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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL


This Honors thesis entitled

**An Investigation into the New Testament Understanding of “Israel”**

written by

**Ashton Hurst**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers

 Dr. J. Scott Duvall, thesis director<sup>1</sup>

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Dr. C. Marvin Pate, second reader

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Dr. B. Allyson Phillips, third reader



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Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

April 19, 2023

OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE NEW TESTAMENT UNDERSTANDING OF “ISRAEL”

HONORS THESIS

BY

ASHTON HURST

APRIL 19, 2023

## INTRODUCTION

God chose his people in the Old Testament (OT) beginning with a man named Abraham. In Genesis chapter 12, God makes a promise to Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, I will curse anyone who treats you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”<sup>1</sup> From Abraham, Israel developed into a great nation that followed God intently sometimes but ultimately found themselves in a never-ending circle of betraying, disobeying, and forgetting God. In Leviticus 26:11-12 God says to Israel, “I will make my residence among you, and I will not reject you. I will be your God, and you will be my people.” God kept this promise by dwelling in the Tabernacle, in the Ark of the Covenant, and eventually, in the Holy of Holies in the temple. However, because of Israel’s continuous rejection of God, He, in turn, replaced national Israel with spiritual Israel as his people. Through the death of his son, Jesus Christ, he offered a place in his family to all who believe in him, regardless of their ethnicity. In the OT, the only way to become a part of the people of God was to have faith in God and to follow his law. It may seem like to be part of God’s people, Israelite blood was essential, however, there are several Gentiles even in the OT that were granted entrance into the people of God. Rahab and Ruth are two great examples of Gentile members of God’s chosen people. There is a common belief that in the OT, Israelites were the only people chosen by God to be his, and that is simply not the case. God chose the nation of Israel as his vessel to reach the world, and Gentiles were allowed in if they were faithful and obedient to God. In the New Testament (NT), following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the way to salvation and into God’s chosen people changed. Jesus’s perfect sacrifice annulled the law and allowed God’s presence to dwell among his people just as it was promised in Genesis 12, and now there is no ethnic distinction. In the OT, God chose a specific people group, Israel, to accomplish his mission, but they failed, and now, God is allowing the entire world to have a chance.

This thesis is an investigation of the New Testament understanding of “Israel.” Beginning with the Gospels, and ending with Revelation, the goal is to thoroughly understand how the New Testament authors view national Israel and the true, spiritual Israel. Following the section investigating the Gospels are sections looking into the Pauline Literature, Hebrews, and Revelation. Readers will gain insight into the nature of “Israel” from a New Testament perspective and what is necessary to be included in the people of God.

### “ISRAEL” IN THE GOSPELS

#### **Jesus is the Completion of the Law**

Obedience to God looks different for true followers than it did for those under the OT law. In the NT, there are many episodes of the Pharisees accusing Jesus, or his disciples, of breaking the law. In Matthew 12:1-8 and Mark 2:23-38, the disciples are accused of breaking the sabbath by eating grain from the fields, and Jesus responds by saying “The son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.”<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:1-11, Matthew 12:9-14, and Mark 3:1-6 further this by adding the story of Jesus healing the man with the shriveled hand on the Sabbath. Before restoring the man’s hand, Jesus says: “I ask you: Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” This episode ends with the Pharisees enraged and discussing how they might get rid

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<sup>1</sup> All scripture references are from Christian Standard Bible (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020).

of Jesus. Jesus knew how much it would upset the pharisees that he was going against what they had always been taught, but Jesus was trying to make the point that he was Lord over the law. The law would soon be complete in him, and the way that the people of God would obey him would look different than the OT law. There are also several instances where Jesus explains that the Jewish leaders are not following the laws. In Matthew 15:1-28 and Mark 7:9-13, Jesus asks “Why do you break God’s commandment because of tradition?” He is pointing out that they have it all wrong; the Pharisees had lost sight of what the law really was. They had become too focused on tradition, and while not all tradition is unbiblical, many of their ancestral tradition was far from what God intended.<sup>3</sup> In this specific instance, Jesus is pointing out the fact that the community is breaking one of the basic commandments (honor your father and mother) on a regular basis. The children in this time were allowed to denounce their obligation to their parents by claiming a halalic ruling of “Qorban.”<sup>4</sup> In these situations, children are declaring that there is no need to obey their parents. This is clearly breaking the commandment that God had given, which makes them hypocrites for accusing Jesus of breaking the law when he was doing good. The Pharisees had turned the law into something opposite of God’s purpose, and they took away the love that God intended to go along with the law.<sup>5</sup> Through all these instances, as well as in Jesus’s other teachings, he is emphasizing that discipleship is key. Jesus wants them to listen to what is being taught to them, and then teach it to others as well as live it out in daily life. Jesus is teaching his disciples that he would provide a new way of following the Lord, the New Covenant, which is mentioned in the Lord’s Supper narratives (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:14-22). This is when he discusses his death and resurrection with the disciples, which will be the beginning of the New Covenant, the “era of fulfillment.”<sup>6</sup> Jesus’s point is that what was being taught by the Pharisees was not the way that God intended the law to be understood. He was there to show how to live a life for God, and that true discipleship looks largely different than the way that they had been taught. Throughout his ministry, it seems that Jesus was preparing his followers for the way it would be after his sacrifice. After Jesus’s death, the law is completed and all people groups are granted access, not just Israel.

### **Disciples Continue Jesus’s Ministry**

Even when Jesus was still on earth, he commissioned the disciples to drive out demons and heal people (Mark 6:7-13). Based on this alone, the disciples played an important role in Jesus’s ministry. Jesus also commissioned the 12 disciples to continue his ministry after his ascension. John 21:15-19 is one example of this: Jesus was instructing Peter to take care of his followers by using three phrases: “feed my lambs,” “take care of my sheep,” and “feed my sheep.” The first probably refers to new believers, the second most likely is asking Peter to care “pastorally” for the believers, and the third means to provide “spiritual nourishment” for the believers.<sup>7</sup> A second example comes from John 17: 9-19 when Jesus was praying for his disciples in the garden before

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<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Matthew*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 260.

<sup>4</sup> Joel B. Green, ed. 2013. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Second ed. The IVP Bible Dictionary Series. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.

<sup>5</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*. Volume 33a. Word Biblical Commentary. (Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1993), 331.

<sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 348-350.

<sup>7</sup> Collin G. Kruse, *The Gospel According to John*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Volume 4. (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 462-463.

he is arrested. Jesus prayed, “As you sent me into the world, I also have sent them into the world,” referring to his disciples. Similarly, in John 20:21, Jesus commissioned the disciples while they were gathered in a locked room by saying, “Peace be with you. As the father has sent me, I also send you.” Following this statement, Jesus promised the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had many reasons for coming to earth, and he was about to accomplish his main reason which was to save the world by dying on the cross. Another purpose was to teach those who believed in him how to have a relationship with the Father, and he was now expecting his disciples to continue that aspect of his mission.<sup>8</sup> Throughout Jesus’s time on earth he taught his disciples how to bear fruit, like in John 15:16, so that once he had gone, they could continue his mission with the soon-coming help of the Holy Spirit, mentioned in John 20:22-23.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Disciples Sent to the “Lost Sheep of Israel”*

