

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Baptism of John

The Church of the Living God

Living in the Kingdom

Maranatha!

Power in the Church

The Riches of His Grace

The Shadow and the Substance

The Story of the Acts of God

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Ian Pennicook

New Creation Publications Inc.
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051
2007

Published by
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC., AUSTRALIA
PO Box 403, Blackwood, South Australia 5051

© Ian D. Pennicook 2007

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Pennicook, Ian D.
Jews, Gentiles and the people of God

ISBN 978 0 86408 292 3

1. Theology, Doctrinal.
2. Israel (Christian theology). 1. Title

230

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publisher.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the
HOLY BIBLE, NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION
Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the
National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Cover design: Nicole Dunkley

Wholly set and printed at
NEW CREATION PUBLICATIONS INC.
Coromandel East, South Australia
www.newcreation.org.au

Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1.	Jews, Gentiles and the People of God	1
2.	The Nations and Creation	5
3.	The Nations and Israel	10
4.	The Nations and the Prophets	19
5.	The Nations and Israel's King	30
6.	Jesus and the Nations	34
7.	The Nations and the Plan of God	44
8.	Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question	53
Addendum	The Future of Israel	68
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>70</i>

Preface

Some may ask: ‘Who cares about Jews, Gentiles and the people of God; surely such a topic is no more than delving into obscure and ancient matters of no relevance to the church today?’ For others, of course, the topic is of vital importance. For them it is far more than a matter of doctrine, it determines the whole course of world history until now. The events in the Middle East in our own time are no less than an extension of the teaching of the scriptures. I do not want to move towards either of these extremes.

What I attempt to do in this book is to set out the way that the scriptures themselves not only teach about the topic but actually reflect it as well. By that I mean that the early church taught the great matters of salvation, justification by grace through faith, the holiness of the people of God and the hope of glory, but they did so within the context of their own life as *consciously* either Jews or Gentiles. Most of us, probably, almost never think in these terms. Such issues as circumcision or diet would rarely emerge as religious issues for most Christians. Yet they were part of the life, and the internal battles, of the early believers. You could not teach about the grace of God in the abstract. As we read, say, Acts 15, we see that grace touched their lives not only as a doctrine of their eternal salvation but touched them also as people living in the world where what you ate and with whom you ate were questions of immediate importance. Circumcision was of enough significance to cause a ‘stand off’ between the

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

apostle Paul and other ‘Christians’ (Paul called them ‘false brothers’) as we read in Galatians 2:4–5.

The scriptures—and here I am focussing on the New Testament—are not monochrome. There is a brilliant diversity among the authors, with issues that faced them showing through in places. So we should beware of reading the scriptures as if they were merely parts of a spiritual street directory. In the letters, for instance, we are engaging with correspondence between people who are passionate about their positions.

Without any doubt, the scriptures are the written word of God, but recognising that demands of us that we read them and submit to them with, as far as possible, an awareness of the context in which they were written.

I should add that, perhaps in spite of appearances, I have not tried to be ‘academic’. All of what follows has been worked through with other Christians, most of whom have had no formal theological training. The various references to other authors is only an indication of how I approached the topic. Given my own circumstances at the time, access to research facilities while I was preparing was limited. But my aim was—and is—to open up more of the wonders of God’s working to men and women, and certainly not to impress them with (what genuine experts would recognise as) my poor abilities.

One final comment on the presence of ‘slabs’ of scripture included in the text. Please read them! It is far too easy to skip biblical quotations, and especially biblical references, as if they were just assumed. Perhaps they can be, but that is not the point. Nothing I can offer is of any value if I have not been true to the text of scripture.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, ‘Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.²³ For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, “To an unknown god.” What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.²⁶ From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live,²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.²⁸ For “In him we live and move and have our being”; as even some of your own poets have said, “For we too are his offspring”’ (Acts 17:22–28).

When in Athens, Paul addressed the council of elders. He did so in response to the request for an explanation of his strange teaching concerning ‘Jesus and the resurrection’ (Acts 17: 18–19). Yet when he explained his teaching, he did so by returning to the subject of creation and then to the way that the ‘unknown god’ is in fact the creator of all the nations and

so the judge of all the nations;¹ the resurrection is the seal on this.

It has been pointed out that there are certain Jewish elements in Paul's teaching, especially in the reaction to the Greeks' idolatry.² But this story is hardly being told as an example of the battle between Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism. If Paul speaks from a Jewish perspective, it is surely because: (i) he is a Jew; (ii) he understands that the God of creation has worked through the history of Israel in order that the nations may 'grope for him and find him' (v. 27); so that (iii) the Jewishness of his reaction is not an ethnic but a godly response. God's concern, and so Paul's, is that the nations may find God. Certainly, Paul does not say or even imply at this point, that these Greeks will come to God and at the same time have a new and definitive relationship with Israel. It could be argued that, in spite of Israel's role in the

¹ It has been questioned whether Paul's meaning is in fact 'every nation of men' (RSV; ASV; NIV) at all. The Greek *πάν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων* (*pan ethnos anthropon*) may be translated as 'the whole race of men' and if this is so then Paul would be referring to, 'the sum of [all] the inhabitants of the earth' (M. Dibelius, in I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, IVP, Leicester, 1980, p. 287). Marshall concurs with Stählin that, 'the latter idea is biblical, and that the New Testament is concerned more with the fate of men as a whole than with the individual nations' (p. 287). If this understanding of the New Testament priorities has conditioned the translation then I would call it into question. Within the context, however, it certainly makes sense (see also F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 1976, pp. 357f.). Lumby, on the other hand, suggests that the idea of the nations all coming from one ancestor would carry an unacceptable implication to the Greek audience, for whom racial distinctions, between Greeks and Barbarians for example, were fundamental (J. R. Lumby, *The Acts of the Apostles: With Introduction and Notes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1912, p. 312; also F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 336f.).

² See James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Epworth Press, Peterborough, 1996), p. 232. Dunn also draws attention to the fact that Paul does not mention Jesus by name in this speech; he is simply 'a man whom he [God] has appointed' (v. 31).

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

plan of God, in the final analysis Israel will be simply one of the nations who make up the whole of humanity in the consummation.

But if this is so, what did Paul mean when he closed the Galatian letter with the blessing:

As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16).

