will be saved" at the end of the age. Horton sees this as a powerful move of God whereby He brings most of the Jewish people who are alive at that time ("all Israel") to faith in Jesus. However, he doesn't see this as a future political restoration of Israel as a nation. In fact, he rejects futuristic Dispensationalism and denies that the Land promises or temple worship will be restored in any literal-national way.


## How Can God Be Finished With His Son?

When "soft" supersessionists acknowledge that Israel as a nation *does* have a future role in God's redemptive plan, and some (like Dr. Horton above) do, we generally leave them alone because the differences between us (on this issue, at least) are not great enough to warrant our time.<sup>15</sup>

But when hard-core supersessionists declare that Israel does *not* have a future role in God's plan, we must stand up for the dispensational-futurist viewpoint. Even though they don't talk about "replacement," they're still saying, essentially, that the Church has fully and permanently assumed the roles and promises once attributed to Israel, effectively taking her place in God's redemptive plan. It's just another way of saying that God is finished with Israel.

Supersessionists don't apply the term "Replacement Theology" to themselves due to its negative overtones. They opt for more palatable terms like "Fulfillment Theology," "Continuity Theology," or sometimes "Gentile Inclusion" to avoid the stigma of Supersessionism.

However, there's an adage that says, "If it waddles, it quacks, it has feathers, and it loves to swim, it's probably a duck."

Replacement Theology by any other name or description is still Replacement Theology. 

### Part Two in the Next Issue



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

<sup>15</sup> Dr. Horton, however, suffers from the misconception that dispensationalists today subscribe to "the notion of two peoples with two distinct plans of salvation" (*Introducing Covenant Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006], p. 130). Scofield and others have been misquoted on this. It may have been the position of some fringe dispensationalists a century ago, but it's no longer the case today. From the beginning, there has always been only one plan of salvation—and it's by God's grace, applied to our hearts by faith.



# Bible Questions & Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

## Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at [garyh@cjfm.org](mailto: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:** *You've said that the Land promise of "Greater Israel" has yet to be fulfilled. However, Covenant Theology has a different take on this, particularly in the writings of O. Palmer Robertson. He mentions the following two passages where the Hebrew Scriptures seem to indicate that those Land promises were fulfilled long ago, in the days of King Solomon:*

On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (Gen. 15:18–21).

So Solomon reigned over all kingdoms from the River [Euphrates] to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt. They brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. . . . For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the River from Tiphseh even to Gaza, namely over all the kings on this side of the River; and he had peace on every side all around him (1 Kings 4:21, 24).

**ANSWER:** Yes, you're right. Our theology is premillennial—and that often puts us at odds with Covenant Theology. But that is not surprising. Covenant theologians view Scripture more symbolically than literally. They spiritualize many of the divine promises and apply them to the Church, rather than accepting them at face value and applying them to Israel, as the pertinent texts clearly say.

So, what about these two passages you cited from the Tanach? Do they say that King Solomon and the Israelites owned all the territory that had been promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

No, they don't. Let me explain. To interpret these passages accurately, we must first understand the difference, politically, between possession and influence in the ancient world.

In biblical times, a king could take control of territory through either one of two different means. First, he and his armies could invade and try to conquer another king's domain. If the invasion was successful, that territory would become his. He owned it. He was now the sovereign. Very often, the vanquished king and his defeated troops would be paraded through the city streets in defeat and humiliation. The losing king might even be executed.

The other way for a king to assume control of another king's territory was for the more powerful king to enlist that lesser king as a vassal, or under-ruler. This is known today as a suzerain-vassal arrangement. A suzerain was a powerful king with superior forces, and a vassal was a weaker king who didn't want to engage the superior army—so he humbled himself under the more powerful king. The suzerain (i.e., the superior king) set the terms—e.g., the payment of taxes or tribute by the vassal, as well as other considerations.

In Genesis 15, we find God making a royal grant to Abraham and his descendants. The grant is unconditional and means the Land now belongs to the Jewish people, and that someday they will possess it wholly and permanently.

But that's not what we find in 1 Kings 4:21. This passage describes Solomon's rule over vassal kingdoms. In other words, he exercised influence (or temporary, limited control) over various existing kingdoms in the Ancient Near East. These subservient kings (vassals) obeyed Solomon (the suzerain) and paid him tribute but were not assimilated into Israel. Since influence doesn't constitute ownership, this passage cannot be seen as a past fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Why? Simply because the covenant God made with Abraham guarantees Israel's ultimate and permanent ownership of the full extent of the Promised Land. She will be planted in her Land, never to be uprooted again (Amos 9:14–15)—and that hasn't yet happened, even in the days of Solomon. The fulfillment must still lie in the future!

Again, note the contrast. The Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional and eternal (Gen. 15:18). It promised a Land, a Seed, and a Blessing.

Solomon's reign, on the other hand, was far-reaching; but it was temporary and relatively short-lived. Following the King's death, the United Kingdom fell apart and forfeited its previous territorial gains (1 Kings 4:21).

Many of the vassal states broke away from Israel's control at that time. This is why the reign of Solomon cannot be legitimately seen as an ancient fulfillment of God's Land promise to Abraham and his descendants.

Numbers 34:1–12 provides a detailed description of the boundaries of the Land, defining its northern, southern, eastern, and western borders (see also Genesis 15:18). Our friend Wilson Levy, a Messianic artist, has drawn a map of "Greater Israel" (above), based on information collated from the applicable passages in the Hebrew Bible. Greater Israel weighs in at an impressive 300,000 or so square miles, making it larger than the sprawling State of Texas, compared to the paltry 8,550 square miles within Israel's current borders.