Jesus’s mission was first to Israel. The Israelites were the people chosen by God to be his people, so it makes sense that Jesus would be sent directly to minister to them. Matthew 10 is the first instance of Jesus’s intention to minister only to the Israelites, he sent his disciples out to the “lost sheep of Israel.” The immediate explanation for this is that the 12 disciples had no way to reach the nations; they were sent to God’s chosen people because that was the first step.<sup>10</sup> In the following verses in Matthew chapter 10, Jesus gave the disciples many instructions about how to reach the Israelites. His command to reach only the Israelites was a practical start for his earthly ministry which would later be expanded to all nations.<sup>11</sup> Another instance of Jesus explaining that his mission was to the Israelites occurred in Matthew 15:21-28 when he was speaking to a Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon. Here, Jesus acknowledged that his current mission was only to the Israelites, but he did not send the woman away. Because of her faith, he expelled the demon from her daughter which was a symbol that anyone with faith will not be excluded from the people of God.<sup>12</sup> There is a trend among the passages in which Jesus declared he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel: this was a current mission, but those with faith will not be excluded. Like so many other instances in the Old and New Testaments, Israelites without faith can be expelled from the people of God, and Gentiles who do have faith will be included. However, it cannot be overlooked that God chose the Israelites and that Jesus was referred to as the King of Israel by many, like Nathanael in John 1:49. Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah which tied him to the fact that he was the Son of God.<sup>13</sup> Though salvation is offered to all who believe regardless of ethnicity, it was necessary for God to have his people, the Israelites, as a vessel to reach the nations. Throughout history, God prepared Israel to receive the Messiah, so it is only fair that Jesus’s immediate concern was to reach “the lost sheep of Israel.”

#### *Disciples were Sent into the World to Reach All Nations*

The Great Commission is the best evidence for the disciples being sent out to minister to the whole world (Matthew 28:16-20, Mark 16:14-18). Jesus clearly sent them to “make disciples of all nations.” This is not the only evidence, however, that the gospel would be offered to people

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 400.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 446-447.

<sup>10</sup> Keener, 202.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 262-263.

<sup>13</sup> Kruse, 90.

of all ethnicities. In Matthew 15:21-28, Jesus met a Canaanite woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon. He told her that he was “only sent to the lost sheep of Israel,” but the woman pleaded with him and made it known that she would not lose her faith and so Jesus rewarded her. This episode is proof that the Gentiles will no longer be excluded from the people of God.<sup>14</sup> Then, in Mark 11:15-17, Jesus cleansed the temple for the Gentiles instead of ridding the temple of everyone that was not a Jew, which is what was expected from the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> In these verses, Jesus alluded to Isaiah 56:7 by asking, “Is it not written, My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?” A verse that was speaking of God’s salvation being offered to those who were previously excluded.<sup>16</sup> Though Jesus was ultimately sent to Israel, the Gentiles cannot be excluded because inclusion in the people of God comes from faith and not from ethnicity, and this is a pattern consistent with what we see in the OT both in prophecy and action with characters like Rahab and Ruth.

### **Correlation between the Disciples and Israel**

#### *Israel’s Failure and the Failure of the Disciples*

There is a major correlation between the failure of Israel and the failures of the disciples in the gospels. Many of the instances in which Jesus rebukes his disciples occur when they have lost their faith in him. In Matthew 8:23-37, the disciples are on a boat in the middle of a storm, and they go to Jesus afraid they are going to die, Jesus answers them with, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” because he expected them to trust in him in the difficult times, unlike Israel in the wilderness when they lost their faith in God.<sup>17</sup> Again, in Matthew 14:31, Jesus asks Peter, “You of little faith, why do you doubt?” when he joined Jesus walking on the water and began to sink. There are also instances where the disciples are rebuked for their failure to understand who Jesus is and what his teachings mean. In Mark 8:14-21, the disciples fail to understand Jesus’s teaching about being careful not to trust the “leaven of the pharisees,” meaning what the pharisees are teaching to the Jewish communities. Like Israel, the disciples are failing to understand what Jesus was saying, which can lead to the hardening of the heart, and Jesus warns against this elsewhere in the gospels.<sup>18</sup> Many of the Jew’s hearts had been hardened which meant that faith in Jesus was impossible, faith leads to understanding, and without understanding the heart is hardened against the Lord.<sup>19</sup> In other instances, it specifically says that the truth was not revealed to the 12 disciples. In Luke 8:22-25, Jesus tells the disciples about his death and resurrection, but verse 34 says, “They understood none of these things. The meaning of the saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.” God was waiting to open their eyes to the truth, which he would do in his timing. Peter fails by denying Jesus as his Lord in Matthew 26:69-75, Mark 14:66-72, and Luke 22:54-62. This instance is important because it is contrasted with Judas’s denial, which ends in Judas killing himself. Peter instead leaves in

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<sup>14</sup> Keener, 262.

<sup>15</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*. Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 342-343.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Keener, 182.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards, 240-241.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

tears, which is the response that can lead back to Jesus.<sup>20</sup> Followers of Jesus will fail, but the important thing is that they come back to Jesus which Peter does. National Israel, however, does not return, like Judas. What is important about the disciples is that, even though they fail repeatedly, they succeed in all the areas in which national Israel failed. Before Peter ever denied Christ, he was the first to recognize him as the Messiah. Peter professes Jesus as Lord in Matthew 16:13-20, Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-20, and John 6:66-68. This revelation is from the Lord, and all other understanding of who Jesus was and what he meant in his teachings was because God allowed it.<sup>21</sup> Israel was blinded to who Jesus was, but the disciple's eyes were opened to the level of understanding that the Israelites never achieved. Ultimately though, the disciples are given the opportunity to succeed because Jesus, the obedient son, had finally come. Jesus would take the place of Israel, the disobedient son, and die on the cross as a sacrifice for all. He was able to teach the disciples how to follow in his footsteps and become obedient where national Israel failed.

*Truth is Revealed to Those Who Have Chosen to Become a Part of the People of God*

In the same way that the truth of who Jesus truly was had to be revealed to the disciples by God, the understanding of Jesus's teachings also had to be given through divine revelation. In passages like Mark 8:14-21, the disciples do not understand what Jesus is trying to teach them about the "leaven of the pharisees," and they are rebuked because of their failure to understand. Jesus desires for them to understand because faith is a product of understanding, and without understanding the heart will be hardened.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, the disciples come to understand the things Jesus teaches them. In Matthew 13:10-17, Jesus explains why he teaches in parables: it is because God has opened the disciple's eyes to the truth but not the eyes of the non-believers. Jesus says that the pharisees are looking right at the truth but do not understand which would mean there is a lack of faith as well. The disciples received a blessing from the Lord because they were ready to hear the "mysteries" that Jesus was presenting, unlike the pharisees, and this blessing was proof that the disciples were true followers of Jesus.<sup>23</sup> This same concept is also expressed in Mark 4:33-34, with an emphasis on the ability to hear. Mark explains the revelations received from the parables as a symbol of the person's readiness to accept the truth that Jesus was teaching.<sup>24</sup> In Luke 10:21-24, Jesus thanks the Father for revealing the truth to the "infants," his followers who were humble rather than the wealthy. Jesus also rejoices in the fact that his disciples were worthy to know and understand what so many before them longed to know, the disciples get to be a part of the New Covenant that Jesus was beginning.<sup>25</sup> Because of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, everyone who truly follows him will receive the same blessing that the disciples received to understand Jesus's teachings and what God reveals through scripture. The same can be true for any remnant of Israel who truly follows God.

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<sup>20</sup> Keener, 378-379.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 270-271.

<sup>22</sup> Edwards, 240-241.

<sup>23</sup> Keener, 238-239.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, 146.

<sup>25</sup> Bock, 194-195.