The phrase ‘and upon the Israel of God’ has caused some bewilderment as a glance at the commentaries and other studies will show. Our ability to get into Paul’s mind at this point is distinctly limited. Some have argued that the better translation would be ‘*even* the Israel of God’ (the Greek *καὶ* [*kai*] being capable of both translations), implying perhaps ‘those who will follow this rule’—the point he has been so strenuously making in the letter, that what matters is not the Jewish rite of circumcision or its lack but a new creation—are (now) the Israel of God.³ On the other hand, other translations seem to imply a distinction between the two by ‘*and* the Israel of God’.⁴ Thus ‘the Israel of God’ could be Israel—either as the Jews who had come to Christ or as ‘elect Israel’—since Paul has made the distinction in Romans that not all who are physically Jewish are children of Abraham (Rom. 9:6–8). Or again, if ‘the Israel of God’ is a reference to Israel as a whole, then we may perhaps note a parallel with Romans 9:1–5, where Paul explains his deep concern for ‘Israel’:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred

³ Either directly or by implication, so the RSV, NIV, and JB.

⁴ NRSV, ASV, AV, NASB, NEB, Weymouth.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

This anguish for Israel would then find some conclusion in Romans 11:26—‘and so all Israel will be saved’—where the meaning would be that:

For all his demoting of the law and the customs, Paul held good hope of the ultimate blessing of Israel. They were not all keeping in line with ‘this rule’ yet, but the fact that some Israelites were doing so was in his eyes a pledge that this remnant would increase until, with the ingathering of the full tale (πλήρωμα) of Gentiles, ‘all Israel will be saved’. The invocation of blessing on the Israel of God has probably an eschatological perspective.⁵

A firm, or at least firmer, conclusion on this point will require us to approach the topic from another angle—one which will allow us to examine Paul’s comments against a background far wider than merely their immediate contexts. We need to ask: What is the context in which Paul finds himself and so writes his letters? How does he understand himself in the light of all that God has been doing in history and in the light of the person and work of Christ? The need for these questions is apparent when we recall the way Paul addressed the Athenians.

⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1982, p. 275.

The Nations and Creation

Returning to Acts 17, we note that Paul addressed the Athenian elders principally on the topic of their worship. They were worshipping ‘an unknown god’ and Paul proceeded to identify him, in particular as the god who required no shrines built by human hands to house him, since he stands as the creator of all things who ‘gives to all mortals life and breath and all things’ (Acts 17:24–25).

There follows from this description of God the reference to the fact that:

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷ so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸ For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’ (Acts 17:26–28).

Why did Paul move from general statements about God to the fact that he created the nations? As I noted above (fn. 1, p. 2) there may not be a reference to individual nations at all in this passage and, grammatically, that may probably be

the case.¹ But, while that may so, there is still Paul's self-conscious apostolic identity to be considered. He was an apostle to the Gentiles, to the nations (Gal. 2:8–9; etc.). Whatever the immediate reference to the Athenians may have been, Paul nonetheless gives us to understand that a nation is an identifiable group, distinguishable from other groups, to which he has been called to preach the gospel. The world is *not* one big nation. Furthermore, it would seem that (*contra* Stählin and Marshall²) the whole of the scriptures lead us to conclude that the nations are as much the focus of God's saving activity as are individuals. Indeed, a focus on individuals may be as much a product of 'Enlightenment' thinking as anything else, while the scriptures have a more corporate view of humanity.

First, the word 'Gentiles' requires some explanation. To most it simply implies non-Jews and this is the way it is used in Galatians. In that case it stands over against, 'the circumcised' (Gal. 2:9). But this does not tell us the meaning of the word, only the way it is used. The word 'Gentile' is of Latin origin. The word *gens* indicates a Roman clan, or group of families linked together by a common name and their belief in a common ancestor. Members of *gens* were 'Gentiles' and

¹ It was standard to translate *πάς* (*pas*) as 'every' or 'all' when it stood outside the article-noun construction, as here in Acts 17:26, and as 'whole' when within the article-noun construction. That rule is now being questioned, see C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977), pp. 93–95.

In this verse there seems good reason to translate it with Dibelius (above, fn. 1, p. 2). The Greek text reads ἐποίησέν τε ἐξ ἑνὸς πάν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων κατοικεῖν ἐπὶ παντὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς which the NRSV translates as 'he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth', yet the constructions are the same. Both *πάς* and *παντὸς* are outside an article-noun construction, *πάν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων* being anarthrous. Since the latter phrase could hardly mean 'every face of the earth', why should the first phrase, *of necessity*, mean 'every nation'?

² See fn. 1, p. 2.

were thus members of small identifiable groups.³ *Gentes*, clans, was the word used in the Latin Vulgate to translate from the LXX the Greek ἔθνος (*ethnos*, pl. ἔθνη) meaning ‘nation’. This in itself would seem to indicate that the word ἔθνος did not refer to a large group but to a (relatively) small, self-contained, distinct unit of people. In its turn, ἔθνος was the word used to translate the Hebrew גּוֹי (*goy*, pl. *goyim*⁴), also meaning nation.

There are other words in both the Old and New Testaments used in relationship with these two words. They are the Hebrew אָמ (am) and Greek λαός (*laos*, pl. λαοί, *laoi*) both of which mean ‘people(s)’. Generally, we may say that these words are interchangeable.⁵ So then, if we are to examine the subject of Jew and ‘Gentile’ in the scriptures, it follows that we are doing more than a mere word study.

The first uses of גּוֹי / ἔθνος in the Old Testament are in Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 and 32:

³ From these the coastland peoples spread. These are the descendants of Japheth in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations.

²⁰ These are the descendants of Ham, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

³¹ These are the descendants of Shem, by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations.

³² These are the families of Noah’s sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.

³ ‘Gens’ in N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (eds), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p. 462.

⁴ *Goyim* is also the modern, derogatory, Jewish word for non-Jews.

⁵ Compare with reference to אָמ. ‘The LXX uses ἔθνη for the plural in the Pentateuch, Joshua and Judges; elsewhere both ἔθνη and λαοί are used’ (E. J. Hamlin, ‘Nations’ in G. A. Buttrick [ed.], *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962, pp. 515f.).

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Genesis chapter 10 is a list of the descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Comparison with Genesis 11:10ff. will show that the list in chapter 10 is not a list of individuals but of 'nations'.⁶ Without pretending to be a technically complete list, Genesis 10 explains that all the nations are descended from Noah. However, the story did not begin with Noah, and Genesis chapter 5 describes the line from Adam to Noah.