With all due respect to Professor Robertson and others in the Covenant camp who agree with him, we believe that Israel, someday, will inhabit the full extent of her Land inheritance—Greater Israel. That is the premillennial position. May that time come soon!





# Fruit from the Harvest



by Violette Berger



## Testimonials

**Diann Parks, CJFM representative (New Jersey)**, recently attended a party in which many of the guests were not yet believers. Diann had an opportunity to share her testimony and other spiritual content with a few of the women in attendance. She shared in more detail with one of the women from a Catholic background, telling her that after she came to faith, she started reading the Bible beginning, in the book of John. Diann described to her how God began to speak to her through His Word and to recognize that the Bible is no ordinary book, but is actually God's Word. The woman responded that she would start reading the book of John right away, since someone had recently given her a Bible as a gift. Diann exclaimed: "Wow! It seems like God has got you surrounded." Please pray that she would indeed read the book of John and for her salvation.

## Morning Walks

**Rob Styler, CJFM Director of Missions (Arizona)**, usually takes a walk in the morning. He used to ride his bike, but found that "you can't talk to anyone and pet any dogs." He first met Joyce on one of his morning walks. Rob was wearing an IDF t-shirt, and Joyce commented, "I like your shirt." They engaged in a conversation, and she told him that she was Jewish and lived in the neighborhood. She asked Rob if he was Jewish, and Rob responded that he was not, but was a Christian who supported Israel and the Jewish people. They spoke for a few minutes whenever they saw each other. Rob hadn't seen Joyce for about a month when they ran into each other at the grocery store. She told him that her son had bought a house in their neighborhood, a few houses down from where Rob lived. She said that she would introduce Rob to him when his family moved in. Joyce also finished by saying, "It's good he will have a friend in the neighborhood." Rob asks that we pray for the situation, adding: "I would like to be a genuine friend to her son and would like opportunities to share Messiah."

## Revival on College Campuses


**Eric Chabot, CJFM representative (Columbus, OH)**, rejoices that revival is happening on college campuses with Christian ministries. Last year, Eric cites 175 people who made first-time commitments to the Lord and his team had 1,540 in-depth conversations at his campus ministries at Ohio State University and Columbus State University. So far, this year, five students have come to faith and the team has had 100 conversations. Eric uses a whiteboard on campus in order to initiate conversations. The most recent question was: "What Gives You Hope?" The options were: "God," "Myself," "Society," or "Other?" Please pray for the salvation of all of the students who stopped and engaged in conversations and heard the Gospel message. Also, pray for more divine appointments on both campuses—and for warmer weather.

Eric writes about a new Jewish group on the OSU campus called "Students Supporting Israel." He has struck up conversations with them at their table, which has allowed him to share the Messiah and other issues as well as his support for Israel. Eric asks that we pray for this relationship to be solidified and for more opportunities to share with them.

Eric also writes about an event that a ministry called "Unite," recently hosted at the Shottenstein Center on campus. It is a ministry that unites other campus ministries and invites students to come and hear the Good News. Eric and his team did have a table there and have been following up with students who made first-time commitments to the Lord. There were around 2,000 students who made first-time commitments and were baptized outside the event.

In addition to Eric's weekly meetings which include a one-hour apologetic topic and a Bible study, he invites guest speakers. He recently hosted David Onsyko who gave a lecture/presentation on "The Shroud of Turin" (the burial cloth of Jesus, discovered and made public in the 14th century AD). Please pray that these meetings build community and foster discipleship.

## Ministry News from Argentina

**Marcos and Deborah Morales, CJFM representatives (Argentina)**, met "Pedro," a Gentile Christian believer who began attending their Messianic Congregation, *Beth Tephila*, in order to learn more about Judaism and the Hebrew language. Marcos writes: "Sometimes people come to our congregation, and we notice that in their way of expressing themselves they have become 'Judaized.'" He adds, "This is a new Messianic movement that emerged some time ago and is not primarily concerned with bringing the Good News of salvation to the Jewish people, but rather seeks to Judaize many Christians by confusing them with liturgies and customs of the Chosen People. This was the case of Pedro. In the light of the Word of God, I showed him that he would not be a better believer or be 'closer to God' by practicing Jewish liturgy or submitting to the law of Moses, such as an unbelieving Jew. I always teach them that if they truly love the People of Israel, God will guide them to learn to testify to Jewish people about Jesus, the Promised Messiah, to His People. Many of them find this difficult. It is not what they are looking for. Others, like Pedro, however, are learning how to witness to Jewish people." Pedro told Marcos that he didn't know any Jewish people. Marcos encouraged Pedro to pray about it and invited Pedro to join their prayer group on Tuesdays, as they pray for Israel and the salvation of Jewish souls. A few weeks later, Pedro told Marcos that he had started a new job (in construction) in the house of a Jewish man, "Leon," and that God gave him an opportunity to give testimony of Yeshua to him. Leon was amazed that a Gentile had so much knowledge of the customs and teachings of the Jewish people, and that Pedro was able to share the salvation message with him in such a familiar way that Leon could understand. Please pray for Leon's salvation and for more opportunities for Pedro to share with him. A few days later, Pedro went to the grocery store, saw a man wearing a kippah and greeted him with a *shalom*. The man asked him if he was Jewish, to which Pedro responded that he was not. He then asked him how he knew Hebrew. Pedro replied that he attended *Beth Tephilah Messianic Congregation*, a group of Jewish and non-Jewish people who believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah of Israel and their personal savior. The Jewish gentleman handed Pedro his business card. He turned out to be one of the rabbis of the Jewish community in their city. Marcos comments: "We thank God for people like Pedro who choose not to be Judaized but instead become a true witness of our Lord Yeshua HaMaschiach (Jesus the Messiah)." 

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