## *The Significance of the Number 12*

Jesus chose 12 disciples just like there were 12 tribes of Israel. In Matthew 10:2, Mark 3:16-19, and Luke 6:12-16, a complete list of the 12 disciples is given which looks very similar to the listings of the tribes of Israel in the OT, and Revelation. The number 12 is very important because of the link it creates between them and Israel. Jesus is calling them to obey and serve him like God called the Israelites to do; however, these 12, unlike the 12 tribes, followed Jesus faithfully and signify the “reconstitution of Israel.”<sup>26</sup> The disciples were incredibly important during Jesus’s earthly ministry, and they will also hold a significant role in the Heavenly kingdom when sitting on 12 thrones and judging Israel as mentioned in Luke 22:29-30. Preceding this passage in Luke, Jesus reveals that there is a betrayer among the disciples, but he assures them that those who remain faithful will be rewarded. Jesus promises that they will sit with him at the celebratory banquet table and will be given authority over God’s people. Jesus gave the disciples this hope because of the trials and suffering they were about to endure after his crucifixion; they needed a reminder that the day of victory was coming.<sup>27</sup> The 12 disciples stand as an example that Israel can only come into the true people of God through faith and obedience to God and that the door is still open to all of those who choose to walk with Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

### **Jesus Offers Eternal Life and Membership in His Covenant Community**

In John 15:1-8, Jesus describes himself as the vine, believers as the branches, and God the Father as the gardener. The point being made is that no one can reach the Father unless they are a part of the vine, Jesus. Jesus takes it further, though, to say that if the “branch” is not producing fruit, it will be cut off by the gardener. Jesus is making sure that everyone knows that they are saved by faith, and the evidence of faith is good works. A lack of good works causes the concern that there is no true faith. The way that fruit is produced is by abiding in Jesus and obeying all that he taught. The illustration of the vine and the branches is significant because a similar illustration is used in Isaiah 5:1-7 which says that Israel did not produce the good fruit that God expected of them.<sup>29</sup> Jesus is now saying that he alone is the vine that produced the fruit that Israel was unable to produce.<sup>30</sup> The disciples are a part of this bearing of the fruit because they are a part of the branches and because they remain in Jesus, they will be included in the people of God. Later in the passage, Jesus talks about cutting off the branches that do not produce fruit, most directly referring to Judas who once walked with Jesus but was cut off.<sup>31</sup> This is key to understanding who is included in the people of God. Jesus chose the 12 disciples, and salvation is offered to all 12 of them. It was Judas’s choice to reject Jesus by betraying him and so he was cut off because of his lack of faith. This same principle applies to all believers. Salvation is offered to all, but only those who remain in Christ and bear fruit will not be cut off by the gardener.

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<sup>26</sup> Edwards, 114-115.

<sup>27</sup> Bock, 352-353.

<sup>28</sup> Edwards, 114-115.

<sup>29</sup> Kruse, 364-365.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

### *Who is Included in the People of God?*

In Jesus's earthly ministry, he describes how to become a part of the people of God and what their lives should look like. The first requirement for admission into God's people is faith. In Matthew 15: 21-28, a Canaanite woman is rewarded for her faith even after Jesus tells her that he was sent only to Israel. She believed that Jesus was powerful enough to let some of his power spill over to the rest of the world and not just Israel. She understood that he was truly the Messiah, the Son of David.<sup>32</sup> This is a model for the faith that all who follow Jesus should express, whether they are part of Israel or any other nation. Jesus also gives us the beatitudes in Matthew 5:2-12 and Luke 6:20-23. These lists echo the OT prophets, and they describe the types of people who will inherit the kingdom of God. Jesus says blessed are those who are poor in spirit, who are humble, who mourn, who thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, pure at heart, are peacemakers, and are persecuted for their righteousness. These are traits of people whom no one expected Jesus to want as a part of his kingdom. In fact, in Luke's list of the beatitudes, he includes a list of "woes" that will not inherit the kingdom of God. These are people who are rich, full, laughing, and who have people speaking well of them. The Jewish people expected the Messiah to come and favor the people listed in the woes. However, like in so many other areas, Jesus was not the Messiah that the Jewish community was expecting. God does not want people who are fulfilled by themselves. He wants the humble who long for God more than anything else.<sup>33</sup> The only way into God's family is through faith in Him and dependence on God alone.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus's earthly mission was to show the Jews where they were failing, and how to alter their lives to remain in the people of God. He did this by pointing out that the Jewish leaders were not holding to the law of Moses in the first place. He called them to revise the way they interpret it and to live like him because he is the fulfillment of the law. Because of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross, salvation was offered to the Israelites apart from the law, however, it was never meant to cover only Israel's sin. The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 had it right: Jesus was powerful enough as the Messiah to cover the sins of the whole world. It did make sense for Jesus to go to the group that God chose to be his people before reaching the rest of the world, but because of God's love and mercy, Jesus commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to all nations. God desires the hearts of all humankind, and the door is open to all of those who have true faith. Throughout the gospels, Jesus calls the Jewish leaders back to what God really intended which was obedience out of faith and love for him. The law was given to Israel out of love, and so the aspect of loving others cannot be separated from it which is what many Jewish leaders were doing. Israel failed to love God with their whole hearts, and they failed to accept the Messiah. Therefore, they were cut off from the people of God. However, those who do accept Jesus as Lord and obey God will be made a part of his people regardless of their ethnicity. Salvation is offered to the Gentiles, but it is not taken away from the Israelites who truly follow God. The 12 disciples serve as an example of how the true people of God succeeded where the Israelites failed, and they are accepted into the true Israel. Because of the disciple's faith, their eyes were opened to Jesus's teachings so that they understood what was expected of them as followers of Christ. These 12 men are the original model for the true Israel, and so much can be

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<sup>32</sup> Keener, 264.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 106.

learned by the way that they interacted with Jesus during his early ministry. They also were sent out to continue Jesus's mission after his ascension which began the early church.

### “ISRAEL” IN PAULINE LITERATURE

In Pauline literature, the best place to determine Paul's view on Israel's place in the people of God is Romans chapter 9. In this chapter, Paul thoroughly addresses who is included in the “true Israel.” Paul, in Romans 9:1-5, is expressing deep concern for his people, the Jews. The reason for his anguish is that his people have been separated from God because of their rejection of the Messiah.<sup>34</sup> After reading the first 8 chapters of Paul's letter, the Jews would have been distraught to hear that God's covenant was now offered to both Jews and Gentiles and that the Jews were the subjects of God's judgment.<sup>35</sup> All of the things they had been told for years were now void or reversed. In the rest of Romans chapter 9, Paul answers the Jews regarding the accusations that God's word had failed and that God is not unjust. The Israelites believed that God had not kept his promise to them that they would be his people; however, Paul shows they had misunderstood the promise from the beginning. Paul uses OT scriptures to show the true nature of God's promise which included, as his people, Gentiles and a remnant of the Jews that he had elected as “vessels of mercy.” Romans chapter 11 gives insight into Paul's teachings about Israel and the Gentiles.

Two other key passages that give insight into Paul's message to the Gentiles regarding their acceptance into the people of God are 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 and Ephesians 2:1-22. The 1 Corinthians passage warns the Gentiles that they are not exempt from the judgment that was placed on the Jews because of their failure to obey God and believe in Jesus Christ. Paul uses several examples from Israel's past and relates them to current problems the Corinthians were facing to make sure they understood that they must stand firm in their commitment to Jesus. The Ephesians passage encompasses the main points of Paul's message of salvation: salvation only comes to those who believe in Jesus by the grace of God, not by any works a person does. However, followers of Christ must also have good works because of what Jesus has done. Paul also establishes that salvation is offered to anyone, Jew or Gentile because there is no longer a dividing barrier: the Jewish Law. God offers membership in his household to all who believe.