If we go back to Genesis 1:28, where God commanded Adam⁷ to fill the earth, we may conclude that this command had, to some extent, been fulfilled in the words of Genesis 10:32. If this is so, then we could conclude that, 'from one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth', whatever the *immediate* meaning of Paul in Acts 17:26.⁸

What is the significance of such a conclusion? The answer to that question lies in the scope of biblical revelation. How does history end? We must return to this later, but Revelation 20:3 and 20:7–8 describe the dragon being thrown into the bottomless pit, 'so that he would deceive the nations no more' and being released 'for a little while' with his intention 'to deceive the nations' but instead being thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:24 then announces that the nations will walk by the light of the holy city, that is, by the light of the

⁶ It would seem that Genesis 11:1–9, the story of the tower of Babel, is anticipated in verse 32 and that the story of the tower of Babel provides a theological reason for the deep divisions within the nations. The idea of divisions through language is taken up in Zephaniah 3:9, though without any explicit thought that the nations would cease to exist, only that as a result of the removal of the curse of language differences, the nations will call upon the name of the Lord. This seems to be a deliberate reflection of Genesis 4:26.

⁷ Adam, verses 26–27.

⁸ See also Deuteronomy 32:8, 'When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods . . . '

The Nations and Creation

glory of God which is expressed by the Lamb. Instead of the false bride, Babylon, receiving the tribute of the nations, 'the glory and honor of the nations' will be brought into the holy city (Rev. 21:26) and those nations will be healed as the leaves of the tree of life are applied to them (Rev. 22:2).

All this takes place in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1). In other words, the nations *are* in Adam and are not a new item brought in as a result of the fall. And if they are in Adam in the first creation, then they appear in all their glory in the last, the new, creation.

The Nations and Israel

How can the writer of the Revelation arrive at his conclusion? Certainly it was truth which was ‘given’; but equally certainly he was very conscious of the Old Testament antecedents for all he was saying, for there are something like 470 allusions to the Old Testament in the book. So to discover the ground from which the details of the Revelation were taken, we need only go to what were then the only scriptures available to the writer: the Old Testament. (That is not to say that some or all of the documents which now comprise the New Testament were not written or even available, only that they had not been compiled into a single collection. Obviously many documents, especially the letters of Paul, had been collected early and were regarded as standing with ‘the *other* scriptures’ [2 Pet. 3:15–16]. Indeed, Paul’s letters along with other New Testament documents provide apostolic insight into how the issues in the Old Testament are to be understood.)

If the first references to the nations are in Genesis 10, and if they carry the implications which I have suggested, then how is the concern for the nations expressed? The answer lies in Genesis 12 where, following the scattering at the tower

The Nations and Israel

of Babel, the action of salvation history commences.¹ The terms of God's call to Abraham are important:

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed'(Gen. 12:1–3).

Here is the second reference to 'nation'. Using the same words as in Genesis 10:31–32, God promises to make Abraham 'a great nation' (*goy*) and so to 'bless . . . all the families of the earth', that is, of the earth which was cursed in Genesis 3:17. The same word, אֲדָמָה (*adamah*), is used in both places, although translated as 'ground' in Genesis 3:17 and 'earth' in Genesis 12:3. 'Adam' (אָדָם) meaning 'Man' comes from the same root as 'ground'. In this promise of blessing we may possibly see the way that many in Israel understood that 'Abraham will be God's means of undoing the sin of Adam',² and thus that Abraham's descendants will be the nation by whom all other nations are restored to their creational place.

In Romans 4, Paul explains the significance of God's promise to Abraham:

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a

¹ Of course, salvation history is the action of God from before the foundation of the world and, even within human history, could be said to begin with Genesis 3:15, but as identifiable *history* the call of Abraham provides the starting point.

² *Genesis Rabbah* 14.6, quoted in N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993), p. 21.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

gift but as something due.⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

⁶ So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works:

⁷ 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;

⁸ blessed is the one against whom the Lord will
not reckon sin.'

⁹ Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.'¹⁰ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them,¹² and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us,¹⁷ as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.¹⁸ Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become 'the father of many nations,' according to what was said, 'So numerous shall your descendants be.'¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb.²⁰ No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,²¹ being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.²² Therefore his faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness.'

The Nations and Israel

²³ Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, ²⁴ but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

We must examine Romans again later, but for the moment this chapter must occupy us. The subject is justification by faith but, in the process of arguing the point, Paul insists that Abraham was declared righteous ‘before he was circumcised, thereby enabling him to become the “father” of both Jewish and Gentile believers’³ (vv. 10–12). Abraham is Paul’s ‘ancestor according to the flesh’ (v. 1), that is, Paul writes as one who is Jewish, but Abraham is also the father, the ancestor, of all those who believe without being circumcised (v. 11) and of those who believe and are circumcised (v. 12). The issue is that it is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision which is crucial if one is to be descended from Abraham—it is faith. The picture implied is of a variety within the whole body of Abraham’s offspring (cf. Gal. 3:29).

Paul says that the promise which came to Abraham was ‘that he would inherit *the world*’ (v. 13). There is no specific statement in the Old Testament which supports the scope of the inheritance envisaged here. Instead there is the promise of numberless descendants (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 18:18), possession of the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:14f., 17; 15:7, 18–21; 17:8), and that the nations of the earth shall be blessed (or bless themselves) through Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18) or his ‘seed’ (Gen. 22:18). The link between these promises to Abraham and the creation mandate to ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28)

³ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 256.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

would give us the picture of the means by which ‘Man’ (*Adam*) was to fulfil the mandate—namely through Abraham.⁴

Also, in the period between the Testaments, Jewish theology had broadened its view of the promise to Abraham to include the whole earth. For example:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
and no one has been found like him in glory;
he kept the law of the Most High,
and was taken into covenant with him;
he established the covenant in his flesh,
and when he was tested he was found faithful.
Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath
that the nations would be blessed through his posterity;
that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth,
and exalt his posterity like the stars,
and cause them to inherit from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.
To Isaac also he gave the same assurance
for the sake of Abraham his father (Sir. 44:19–22, RSV).

But there is also the picture in scripture of the way that the promise to Abraham was intended to encompass the whole earth *through* the nations. Later, this is worked out in Israel’s commission to be ‘a priestly kingdom’ or ‘a royal priesthood’ (Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Israel is to be the nation which mediates the presence of God to the nations.⁵

As Abraham’s family grows, the interest in the nations continues to be an issue. For example:

As for the son of the slave woman [i.e. Ishmael], I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring (Gen. 21:13; cf. v. 18).

And the LORD said to [Rebekah], ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be

⁴ Also, of course, Jesus is described as ‘the heir of all things’ (Heb. 1:2).

⁵ This almost certainly the thrust of the book of Jonah.

The Nations and Israel

stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger' (Gen. 25:23).

God said to [Israel], 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you' (Gen. 35:11).⁶

When blessing his sons, Jacob said that:

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples [אֲמָ, *am*] is his (Gen. 49:10).

With the emergence of the nation Israel, we are confronted by the plan of God to bless the nations through Abraham's descendants. As noted above:

... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6).

This declaration is intended to define the role of Israel. Israel is not called 'holy' because of its moral qualities. Indeed the reverse is true; the Torah which demands moral qualities from Israel does so because Israel is holy. To call Israel 'holy' means that God has set Israel apart for himself. The moral qualities which are to be exhibited are the qualities of the one who called her 'out of darkness into his marvellous light'. But further, Israel is a holy nation in order to be a priestly kingdom.⁷ This title refers to the way Israel is to be the nation which leads the worship in which other nations will participate. The surrounding nations will come to Israel,

⁶ Whatever the meaning of 'a company of nations shall come *from you*', the interest in a multiplicity of nations is still present. See also Genesis 48:19.

⁷ See my discussion of this topic in 'The Priesthood of all Believers', the Sydney Monthly Study for April 1997, available at: <www.newcreation.org.au>.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

not to be part of them but to be partners with them in worship.

Israel's whole life as this nation was lived in the context of the surrounding nations. The land of Canaan was populated by nations whose practices were an abomination. For example, after listing various prohibitions, the Lord instructed Israel:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves (Lev. 18:24).

If Israel breaks covenant with God, the judgement will include being scattered among the nations:

And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste (Lev. 26:33).

The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known.⁶⁵ Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit (Deut. 28:64–65).

Far from Israel being a blessing to the nations around about, she would be reduced to nothing greater than slaves for whom there is no buyer (Deut. 28:68). In other words, the nations, rather than being attracted to Israel and so to Israel's God, would be repelled by the faithless nation which, in essence, was no different from themselves.⁸

⁸ The parallel which may be drawn today is obvious. Let the church say what it will; if it does not live in the reality of its salvation the world will be completely uninterested in its message, if not even contemptuous.

The Nations and Israel

The history of Israel records this very thing. Judges chapter 2 sets the agenda for the whole book. Thus:

Now the angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said, 'I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you into the land that I had promised to your ancestors. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you."² For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.'" But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done!³ So now I say, I will not drive them out before you; but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you' (Judg. 2:1–3).

Likewise, the establishment of the monarchy in Israel is related to the desire of the people to be *un*-holy:

'You [Samuel] are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations' . . .⁷ and the LORD said to Samuel, 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.'⁸ Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you' (1 Sam. 8:5, 7–8).

The ultimate judgement of exile was expressed by Ezekiel in the very terms anticipated by Moses:

The word of the LORD came to me:¹⁷ Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds; their conduct in my sight was like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual period.¹⁸ So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed upon the land, and for the idols with which they had defiled it.¹⁹ I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries; in accordance with their conduct and their deeds I judged them.²⁰ But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, 'These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land' (Ezek. 36:16–20).

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Likewise David says in Psalm 44:

- ⁹ Yet you have rejected us and abased us,
and have not gone out with our armies.
- ¹⁰ You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have gotten spoil.
- ¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.
- ¹² You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.
- ¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.
- ¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples (Ps. 44:9–14).

4

The Nations and the Prophets

In all the judgement which Israel experienced as a result of her refusal to be the holy nation and priestly kingdom, the purpose of God for the nations is never lost. Nor is the concern of the godly for the nations:

- May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah*
² that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth. *Selah*
⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.
⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.
⁷ May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him (Ps. 67).

Alongside this is the desire that nations that forget God should be judged. This desire is not vindictive; rather it

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

derives from the passionate concern for the name of God which was so manifestly lacking in Israel under judgement. The picture is large; the nations are under judgement because they have *forgotten*¹ God:

The wicked shall depart to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God (Ps. 9:17).

The nations ‘live and move and have [their] being’ in him (Acts 17:28). They may lack Israel’s special revelation, but they cannot deny their essential being any more than Israel can:

Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you! (Ps. 82:8).

This explains the prophetic interest in the nations. Isaiah, for example, commences his book with a description of the sin of Israel (chs 1–5), followed by the call of the prophet and his consequent message of judgement (ch. 6). Yet the description of Israel’s sin is introduced in terms of Israel as the worshipping community (1:10–17) and the book of Isaiah has as its focal point the restoration of Israel, *so that the nations will be able to participate in worship* (2:1–4):

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come
the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,

¹ See, perhaps, the analysis of Don Richardson, in *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Regal Books, Ventura, 1984), where he argues that what lies behind the religions of today is a clear sense of the presence of the one true God.

The Nations and the Prophets

‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

This picture is of the nations coming to Israel, to Zion, in order to learn Torah, which is flowing out from the renewed Israel. The result is the restoration of the nations, that is, they remain distinct groups but without the fierce divisions which have existed since the fall and since the tower of Babel.

Within the announcement of judgement on Israel is the recognition that God will use Assyria to accomplish his purpose. Hence, Isaiah 10:5–11:

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—
the club in their hands is my fury!
⁶ Against a godless nation I send him,
and against the people of my wrath I command him,
to take spoil and seize plunder,
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.
⁷ But this is not what he intends,
nor does he have this in mind;
but it is in his heart to destroy,
and to cut off nations not a few.
⁸ For he says:
‘Are not my commanders all kings?
⁹ Is not Calno like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad?
Is not Samaria like Damascus?’
¹⁰ As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

whose images were greater than those of Jerusalem
and Samaria,

¹¹ shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols
what I have done to Samaria and her images?’

Furthermore, when the judgement of Israel is complete,
Assyria will itself be called to account:

When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on
Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria
and his haughty pride (Isa. 10:12).

Chapters 13–23 are directly concerned with the nations:
Babylon (13:1–14:23), Assyria (14:24–27), Philistia (14:28–
32), Moab (15:1–16:14), Damascus/Syria (17:1–14), Ethiopia
(18:1–7), Egypt (19:1–25), Babylon again (21:1–10), Dumah
(21:11–12), Arabia (21:13–17) and Tyre (23:1–18). It is the
‘oracle concerning Egypt’ (19:1–25) which reveals the over-
all goal:

An oracle concerning Egypt.

See, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud
and comes to Egypt;
the idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence,
and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.

² I will stir up Egyptians against Egyptians,
and they will fight, one against the other,
neighbor against neighbor,
city against city, kingdom against kingdom;

³ the spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out,
and I will confound their plans;
they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead
and the ghosts and the familiar spirits;

⁴ I will deliver the Egyptians
into the hand of a hard master;
a fierce king will rule over them,
says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts.