### Romans 9

#### *The Word of God has not Failed*

Verses 6-13 are based on the accusation that God's word and promise had failed because Paul suggested that the covenant curses rested on Israel.<sup>36</sup> This accusation was fed by the fact that the Jewish people had not accepted Christ and the Gentiles had flooded into the church.<sup>37</sup> Osborne points out that all of chapter 9 is answering this one question: “In light of God's promises to Israel, [how have] so many in Israel not found salvation?”<sup>38</sup> Paul quickly begins to answer it in verse 6b: he blatantly states that Israel's salvation had never stemmed from their

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<sup>34</sup> Tomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*. Second Edition. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2018), 468.

<sup>35</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 232-233.

<sup>36</sup> Pate, 209.

<sup>37</sup> Osborne, 241.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

ethnic identity but only from their spiritual commitment to God.<sup>39</sup> Paul continues to answer this question throughout the entire chapter.

Paul accuses the Israelites of “misunderstanding their identity.”<sup>40</sup> Instead of placing the failure on God, it is placed on the Jews because they did not understand God’s promise. Abraham’s true descendants are not necessarily of his bloodline, they are children of Isaac or children of the promise.<sup>41</sup> In verse 8, Paul suggests that there is a spiritual Israel and a biological Israel. Like earlier mentioned, not all of biological Israel is included in spiritual Israel, but all of spiritual Israel are descendants of the promise to Abraham and Isaac.<sup>42</sup> According to Moo, when God promised a “calling” of descendants “in” Isaac, he was promising a spiritual offspring not just a biological one.<sup>43</sup> This is why the “true Israel” is referred to as the children of the promise.<sup>44</sup> Both Abraham and Isaac are given a promise about their sons. These promises coincided with the nation of Israel but are not exclusive to them. Paul uses the stories of God choosing Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau to show that God has always been selective of his people.<sup>45</sup> This is evidence of the fact that some people are chosen to be a part of the people of God and some are not, it is a free choice made by God.<sup>46</sup> Paul is pointing out that the distinction between Israel and the true people of God is not a new idea; rather, it is a decision that has been made all throughout the OT. The idea of sovereign election is clearly seen in Jacob and Esau.<sup>47</sup> God’s decision to build Israel from Jacob was solely God’s choice.<sup>48</sup> Jacob was chosen before he was ever born, and his selection had no influence on his actions: Jacob was simply the one who was elected by God.<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that in verse 13, when it says “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated,” God was not using emotional terms. Pate points out that he is using logical terms as if saying, “God accepted Jacob but rejected Esau.”<sup>50</sup> Esau did not receive his “birthright,” and similarly, the Israelites do not receive the “birthright” they thought they were owed.<sup>51</sup> God chose Jacob from grace, not a birthright; this is an image that the Israelites needed to understand.<sup>52</sup> Here, Paul used stories that the Jews would have been familiar with to explain how God’s word and promise to them had not failed but was very consistent.

### *God is not Unjust*

The rest of chapter 9 rebuts the accusation that God is unjust. When Paul uses the phrase, “What then shall we say,” in verse 14, he is preparing to address a misconception.<sup>53</sup> The Israelites thought that if God chose whom he accepted and whom he rejected, that made him

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<sup>39</sup> Pate, 209.

<sup>40</sup> Osborne, 242.

<sup>41</sup> Schreiner, 355.

<sup>42</sup> Moo, 595-956.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 956.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Osborne, 242.

<sup>46</sup> Moo, 591.

<sup>47</sup> Pate, 210.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Osborne, 245.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Osborne, 248

unfair or unjust.<sup>54</sup> Paul is refuting the Jewish perspective that God is unjust by pointing out again that the Jews are misconstruing the promise God made to the Israelites.<sup>55</sup> Paul is using his typical method of asking rhetorical questions than answering them throughout the rest of the chapter.<sup>56</sup> This specific question is one that has been previously addressed in Romans 3:5 where God's righteousness is related to his truth and faithfulness, which helps better understand the answer in chapter 9.<sup>57</sup> Paul points out that God's character is righteous, just, and true, and his character is eternally consistent, so accusing him of being unjust was inconsistent with Romans 3 and the rest of scripture.<sup>58</sup>

Through the next few verses, Paul is making the observation that in the past, God has shown mercy to the Jews and wrath to the Gentiles whereas at this point those roles had switched and the covenant curses were now being released on the Israelites.<sup>59</sup> This is evidence that God has no one group he favors; he shows wrath and mercy to both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>60</sup> Verse 15 begins the third OT illustration in the chapter: Moses and Pharaoh. Paul uses two statements from God to Moses to show that God freely chooses whom he shows mercy to and whom he hardens.<sup>61</sup> The choice to reject Pharaoh continued to show that the decisions God makes, like the decision between Jacob and Esau, are not isolated events.<sup>62</sup> This pattern is true to God's character on multiple occasions.<sup>63</sup> It is also true that God's righteousness is closely related to His mercy, and His choice to accept Jacob and Isaac, and Moses was merciful.<sup>64</sup> This realization provides a pathway into Paul's next point in verse 16: "It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy." This means that salvation is not a result of works or human effort which was another misconception of the Jews. It is now clear that the basis of divine election is God's mercy.<sup>65</sup> Verse 17 is a statement from Exodus where God is instructing Moses about how to address Pharaoh. God reveals that his purpose for hardening Pharaoh was to display his saving power to the Israelites and to fulfill his purpose allowing the Israelites to proclaim his glory.<sup>66</sup> In this same way, God hardened parts of Israel to raise up the Gentiles to proclaim his name in Paul's day.<sup>67</sup>

Paul's point from verse 18 raised another question for the Jews: if God chooses whom he saves and rejects, how are the Jews at fault? The Israelites are again using the original promise to Abraham to question the justice of God.<sup>68</sup> Paul uses an OT metaphor to say, "Who are you to talk back to the creator?"<sup>69</sup> The point of the potter/creator and clay/creation metaphor is to point out

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<sup>54</sup> Pate, 210.

<sup>55</sup> Moo, 611.

<sup>56</sup> Osborne, 247.

<sup>57</sup> Schreiner, 363.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*; Moo, 612.

<sup>59</sup> Pate, 210.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Osborne, 248.

<sup>62</sup> Moo, 612.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Schreiner, 364.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Osborne, 249.

<sup>67</sup> Moo, 615.

<sup>68</sup> Osborne, 251.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*; Pate, 211.

the coming judgment and exile of Israel because of their sin.<sup>70</sup> Paul talks about the “clay” being used for “special purposes” or “common use” which refers to whether or not Israelites become part of God’s family.<sup>71</sup> Paul is not rebuking them for asking the question; he acknowledges that there is a reason why they ask it. However, he is rebuking their attitude behind the question.<sup>72</sup> They have an attitude of disputation and resistance, not of true inquiry.<sup>73</sup> Moo admits that there is no logical, philosophical reasoning offered to settle the tension that comes from this debate, but what Paul makes clear is that the rejection of Israel stemmed directly from their own “willful failure to believe.”<sup>74</sup> The answer that Paul gives is one that emphasizes the “frailty of human beings and the greatness of God.”<sup>75</sup> Because of God’s sovereignty as creator, he has the freedom to mold his clay however he desires to best fit his will.<sup>76</sup>

Verse 22 continues the theme from the previous verses, suggesting that God had been patiently waiting for the Israelites to return to him, and they never did.<sup>77</sup> This is another confirmation that the reason Israel had been handed over to the covenantal curses of destruction was because of their own “willful failure to believe.”<sup>78</sup> The verse is also returning to the question of Israelites not being saved by addressing why the “potter” would have prepared some for “common use.”<sup>79</sup> According to Schreiner, verse 22 and those following are in fact referring to eschatological judgment because when Paul uses the terms “vessels of wrath” and “vessels of mercy” in the rest of his writings, he is most often referring to eschatological terms.<sup>80</sup> There is a link between these verses and 9:11 about Jacob being chosen over Esau; neither of these (Jacob and the unsaved Israelites) were chosen for honor/dishonor based on anything they had done, it was a sovereign decision of the creator.<sup>81</sup> This speaks to verse 23 when he talks about “the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory.” However, Osborne suggests that they were “prepared for destruction on the basis of unbelief, not that they have been predestined to unbelief.”<sup>82</sup> He takes this view because even though the Israelites are currently under God’s wrath, they were once under his mercy, and the change was because of their own rejection of Christ.<sup>83</sup> Verses 23-24 suggest that the Christian Gentiles are now the objects of God’s mercy.<sup>84</sup> The verses reveal God’s purpose which is to more gloriously show his power and wrath and to make himself known to the rest of his “vessels of mercy” to whom he had planned to reveal himself all along: the whole world.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Pate, 211.