The Nations and the Prophets

- ⁵ The waters of the Nile will be dried up,
and the river will be parched and dry;
⁶ its canals will become foul,
and the branches of Egypt's Nile will diminish
and dry up,
reeds and rushes will rot away.
⁷ There will be bare places by the Nile,
on the brink of the Nile;
and all that is sown by the Nile will dry up,
be driven away, and be no more.
⁸ Those who fish will mourn;
all who cast hooks in the Nile will lament,
and those who spread nets on the water will
languish.
⁹ The workers in flax will be in despair,
and the carders and those at the loom will grow pale.
¹⁰ Its weavers will be dismayed,
and all who work for wages will be grieved.
¹¹ The princes of Zoan are utterly foolish;
the wise counselors of Pharaoh give stupid counsel.
How can you say to Pharaoh,
'I am one of the sages,
a descendant of ancient kings'?
¹² Where now are your sages?
Let them tell you and make known
what the LORD of hosts has planned against Egypt.
¹³ The princes of Zoan have become fools,
and the princes of Memphis are deluded;
those who are the cornerstones of its tribes
have led Egypt astray.
¹⁴ The LORD has poured into them
a spirit of confusion;
and they have made Egypt stagger in all its doings
as a drunkard staggers around in vomit.
¹⁵ Neither head nor tail, palm branch or reed,
will be able to do anything for Egypt.
¹⁶ On that day the Egyptians will be like women, and tremble with
fear before the hand that the LORD of hosts raises against them.
¹⁷ And the land of Judah will become a terror to the Egyptians;

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

everyone to whom it is mentioned will fear because of the plan that the LORD of hosts is planning against them.

¹⁸ On that day there will be five cities in the land of Egypt that speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD of hosts. One of these will be called the City of the Sun.

¹⁹ On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the center of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD at its border. ²⁰ It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior, and will defend and deliver them. ²¹ The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. ²² The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them.

²³ On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

²⁴ On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, ²⁵ whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.'

Verses 1–15 describe the judgement of Egypt. However, the remainder of the oracle describes the healing of Egypt. Motyer's comment is helpful:

The true bearing of the oracles which have focused on Egypt is that Egypt is a 'case in point' of the Lord's purpose to unite the world in his worship. True religion heals wounds between people. The late eighth century BC was full of the tension between the two would-be super-powers, Egypt and Assyria, but what worldly ambition sunders religion based on revelation (as above; *cf.* 2:2–4) unites. This is the third stage in the spreading kingdom of peace: first a few cities (18), then a whole country (19), now the whole world. The emphasis here rests on the oneness people feel with each other and the free expression they give to it.

The *highway* (*m^esillâ*, 'a causeway or raised road', visible and unmistakable) expresses possibility of access. The free, mutual

The Nations and the Prophets

movement between *Egypt* and *Assyria* shows *the Egyptians* and *the Assyrians* enjoying it. *Worship together* expresses the ground of their unity, the magnetism which unites them: they accept each other because each has been accepted by the Lord (cf. Rom. 14:1–3).

The final ‘In that day’ section is the capstone. The fellowship they feel (23) is objectively ratified as the Lord says *Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork and Israel my inheritance*. At the start Judah was an object of fear to the Egyptians (17). This is correct, for true acknowledgment of the Lord means acknowledgment and submissiveness to those who are already his people (cf. 1 Cor. 14:2–25). But the convert at once enjoys a co-equal membership. The three titles *people*, *handiwork* and *inheritance* have always belonged to Israel. In Egypt the word once was ‘Let my people go’ (Ex. 5:1), but now *Egypt* is *my people*. Nothing could more wonderfully signalize what God has wrought.²

Isaiah’s point is that Israel, Assyria and Egypt stand side by side as partners in the great worship which flows from the whole creation. Neither does anything more than participate in the promise made to Abraham who was, as Paul pointed out, a Gentile when the promise was given and believed.

Later, Isaiah recounts the salvation of Israel, whom he describes as ‘Israel, my [i.e. God’s] servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend’ (41:8). In so forcibly calling Israel the ‘servant’ (cf. v. 9), Isaiah has set the parameters for the language of the first ‘servant song’ of chapter 42. Whatever the later implications, initially the servant is Israel and the purpose of being chosen is to ‘bring forth justice to the nations’ (v. 1) and to ‘establish justice in the earth’ so that ‘the coastlands wait for his teaching’ (Torah, v. 4; cf. 2:1–4). To the servant, God then says:

² J. A. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 1993, pp. 169f.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them (Isa. 42:6–9).

The servant will be instrumental in opening the eyes of the blind and bringing the prisoners out of the dungeon—that is, the healing of the nations. The restoration of Israel has the nations in view. Thus:

It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end
of the earth (Isa. 49:6).

It should be noted that the deep suffering of the servant taking the sins of *many* and so making *many* righteous (53: 11–12) is undergone before ‘many nations’ whose kings ‘shut their mouths because of him’ (52:15).

There are many references in the other prophets which make a similar point. Jeremiah is appointed ‘a prophet to the nations’ (1:5), ‘to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, *to build and to plant*’ (1:10). As expected, the main thrust of his prophecy is the judgement of Israel but, again, Israel’s restoration has its effects among the nations:

The Nations and the Prophets

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. ¹⁷ At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will (Jer. 3:15–17).

If you return, O Israel, says the LORD,
if you return to me,
if you remove your abominations from my presence,
and do not waver,
² and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives!'
in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
then nations shall be blessed by him,
and by him they shall boast (Jer. 4:1–2).

Chapters 45–51 are also devoted to the nations, with a large section given over to the Babylonians—appropriately so, in view of the historical context. But, even allowing for the disjointed chronology of the finished book, these chapters must be understood in the light of the passages quoted above, as well as in Ezekiel chapters 27–32, Obadiah and Nahum and, of course, the prophecy of Jonah. That book, of all others, indicates the problem of Israel's refusal to function within the purposes of God for the nations—in that case, Nineveh. It is God's intention to save the nations, but Israel, the nation with the word of God, flees from its responsibilities. Nonetheless, even if they must be taken into the depths they will be a light to the nations and the nations will be saved.

How will the nations be saved? The answer lies in the person of Israel's king—the nations come to Israel, not to join her but to submit to her king. Psalm 2 is perhaps the clearest statement of this:

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
² The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
³ 'Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us.'
⁴ He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.
⁵ Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
⁶ 'I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.'
⁷ I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron,
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.'
¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
with trembling ¹² kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Happy are all who take refuge in him.

This is a command to the kings of the rebellious nations to submit to Israel's king set on Zion, the one who is the Lord's anointed, his son. As we noted above:

The wicked shall depart to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God (Ps. 9:17).

Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you! (Ps. 82:8).

These are the nations who belong to God and who were present in the loins of Adam. They belong to him, their

The Nations and the Prophets

creator, and will return to him when he brings Israel back to himself. Through them the truth of his holiness (see Ezek. 36:22–23) and universal kingship is declared, for:

The LORD is king! Let *the earth* rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad! (Ps. 97:1).

The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim;
let the earth quake!
²The LORD is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
³Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he! (Ps. 99:1–3).

It only remains to see how this will take place.

The Nations and Israel's King

There are many more statements in the Old Testament which could have been raised to support the picture I have presented. But of more significance than merely stating the promises, is examining their fulfilment.

One point needs to be stressed at the outset. These promises regarding Israel and the nations find their primary fulfilment in Christ. Of course, promises which are fulfilled are different from predictions which come true.¹ Predictions usually demand some sort of literal completion; promises are filled with the possibility which God has for them. Take, for example, the promises of the return to the land, the inheritance, which God had promised through the prophets to Israel/Judah under judgement. The nations will know that 'I am the LORD' when Israel is restored and purified:

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. ²³I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among

¹ I owe this observation to Adrio König.

The Nations and Israel's King

them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. ²⁴I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. ²⁵I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. ²⁸Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. ²⁹I will save you from all your uncleannesses, and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. ³⁰I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. ³¹Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. ³²It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and dismayed for your ways, O house of Israel.

³³Thus says the Lord GOD: On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. ³⁴The land that was desolate shall be tilled, instead of being the desolation that it was in the sight of all who passed by. ³⁵And they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.' ³⁶Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate; I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it (Ezek. 36:22–36).

If this was a prediction requiring a literal fulfilment then we *may* assume that the restoration of 'Israel' as a recognised nation in its own land in 1948 was the goal—although only if we overlook some of the glaring moral weaknesses which still remain there. Modern Israel is an agglomeration of ethnic Jews.²

² This says nothing concerning any future developments.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

However, as a promise, the fulfilment is far richer than this. Indeed, the fulfilment of the promise will only be recognised when it takes place, because the details and the methods of the fulfilment are not clear from the promise itself.³ That is why I would claim with Paul that ‘in [Jesus Christ] every one of God’s promises is a “Yes”’ (2 Cor. 1:20).⁴ The promises are only fulfilled in Christ. This is the thrust of Hebrews 12:18–24:

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest,¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.²⁰ (For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.’²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’)²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering,²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The inheritance of Israel is no longer something tangible, such as Mount Sinai or its associated ‘physical’ manifestations of the presence of God. The inheritance, of course still described using the language of the promises, is found in the heavenly Jerusalem and the worship which goes on there and also in Christ, the mediator of a new covenant which has blood far more effective than even that of Abel.

³ We could point out that the various strands of the Old Testament promises are not tied together in the Old Testament itself. The Jewish scholars of Jesus’ day, all experts in the scriptures, still asked if John the Baptist was ‘the Messiah, or Elijah, [or] the prophet’ (John 1:24; cf. Matt. 16:13–14). They expected that any fulfilment would be multi-faceted.

⁴ For the meaning of this statement in its context, see Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997), pp. 108f.

The Nations and Israel's King

The incarnation, life and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the subsequent gift of the Spirit at Pentecost—known as these are through the apostolic testimony—are of such significance that we stand in awe as we watch the way God the Father fulfils his promises through his Son. If the nations are to be blessed then it must be as they come to Christ.

Jesus and the Nations

What was the relationship in Jesus' day of the Jews to the Gentiles? To answer that question, we must recognise that Judaism was the result of centuries of self-conscious reflection on the way God had dealt with Israel. From the time of the return from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the temple, the Jews began to develop an exclusivism which turned their neighbours into adversaries. Ezra 4:1–3 records:

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, ² they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, 'Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here.' ³ But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, 'You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.'

Later, Ezra was confronted by the intermarriage of Jews with 'the peoples of the lands with their abominations' (Ezra 9:1). His evaluation was:

... we have forsaken your commandments, ¹¹ which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land that you are entering

Jesus and the Nations

to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. ¹²Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ ¹³After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, ¹⁴shall we break your commandments again . . . ? (Ezra 9:10–14).

The commandments are now being associated with national distinctiveness and it is this that we eventually see expressed in the group known as the Pharisees.¹ And this is where we come to understand the apostle Paul, since he claimed to have been:

. . . circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless (Phil. 3:5–6).

His description of his former life is consistent with what we know of the Pharisees from elsewhere. Tom Wright offers the following description of Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee:

Saul’s persecution of the church, and the word ‘zeal’ with which he describes it, puts him firmly on the map of a certain type of first-century Judaism. It gives us access to quite a wide database with which to plot the sort of agendas he must have been following, agendas which make sense of his activity in persecuting the church even beyond the borders of the Holy Land itself. It reveals Saul of Tarsus not just as a Jew, but as a Pharisee; not just as a Pharisee, but

¹ For a description of the origins of the sect of the Pharisees, see S. Westerholm, ‘Pharisees’ in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, Downers Grove, 1992), pp. 609ff.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

as a Shammaite Pharisee; not just, perhaps, as a Shammaite Pharisee, but as one of the strictest of the strict.

Who were the Shammaites? A division had taken place within Pharisaism in the generation before Saul of Tarsus. During the reign of Herod the Great (36–4BC) there arose two schools of thought within the already powerful movement, following the two great teachers of the Herodian period, Hillel and Shammai. We know them through dozens of discussions in the Mishnah (the codification of Jewish law, drawn together around AD200), where almost always Hillel is the ‘lenient’ one, and Shammai is the ‘strict’ one. Their followers, likewise, argue issue after issue in terms of lenient and strict practices.

By the time the Mishnah was written, around the end of the second century AD, the Hillelite position had already won the day, as indeed it does in most of the Mishnah itself. However, between the time of Hillel and Shammai in the later first century BC, and the time of the great Rabbi Akiba in the early years of the second century AD, there was still a good deal of controversy between these two branches of the Pharisees. Saul would have grown up in a world of fierce debate and party loyalty. Not only was he a Jew in a world run by pagan *goyim*, Gentiles, not only was he a Pharisee in a world where (from the Pharisees’ point of view) many Jews were seriously compromised with aspects of paganism, he was a Shammaite, a hard-line Pharisee—what we today would call a militant right-winger.

But what precisely were Hillel and Shammai lenient and strict *about*? The Mishnah and the other later rabbinic writings give us the impression that they are lenient or strict about the personal observance of the commands of Torah. Things were not, however, quite so simple in Paul’s world. The key issue at stake between ‘lenient’ and ‘strict’ interpretations of the law was not just a matter of religion. Nor was it just about private or personal piety. The key issue was as much ‘political’ as it was ‘theological’. It was about aims and agendas for Israel: for the people, the land, and the Temple.