<sup>71</sup> Osborne, 252.

<sup>72</sup> Moo, 621-622.

<sup>73</sup> Schreiner, 369.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 620.

<sup>75</sup> Schreiner, 369.

<sup>76</sup> Osborne, 252.

<sup>77</sup> Pate, 211.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.; Schreiner, 269.

<sup>79</sup> Schreiner, 370.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Osborne, 254.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Pate, 211.

<sup>85</sup> Moo, 627-628.

The rest of the chapter closes out Paul's rebuttal to both questions. God's word has not failed, and he is not unjust because God is not yet finished with Israel. It is important to note that the beginning of verse 24 fits with the end of verse 23 meaning that those called are identified with the "vessels of mercy," however, it also fits with verse 25 because a pattern is being developed.<sup>86</sup> As pointed out by Moo, in verse 24, Paul shows that God calls Jews and Gentiles; in verses 25-26 Paul uses an OT reference to confirm God's calling of the Gentiles; and in verses 27-29, Paul gives an OT confirmation that God has called Jews as well.<sup>87</sup> In verse 25, Paul quotes Hosea 2:23 which applies Hosea's prophecy to the future restoration of Israel.<sup>88</sup> The words "call" and "loved" in Paul's translation of Hosea likely are there to tie this OT quotation to the story of Jacob and Esau.<sup>89</sup> In the same way that Jacob was loved by God (or accepted by God), the Gentiles who were like Esau, are now also loved by God.<sup>90</sup> Verse 26 is a citation of Hosea 1:10.<sup>91</sup> The "place" Hosea referred to was the land of Israel's exile, but Paul is using it to refer to the fact that the Gentiles had once been in exile and had now been called out by God.<sup>92</sup> It is fair to assume that Hosea's prophecy had been fulfilled by the calling of the Gentiles, but not at the cost of cutting off Israel forever.<sup>93</sup> The church is renewed and God's promises are fulfilled: Jesus, and those who belong to him, including Gentiles, are the true Israel and can be referred to as the children of God.<sup>94</sup> This serves as evidence that God's acceptance of Gentiles is consistent with the OT, and the prophecies of the restoration of Israel have always included the calling of the Gentiles.<sup>95</sup> Thus, God's word and promises had not failed.

Verses 27-29 are quotations from Isaiah 10:22-23 and Isaiah 1:9; and as Moo stated, these verses serve to give an OT confirmation of God's call to the Jews.<sup>96</sup> This section addresses the remnant of Israel, a group of ethnic Jews who had been called by God.<sup>97</sup> This group of Israelites completely fulfilled God's promise because it establishes that God is calling "vessels of mercy" from the Jews; he had not abandoned them.<sup>98</sup> However, this quotation from Isaiah proves Paul's point that God had never promised to save the entirety of the Jews.<sup>99</sup> This seems to be a negative concept because many Jews will not be saved, however, there is hope that lies with the remnant.<sup>100</sup> This verse is surprising to Jewish readers because they had always expected to be the majority number of God's children, but it is just the opposite.<sup>101</sup> God has not rejected Israel forever, instead, he has preserved a remnant of Israelites who have faith in God.<sup>102</sup> They have not been abandoned and thus God is still just and is still faithful to his promise.<sup>103</sup> After the negative

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 631.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Pate, 211.

<sup>89</sup> Schreiner, 376.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Pate, 211.

<sup>92</sup> Moo, 633.

<sup>93</sup> Schreiner, 376-377.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Pate, 211; Moo, 631.

<sup>97</sup> Osborne, 257-258.

<sup>98</sup> Moo, 634.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Schreiner, 377.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Osborne, 258.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

news, Paul ends positively using Isaiah 1:9. Here he confirms the pouring out of God's mercy on Israel by explaining that God did leave a "seed" so that they did not become like Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>104</sup> This means that God is not allowing the Israelites to end in annihilation like Sodom and Gomorrah, a miracle of God's grace and mercy.<sup>105</sup>

### **Romans 11**

Romans 11 gives more specific insight into Paul's teachings about Israel and the Gentiles. In verse 1, Paul clearly addresses Israel's question from Chapter 9, "Has God rejected his people?" To which Paul responded, "Absolutely not!" Verse 5 explains why Israel has not been rejected because there is a remnant who was "chosen by grace." Because of this wording, it is impossible to conclude that God has completely rejected Israel due to the fact that by His grace, he has allowed some of the Israelites to believe in Him.<sup>106</sup> Clearly, acceptance into the people of God is not based on ethnicity. Verse 6 qualifies verse 5 by saying that they are not saved by works, signaling that they are no longer under the old covenant which was based on good works.<sup>107</sup> This is something that the Jewish Christians had to understand to truly be followers of Christ. In the same way that acceptance into the people of God is not due to ethnicity, it is also not achieved by works. Verse 11 adds another layer to the question of Israel's rejection: their failure and "rejection" is not permanent. In addition to this news, Paul says that their failure will be used for a purpose: to bring the Gentiles into the people of God. The end of verse 11 says that the Gentiles were brought in to make Israel jealous. Because of this reversal of the way Israel assumed salvation would happen (all Jews then some Gentiles), Israel now has the capacity to praise God in a much deeper way than would have been possible before their fall.<sup>108</sup> Beginning in verse 13, Paul shifts his focus to addressing the Gentiles. He discusses further the jealousy of Israel leading them to rejoin the people of God and emphasizes that Israel's rejection brings salvation to the entire world. This is something worthy of praise and thanksgiving. Verse 16 begins the discussion of the root and the branches creating an image of Israel's failure and the Gentile's acceptance into the people of God. In this image, the root is the foundation of God's people, those from the OT who were faithful to God, and the Israelites are the original branches.<sup>109</sup> When Israel failed, their branches were broken off leaving room for the "wild branches," gentiles, to be grafted onto the tree. Overall, Paul's message is clear. Israel has not been entirely cast off, and the Gentiles are offered a place in the people of God. Becoming a child of God, or a member of true Israel is not achieved by ethnicity or by works, instead, it is by faith in Jesus and the grace of God that everyone is offered the gift of salvation.

### **"Israel" in Paul's Other Letters**

#### *1 Cor. 10:1-13*

In this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Paul uses the story of Israel's failure to follow God and consequential judgment to show the Corinthians that they must strive to follow Christ to the best of their ability, or the same judgment will fall on them. The first four verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 10 draw a connection between Israel and the Corinthian church. In verse 1,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>105</sup> Moo, 635; Schreiner, 378.

<sup>106</sup> Schreiner, 582.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 582-583.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 594.

<sup>109</sup> Schreiner, 600.