The question, as for many Jews in most of Jewish history, was: what line do we adopt *vis-à-vis* the present political situation? The Hillelites, broadly speaking, pursued a policy of ‘live and let live’. Let the Herods and the Pilates, and indeed the Caiaphases, rule the world—let them even rule Israel, politically—just as long as we Jews are allowed to study and practise Torah (the Jewish law) in peace. The Shammaites believed that this wasn’t good enough. Torah itself,

Jesus and the Nations

they thought, demanded that Israel be free from the Gentile yoke, free to serve God in peace, calling no-one master except YHWH, the one true God, himself.

This is what it means to be 'zealous for God' or 'zealous for the traditions of the fathers' in first-century Judaism. We use the word 'zeal' to indicate warmth of heart and spirit, eagerness for a cause. That is a not inaccurate summary of one part of its first-century meaning, too. But whereas for the modern Christian 'zeal' is something you do on your knees, or in evangelism, or in works of charity, for the first-century Jew 'zeal' was something you did with a knife. Those first-century Jews who longed for revolution against Rome looked back to Phinehas and Elijah in the Old Testament, and to the Maccabean heroes two centuries before Paul, as their models. They saw themselves as being 'zealous for YHWH', 'zealous for Torah', and as having the right, and the duty, to put that zeal into operation with the use of violence. 'Zeal' thus comes close to holy war: a war to be fought (initially, at any rate) guerrilla-style, by individuals committed to the cause.

We should not imagine that such revolutionary activities were confined to a few hotheads, or to one short period (such as that leading up to the war of AD66–70). There is ample evidence of revolutionary activity throughout the first century before Jesus and the first century after him. And the people involved in it included, surprising though this may be to some, the majority of the Pharisees, namely, the Shammaites. The Jewish revolutionaries in this period were thus not simply political revolutionaries, unconcerned with religious or theological issues. As with some contemporary Muslim extremists, their reading of their sacred texts, fuelled by prayer and fasting, generated their revolutionary zeal in the first place and sustained it once it was up and running. Archaeology has shown that the revolutionary 'Sicarii', the 'dagger-men', who died in the last stand on Masada, were deeply pious Jews.²

What was the attitude of these Shammaites towards Gentiles? Simply, it was that for Gentiles to know the blessing of God they must come within the exclusivist

² N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1997, pp. 26–7.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

boundaries of Judaism. And those boundaries were delineated by the Jewish dietary laws, the keeping of the Sabbath and the ritual of circumcision. It was these boundaries which we see the apostle Paul later standing so vigorously against.

When we read of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, we hear Jesus criticise them:

But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them. ¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Matt. 23:13, 15).

This was the real picture (though I should add that in the first century AD most Jews lived comfortably among Gentile communities; they were the *Diaspora*). The Pharisees have not understood the true nature of the kingdom and by their efforts to win converts they actually exclude others from the kingdom while locking themselves into the tight confines of Judaism. In fact, the word ‘convert’ is a translation of the Greek προσήλυτος (*prosēlutos*) which refers to a Gentile who has converted to Judaism, and it seems that the primary requirement for being a proselyte was (for males) circumcision.³ Before I examine the way the apostle Paul dealt with this issue, we should consider the way the Gentiles are presented in the gospel accounts.

Jesus’ descriptions of the Gentiles are consistent with the general tone of his day. Gentiles were not part of the people of God. When dealing with a problem of relationships in the

³ A fuller discussion can be found in T. R. Schreiner, ‘Proselyte’ in G. Bromiley (ed.), *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986), pp. 1005–1011.

church,⁴ the disciples were to treat recalcitrant members as Gentiles and tax collectors (Matt. 18:17).

Jesus' contact with Gentiles was distinctly limited. This may seem somewhat strange in the light of the Old Testament anticipation and of his own professed aim of 'fulfilling the law and the prophets' (Matt. 5:17–18). Although he did meet the occasional non-Jew he nonetheless told his disciples to:

Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶ but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 10:5–6).

How do we explain this? The answer is best seen in the way the gospels themselves present Jesus' ministry.

For example, Matthew's gospel begins with a genealogy of Jesus. He is 'the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' (Matt. 1:1). The Jews in general might have forgotten, but the apostle Paul firmly reminds us that Abraham was a Gentile. Furthermore, the genealogy includes two Gentile women, Ruth and Rahab. Matthew is the one who records that it was wise men from the East who were the first to come to worship 'the king of the Jews' (Matt. 2:1–12). In the Sermon on the Mount there is the recognition that Gentiles do not know how to pray and so should not be the paradigm (Matt. 6:7–8), although later Jesus strongly castigates the Pharisees for actually focussing on themselves in *their* devotions (Matt. 23, esp. v. 5).

⁴ There are only two uses of the word 'church' in the gospels, both in Matthew, at 16:18 and 18:17 (though note the NRSV's insertions to avoid using the word 'brother' at 18:15 and 21). I suggest that both are explicable in the light of the Old Testament descriptions of the people of God and need not, therefore, be seen as anachronisms. See I. H. Marshall, 'Church' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, pp. 122ff.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

There are a number of miracles of healing described in Matthew chapter eight. The first (Matt. 8:1–4) involves Jesus *touching* a leper (thus rendering himself *unclean*, see Lev. 5:3 and cf. Matt. 9:18, though the result is that the leper is made *clean*) and the second (Matt. 8:5–13) shows Jesus healing the servant of a centurion, an officer in the Roman forces. There is also the healing of the Gadarene demoniacs (Matt. 8:28–34). Although some geographical uncertainties exist, the area was predominantly Gentile as evidenced by the presence of the herd of pigs.

When Jesus heard that the Pharisees were conspiring to kill him, Matthew records that Jesus quietly left the area and ordered those whom he healed not to make him known. Matthew makes it clear that his quietness is consistent with Isaiah 42:1–4, a passage which twice records that the servant will bring blessings to the Gentiles (Matt. 12:18–21).

There are other items in Matthew's gospel which could be considered but the question raised earlier can surely be answered more easily. When Jesus told the disciples not to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Matt. 10:5–6) he was not prohibiting blessings to the Gentiles but determining the method by which they would come. The various healings and so forth which the Gentiles experienced were anticipatory of the full blessing which would come through a renewed Israel. Jesus' primary ministry was to Israel *in order that* Israel would be restored to its role among the nations.