Paul establishes a key point by using the term “ancestors,” meaning the Israelites, when addressing a gentile church. He does this to show that these believers are included in the “restored Israel” so that there is no question of their membership in God’s family before he continues.<sup>110</sup> Schreiner points out several analogous comparisons beginning in verse 2.<sup>111</sup> Paul says that the ancestors were baptized into Moses which aligns with the Christ-followers being baptized into Jesus Christ. Verses 3 and 4 say that the ancestors ate and drank of the same spiritual food and drink which connects to the Lord’s Supper. Specifically, in verse 4, there is a connection made to the Israelites drinking from the rock in Numbers 20:1-13 and the Corinthians drinking from the rock that is Jesus Christ.<sup>112</sup> It seems that, by making these connections, Paul is creating a strong link between the Israelites and the church in Corinth so that they will understand that they are part of the chosen people of God, as well as that they must pay attention to the mistakes made by their spiritual ancestors.

Verses 6-10 point out several mistakes made by the Israelites as well as connections to temptations the Corinthians were facing. Paul does this to warn the Corinthians that they are not exempt from the same judgment that separated Israel from God. These warnings were to beware of evil desires, not to eat food offered to idols, not to be sexually immoral, not to test God, and not to complain. All these things were ways that the Israelites disobeyed God and brought his judgment upon themselves. Verse 11 explains the purpose of warning the Corinthians not to make the same mistakes. The Israelites were designated by God for a specific purpose in salvation history, and their experiences correspond with the experiences of the early church.<sup>113</sup> One example of this relationship is that Jesus’s sacrifice fulfilled the sacrifice of animals. Because of this relationship, Paul uses the mistakes of Israel as lessons to the Corinthians so that they can succeed where Israel failed. In the same way that Israel was chosen from the beginning, so were the believers in the early church; and now that the covenant promises rest on the nations, Paul’s warnings serve as divine protection of the new covenant promises.<sup>114</sup> After establishing all these connections, Paul implores that the Corinthians not take Jesus’s grace for granted. Instead, they must be vigilant and stand firm in their faith so that they do not fail where Israel did.<sup>115</sup> He ends the section by tying in God’s faithfulness to keep his promises which include providing a way to bear temptation as well as a promise not to abandon them.<sup>116</sup> God is unchanging and so his faithfulness and judgment are the same always. The overall message of Paul to the Corinthians is that just because they are not under the covenant promises, they are not protected from the judgment of God if they do not heed the warnings that have been displayed by their forefathers.

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<sup>110</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *I Corinthians: an introduction and commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 199.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 205-206.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 206-207.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

*Eph 2:1-22*

In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul first talks about the Jews by addressing them as “us.”<sup>117</sup> Paul discusses the predestination of the Jews to receive God’s inheritance and qualifies that by saying only those who put their hope in Jesus are included in this inheritance. He then goes on to address the Gentiles, calling them “you.” Paul tells the Gentile Ephesians that because they had believed in Jesus Christ, they too would receive the inheritance which was taking the form of the Holy Spirit as a “down payment.” It was important to Paul that the Gentile Christians understand that they were included in God’s family because of their belief and that they were equal with the Jewish believers because they all had the same inheritance: the Holy Spirit.

Paul, in chapter 2, now sees a need to further explain what it means to be alive in Christ and a part of his people. In verses 1-3, he reminds them of their state before believing in Jesus. He uses the depiction of life and death by saying that they were once dead in their sins and apart from God. Instead of being Children of God, they were Children of wrath. According to Liefeld, Paul uses these terms to teach that before believing in Christ, they were not in a neutral state. Instead, they were destined for judgment because they were living according to fleshly desires.<sup>118</sup> In verse 4, the phrase “but God” signals a transition: now because of their belief in Jesus Christ, they were no longer destined for judgment, instead, they were granted eternal life. Paul lists three qualities of God that result in his gift of salvation: mercy, love, and grace (in verse 5). Paul uses specific wording to show that God’s mercy is generous, and his love is very active as well very undeserved.<sup>119</sup> Most important in these two verses is the quality of grace. Liefeld mentions that in the NT, grace is referring to “covenantal faithfulness,” which helps Paul explain the reason that the Galatians were made alive in Christ instead of explaining how. It seems that Paul addresses grace so early because he needs to establish that salvation cannot be earned, rather it is a gift from God. Paul makes this very clear in verses 8-9 by saying, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift – not from works so that no one can boast.” Verse 10 is closely connected to verses 8-9: salvation is not earned by works, but it does not stop at grace. The reason God created humans was to do good works and because of faith in God and his salvation by grace, Christ’s followers will also do good works because of their belief in Christ. This section of chapter 2 gives an in-depth explanation of how both Jews and Gentiles can become a part of God’s family: through faith in Christ by the Grace of God. Paul also begins to explain what the people of God should look like: they do good works.

Verses 11-22 show how the Gentiles specifically fit into this framework. Paul goes back to explaining the state of the Gentiles before their belief in Christ in verses 11-12: they were “uncircumcised,” excluded from the citizenship of Israel and the covenant promises, without hope, and without God. Verse 13 has a similar transition as in verse 4, “but now in Christ Jesus,” which leads to a description of the believing Gentile’s current status: “near to the blood of Jesus Christ.” Verses 14-18 discuss the new relationship between the Jews and Gentiles. In this section, the word “peace” is repeated several times. In verse 14, he talks about how the once hostile relationship between the Jews and Gentiles, was now peaceful because Jesus tore down the dividing wall. Verse 15 further explains the previous verse by implying that the wall from

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<sup>117</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, *Ephesians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 56.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

verse 14 was the Jewish law. The law is what prevented Jews from accepting Gentiles, so because Jesus fulfilled the law, it is no longer a divider between the two groups of people thus creating peace. The second part of verse 15 along with verse 16 says that Christ, in himself, created one man from the two, referring to the Jews and Gentiles becoming one and that through Jesus's death on the cross, God would reconcile both of these to himself in one body. Paul often uses the word "body" to mean the church, which is evidence that both the Jewish and Gentile Christians were now part of the same church or body as well as part of God's people.<sup>120</sup> The final verses in the chapter leave the Gentiles with a message of inclusion. Verses 17-18 state that the Jews and Gentiles would have equal access to the Father. Verse 19 clearly states that the Gentiles are not foreign to God anymore, but now are "members of God's household." This entire chapter makes it very clear to both Jews and Gentiles that anyone who believes in Christ is saved by faith through the grace of God for the purpose of good works, and that there is no division between the believing Jews and Gentiles because the law has been fulfilled and the foreigners have been grafted into the household of God.

### "ISRAEL" IN HEBREWS

The book of Hebrews was written to address a group of Christians who had a good understanding of Jewish culture and tradition as well as extensive knowledge of the OT.<sup>121</sup> The author aims to warn his audience of the dangers of reverting to the ways of Judaism instead of continuing in the way of Christ. Hebrews begins by reminding the church of who Jesus is and what he had done to give them salvation. In chapter 1, starting in verse 8, the author uses OT references from Psalms and Isaiah to describe God's anointing of Christ. He used the OT because the audience was familiar with it and referring to it in his argument would have been very persuasive. Chapter 2 verse 10 gives the reason for Christ's anointing: His sufferings will be the source of salvation because he is perfect. It was important for the audience to be reminded of Christ's death on the cross and their gift of being "brought to glory." Without this sacrifice from Jesus, their salvation and sanctification, as mentioned in 10:10, would not be possible. Along with the gift of salvation, Jesus's sacrifice also brought about the New Covenant. Hebrews 7:18 says, "So the previous command is annulled because it was weak and unprofitable (for the law perfected nothing), but a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God." This verse is part of a greater section of Hebrews that asserts that the Levitical priesthood is no more and that there is a new permanent priesthood that ends the mosaic law and the Old Covenant.<sup>122</sup> Now, there is a new hope because the people of God are no longer tied to the harsh restrictions of the law and are able to be nearer to God than the law allowed since the law could "perfect nothing." Chapter 9 goes into further detail about the New Covenant. With Christ as the new high priest, he offers "eternal inheritance" to those who believe in him because his death redeemed their transgressions. His perfect sacrifice made it so that there was no need for the frequent sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The world is blessed by Jesus's liberation from sin.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>121</sup> George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*. The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 19.

<sup>122</sup> Ray Steadman. *Hebrews*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 83.

<sup>123</sup> Guthrie, 313.

## Warnings to Believers

The author of Hebrews uses Israel's failure to follow Christ to show that God's people have always been included through their faith and obedience to God. Chapter 4 verse 6 says "Therefore, since it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news did not enter because of disobedience." This verse is addressing the promise to enter into the Lord's rest and addresses the fact that some who heard the promise (Israel) will not achieve the rest because of their disobedience and inability to believe the good news they heard. This is strong evidence, that even in the OT, when Israel was the people of God, they did not achieve this status based on nationality but by obedience and faith in God. If this is the way that it worked then, it is not unusual for this to remain the case in the NT. 4:10 further explains this by saying that the people who enter this rest, also have rest from their works. This implies that as the people of God, there is no dependence on works like there is in the Jewish culture.<sup>124</sup>

The following verse sets up a major theme of Hebrews: enter God's rest so that there is no temptation toward disobedience which would lead to falling away as national Israel did. This same theme is seen in 2:1, which is a reminder to pay attention to all they have heard about Jesus so that they do not drift away from the Christian faith. This is important because it shows the physical mistake that was made by Israel that led to their falling out of the people of God. This means that the current Christians reading this letter were also at risk of making the same mistake to remove themselves from God's family. Because of this, it is impossible that the determining factor is anything other than faith in God and obedience to his commands. The beginning of chapter 6 says something significant about the way that Christians should follow Christ to avoid the same mistakes that national Israel made. The author aimed to help them move from elementary Christian teachings to a more mature understanding of the Christian faith. 6:1-2 include 6 aspects of the mature foundation he expects them to achieve. These 6 things all have parallels to Judaism. Some scholars think this list is strictly Jewish or only Christian, but Steadman sees this list as both.<sup>125</sup> This is significant because it shows a smooth transition from Judaism to Christianity and emphasizes the fact that ethnic Jews who once belonged to Judaism are not completely removed from this new group of God's people. In the same way that these two religious groups share similar practices, if an ethnically Jewish person has true faith in Jesus Christ, they can also be included in the non-ethnically specific people of God.

Chapter 10:28-29 contains yet another warning to those who, like Israel, reject the Son of God in verses 28 and 29. This warning, which compares the rejection of Jesus to the death that followed the disregard of the mosaic law, serves as more evidence of the requirements to be part of the people of God. To be included in the New Covenant people of God, they must recognize Jesus as the Son of God and adhere to his commands in the same way that Jews were expected to obey the laws of Moses. This type of "lesser to greater" is significant because it emphasizes the degree to which the New Covenant, Christianity, is greater than the Old Covenant, Judaism.<sup>126</sup> With the New Covenant established by the permanent high priest, Jesus Christ, comes an

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<sup>124</sup> Steadman, 57.

<sup>125</sup> Steadman, 69.

<sup>126</sup> Guthrie, 356-357.

invitation to all nations to be a part of the people of God, including national Jews. However, this invitation comes with much greater consequences if it is rejected like Israel rejected the Old Covenant through disobedience. It is important to notice that throughout these warnings and descriptions of the people of God, ethnicity is never a requirement, rather it is the attitude of the heart, the willingness to obey, and faith in God the Father and Jesus his Son.

### **The Importance of Faith**

Another primary goal of the author of Hebrews was to firmly establish the importance of faith in Jesus Christ. It is through this faith that the people of God are sustained. Chapter 10 verses 19-25 gives an incredible depiction of what the people of God should look like, again, never mentioning ethnicity. The author begins by commending their boldness to “enter the sanctuary through the blood of Christ,” which is significant because of the parallel to the Holy of Holies in the temple. Steadman points out the fact that Jesus’s death on the cross provided access to the presence of God to *all* who believe in him as opposed to in the Holy of Holies where only the high priest could have this honor.<sup>127</sup> Because of this, believers are called to draw near to Christ in faith because he cleansed their sins and made them pure. There is new hope because they are no longer bound to the law which creates an unwavering faith in Jesus, the foundational requirement for admission into his “chosen people.” The author also includes some behaviors of Christ’s followers like loving one another, doing good works, gathering together, and encouraging each other. Yet again, there is no mention of ethnicity, only faith as a requirement. Based on this passage which clearly is addressing the people of God, all of those who are included in God’s people must approach him with a sincere heart. Guthrie points out the significance of the author using this phrase: in scripture, “the heart” usually refers to a person’s inner self, and in the new covenant, God says he will write his laws on the heart. This is significant because it shows God’s desire to have the hearts of his people in the correct condition which is achieved through godly commitments and motivations.<sup>128</sup> This correct heart is full of “assurance of faith” which is the main requirement for inclusion in the people of God.

### **“ISRAEL” IN REVELATION**

The book of Revelation contains a lot of information about Jews and Gentiles, the nations, multitudes, and who is included in the people of God. Right from the start of the vision, John was shown an image that firmly establishes that God’s people are both Jews and Gentiles. The image of the 7 lampstands, which begins in Revelation 1:12, is drawn from a Jewish menorah that has 7 branches.<sup>129</sup> This is significant because 1:20 reveals that the 7 lampstands are the 7 churches that are addressed in chapters 2 and 3. It is important to notice that the churches that are being represented by the Jewish image of the lampstand are made up of both Jews and Gentiles signifying that there is no longer a division between Jews and Gentiles in the eyes of God.

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<sup>127</sup> Steadman, 107.

<sup>128</sup> Guthrie, 343.

<sup>129</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 99.

Chapter 7 of Revelation provides insight into the roles and responsibilities of the church in John's time with two related visions. The first, 7:1-8, depicts 144,000 people being sealed by God, and the second, 7:9-17, consists of the great multitude celebrating in Heaven. In the first vision, verse 4 says that there are 144,000 sealed from the tribes of Israel. Many people view this as literal Israel or a Jewish remnant, however, Duvall, points out that this number comes from multiplying 12 by 12,000 which represents the total or full people of God.<sup>130</sup> This is consistent with the numerous occasions in Revelation where numbers are used symbolically. This seal is one of protection, not from physical death or persecution, but from eternal separation from God.<sup>131</sup> This seal would be offered to Jews and Gentiles because Jesus's sacrifice allowed for God's salvation to be offered to all people, not just the Jews. To say that only 144,000 Jews receive the seal of the living God, would be inconsistent with the other teachings in the NT. In the second vision, John sees a great multitude of people standing victorious on Mount Zion with Christ. Duvall notes that these two visions are best understood when paired together, and as a couplet, they resemble Rev 5:5-6 when John hears a lion and sees a lamb.<sup>132</sup> Now, John hears of 144,000 Jews being sealed, yet he sees a great multitude from all nations.<sup>133</sup> According to Keener, the first vision was symbolic of the Jewish expectation of an "end-time pilgrimage," whereas the second vision is a literal explanation of the first.<sup>134</sup> This also shows the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham which shows that God has not abandoned Israel, instead, he kept his promise to Israel while also grafting in the nations.<sup>135</sup> It is clear from the couplet of visions that God includes all ethnicities in his sealed multitude of people.

There is another vision, in chapter 14, that also addresses the people of God. 14:1-5 is the first vision which consists of the 144,000 sealed followers of Christ standing before the Lamb on Mount Zion. Similar to the vision in 7:1-8, there are some symbolic aspects. As in 7:4, the number, 144,000, symbolizes the total or complete people of God, not literally 144,000 Israelites.<sup>136</sup> This is consistent with the rest of the NT by implying that the complete people of God would be from all nations, not only Israel. This symbolic view is supported by 14:4 which says all of the 144,000 are virgins. It is very unlikely that God would give a special designation to unmarried, virgin believers because that would give a negative connotation to marriage and that is inconsistent with the teachings in the rest of scripture.<sup>137</sup> Because of this, it is easily assumed that calling the 144,000 virgins is symbolic of their moral purity through their relationship with God.<sup>138</sup> If this is accepted as a symbolic description of the people of God, it makes sense that the number also be symbolic.

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<sup>130</sup> Scott J. Duvall, *Revelation*, Teach the Text Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2014), 121-122.

<sup>131</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 158.

<sup>132</sup> Duvall, 126.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 243.

<sup>135</sup> Duvall, 126.

<sup>136</sup> Duvall, 203.

<sup>137</sup> Osborne, 528.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

The Book of Revelation uses the word “nations” numerous times, and it can have several different meanings. “Nations” is typically used to show universality but can also be used as a negative term to mean the people on earth who oppose God.<sup>139</sup> There are a couple of instances that are particularly important. Revelation 5:9-10 is a praise song sung by the saints. In the song, they thank God for purchasing his people from every “tribe and language and people and nation,” to reign on Earth with God. Mounce says that after reading this verse, it is foolish to attempt to make an ethnic distinction when discussing the people of God.<sup>140</sup> Here, it is evident that in contrast to Judaism’s exclusiveness, the church of God is one of universality, and salvation is offered to all regardless of ethnicity.<sup>141</sup> The vision in 7:9-17 uses the word “multitude” to mean the same ethnically diverse group of people that make up the followers of Christ. In chapter 14 verse 6, an angel announces the “eternal gospel” to people of all nations, tribes, languages, and people. Here, the “inhabitants of the earth” or nations, are not the same people of God as previously discussed, however, they are still being presented with the gospel.<sup>142</sup> This is more evidence that God does not limit his church to Jews, rather he desires all people of all nations to follow him. In this passage in chapter 14, there is still hope for more people from every ethnicity to come to follow Christ and become a part of the new Israel.

The Book of Revelation also gives significant insight into the role of God’s people in the New Heaven and New Earth. In chapter 19, John hears a “vast multitude” praising God in Heaven. Here, it is assumed that the multitude is made up of all nations and tribes and languages and people like when the term “nations” is used to describe the people of God. In chapter 21, John sees the new creation, and he sees that God is “dwelling with humanity.” It is important to notice that 21:3b says, “They will be his people and God himself will be with them and will be their God.” This has a direct connection to Leviticus 26:11-12 which says, “I will make my place of residence among you, and I will not reject you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people.”<sup>143</sup> This phrase appears throughout the Bible as a comforting promise to God’s people. In Leviticus, God was talking to Israel, but now, God’s people consist of all ethnicities, yet the promise remains the same.<sup>144</sup> 21:4 lists all of the negative things that will no longer exist in the New Creation, and Osborne points out that along with these things, ethnic and racial distinctions will be no more, and all God’s people will be one people.<sup>145</sup> 21:12 says that in the New Creation, there will be 12 gates with each of the names of the 12 tribes of Israel inscribed on each of them. This signals that God has not abandoned Israel, but instead has made the heavenly city a refuge for people of all nations.<sup>146</sup> Then, in 21:14, there are 12 foundations that have the names of the 12 apostles on them. This aspect of the heavenly city shows how one

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<sup>139</sup> Duvall, 165.

<sup>140</sup> Mounce, 136.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Duvall, 208.

<sup>143</sup> Osborne, 734.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Duvall, 302.

is allowed to enter the gates: through membership in the people of God.<sup>147</sup> It has been made abundantly clear that to become a member of the people of God, one must have faith in Jesus.

Interestingly, 21:22 says that there will be no temple in the New Heaven and New Earth because the Father and the Son are the temple. This would have been the opposite of the Jewish picture of the end times.<sup>148</sup> There will be no physical building where the presence of God dwells, instead, the entire New Creation is a temple because God's presence dwells among his people.<sup>149</sup> This shows that there is a community among believers, as well as emphasizing the annulment of the Jewish law. 21:24 says that the nations will walk by the light of the lamb. This is another reminder that while Gentiles once "trampled the temple city" (11:2), they are now depicted as honoring the "temple" and are allowed to walk by the light of the lamb.<sup>150</sup> The second section of chapter 22 contains the words of Jesus regarding those who are members of the people of God. 22:14 says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and many enter the gates of the city." This verse is a description of the type of person that gains membership in the true Israel: people who persevere in their faithfulness to Christ and do not give in to the world.<sup>151</sup> There is no trace of ethnic requirements or a chance to gain salvation by works. The final verses of the final book of the Bible make it abundantly clear that the people of God, the true Israel, is made up of anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

God's chosen people, the true Israel, gain access to God through their faith in Jesus Christ. Ethnicity, nationality, and obedience to the law are not enough for a person to receive the gift of eternal life. Despite many misconceptions, national or ethnic Israel does not receive any special treatment based on ethnicity or nationality. They were the chosen people of God, but they were chosen for a purpose, and they failed to accomplish it. Because of this, God opened his arms to the Gentiles and anyone who could succeed where national Israel failed. After Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection, the veil in the temple was torn, and God's presence was finally able to dwell among his people. The Holy Spirit now lives inside all who believe in and follow Christ. This is the sole requirement to become a part of the true Israel. God's chosen people are, and have always been, the people who respond in faith to the call of God. Abraham put his faith in God, many Israelites throughout the OT had faith in God, Ruth and Rahab put their faith in God despite their Gentile blood, the 12 apostles had faith, as well as every other member of the true Israel who put their faith in Jesus Christ. Even when nationality was a factor, those who were counted as true members of God's family, were those who responded to God's calling for faith beyond their national ties. Based on these things, it is impossible for national Israelites to be granted salvation by their blood alone because that would leave no room for the choice to follow Christ. There are and always have been national Israelites who do follow God and are granted eternal life, but it has never been about their ethnicity, only about their heart. Many misconceptions today come from the use of the term "Israel" or

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Keener, 497.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Keener, 498.

<sup>151</sup> Duvall, 320.



“Israelites” in the Book of Revelation. However, it has been shown that in most cases, this term is referring to the “true Israel” or the true, complete people of God who have chosen to commit their lives to Christ and follow him. The entire NT supports the principle that the only way to salvation is through believing in, and faithfully following and serving God. It is also important to understand that in the same way that Israel was cut off from God’s people, any Gentile faces the same fate if they do not truly follow, obey, and have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Christians today must also apply these principles to their understanding of faith and the people of God. Whether in thinking about themselves or others, it is essential to understand that there is no place for ethnic or national distinctions in spiritual Israel. The only determining factor for admission into the people of God is faith in Christ which will result in good works. There is a common misconception that there are different ways to salvation for Jews and Gentiles. However, based on the conclusions of this study that faith in Christ is the sole path to salvation, there is no conceivable way that Jews and Gentiles could have separate paths to salvation. This conclusion also has political ramifications. If there are no ethnic or national distinctions in God’s people, there is no reason to give ethnicity or nationality weight in the political realm (e.g., support for national Israel on a religious basis). Most of all, it is key for today’s believers to recognize that their place in the true Israel is achieved by their faith in Christ, not by any other means.

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