But there is more, for what also becomes plain is that Matthew understands Israel as reaching its goal in Jesus himself. After establishing that Jesus is the descendant of Abraham (and of David), Matthew linked the return of the baby Jesus from Egypt with Hosea 11:1, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Matt. 2:15). Superficially a strange quotation, I suggest that the meaning is that Jesus is the seed

Jesus and the Nations

of Abraham, the son (cf. Exod. 4:22–23) who will be the source of the restoration of creation (Gen. 12:1–3). He is Israel. If this is so then ethnic Israel must accept Jesus as the Messiah or forfeit its covenantal privilege. Rejection of Jesus will mark the end of Israel. This is the thrust, surely, of Matthew 23–25; the climactic judgement identifies the destruction of the temple (which equals the destruction of the nation) with the end of the age and with the coming of Messiah (23:3). But there are those in Israel who are faithful servants; five wise bridesmaids who look forward to his coming and stewards who manage his gifts well (Matt. 25:1–30). But nonetheless, on that day of judgement, Israel will fare no differently than any other nation.⁵ Thus:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left (Matt. 25:31–33).

The story in Matthew continues with Jesus warning the disciples that even they would all desert him (Matt. 26:31), followed by Peter's vehement denial of Jesus (Matt. 26:69–75) and then the total and vicious rejection of him by the leaders of the nation. They are specifically rejecting their Messiah (Gk. Χριστός, *Christos*, Matt. 27:17, 22). Just as Israel profaned the name of God (in this case, it is 'God with us', 'Emmanuel', see Matt. 1:23), so too do the nations, represented by the Roman Governor's troops:

⁵ This is consistent with Acts 4:25ff. where the quotation from Psalm 2 concerning the nations in rebellion against the Lord and his Messiah is shown to include 'Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel' (v. 27).

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him.²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him,²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head.³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him (Matt. 27:27–31).

So, how does Matthew end his gospel? He who came to 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21) has his people and from them the nations will be blessed. So Matthew 28:16–20:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

Abraham's seed, Israel himself, is now moving out, in full authority, with and through his people, to claim the nations and to bring them once again into submission, which is nothing less than immersion into the Triune God himself.

The gospel accounts, each in its own way, all present a similar picture. Mark's climax⁶ is the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God by a centurion (Mark 15:39; cf. 1:17). Luke's gospel concludes with the recognition that:

⁶ Leaving aside the matter of the disputed endings.

⁷ Some MSS lack the phrase 'the Son of God' in Mark 1:1.

Jesus and the Nations

... it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47).

John's gospel establishes from the commencement that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate and that, as such, all creation derives from him (John 1:1–5). He is 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). By his death he will draw all to himself (John 12:32) and the gospel ends with Jesus sending the disciples in the same terms and with the same power as he himself had. If he takes away the sin of the world, then the disciples will bring that blessing as they go:

Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (John 20:21–23).

We must next turn to the way the subject is revealed in the post-Pentecost world.

The Nations and the Plan of God

The Christian church is mostly comprised of Gentiles. The reality is that, while there are many Jews who have come to Christ, for all sorts of reasons, few of us know any of them. Issues, then, of Jew and Gentile in the church with their respective sensitivities rarely become of more than antiquarian interest for most Christians. Yet this is not the way the New Testament describes the church. Large sections of the Acts and the letters are given over to describing and resolving tensions between the two groups. What is more, in the story of Acts, there are *no* Gentile believers until the end of the tenth chapter! More than one third of the book is given to presenting the new reality of a body of Jews (plus Samaritans in ch. 8) who now believe in Jesus as the Messiah who is also YHWH (Acts 2:36; cf. 2:21).

Acts commences with Jesus giving the apostles instruction concerning the kingdom of God (Acts 1:1–5), a theme taken up by the apostles, including Paul, all the way through the book (see Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Whatever it was that Jesus said, Acts 1:6 indicates that the apostles understood it as having a focus on Israel. It seems unlikely that their question is unrelated to the subject; rather

The Nations and the Plan of God

Jesus does not deny their question, he simply dismisses their interest in timing and states the issues of the kingdom:¹

He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:7–8).

Their focus is Israel; since we do not know the precise details of what was taught, although we can readily work out what it was from the Old Testament and the gospels (Luke's in particular), it may well be that their question was perfectly in order. If the kingdom is restored to Israel, then Israel can again function fully in the plan of God.

Alternatively (or perhaps also), their question may betray the attitude which becomes evident later in Acts that the kingdom of God is to be found in Israel and that for Gentiles to enter the kingdom involves their entering Israel. The apostles certainly show no interest in 'going' as the story unfolds. In Acts 8:1, Luke emphatically says that the apostles did not leave Jerusalem when the church was scattered and in Acts 10, Peter is virtually forced to go to Cornelius with the gospel:

... he said to them, 'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. ²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?' (Acts 10:28–29).

Peter may have come 'without objection' but he evidently came also without expectation, or at least the Jewish believers who came with him did:

¹ See James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 9ff.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God (Acts 10:44–46).

Likewise the other apostles seemed put out by Peter's eating with 'uncircumcised men' (Acts 11:2–3). It may be that the phrase 'uncircumcised men' is another way of saying 'non-Jews' but it may also be another way of delineating the issues facing the church. Jewish believers are 'circumcised believers'. I will return to this shortly.

The story of Acts continues with the spread of the gospel to Antioch (Acts 11:19ff.). Sadly the manuscript evidence is not clear. We are not sure if Luke wrote that they spoke to 'Hellenists' or to 'Greeks'.² The contrast with what has gone before probably indicates that once Cornelius and those with him had become believers and received the Spirit it was now to be expected that others would move out beyond the confines of Jewish audiences.

Of course, the Gentiles now stood alongside the Jews and the Samaritans as having not only become believers (a not unimportant term in the New Testament but one which has become devalued somewhat in today's language) but they also had, with them, received the Spirit! This meant that all of them now stood in the climax of history. The giving of the

² If it was the former (with the NRSV and the UBS³) then they were possibly preaching to Greek speaking Jews; if the latter, then to Gentiles. Compare Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Soc., London, 1971), pp. 386–9. He concludes that here the rare word 'Ἑλληνιστάς' (Hellenists), 'is to be understood in the broad sense of "Greek-speaking persons," meaning thereby the mixed population of Antioch in contrast to the 'Ιουδαῖοι of ver. 19' (pp. 388–9). Dunn, on the other hand, argues that the original word was "Ἕλληνας (Greeks).

Spirit was no mere icing on the cake of salvation; it was the purpose of salvation.³

Acts 13:4ff. describes Paul (Barnabas and Saul) preaching before the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus (v. 7) who subsequently believed (v. 12). But even here it seems that Paul's primary focus was still on the Jews, many of whom evidently believed. It was not until the Jews in Pisidian Antioch publicly rejected the message that:

... both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

"I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
so that you may bring salvation to the ends
of the earth."⁴⁸

⁴⁸ When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹ Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region (Acts 13:46–49).

This paragraph is highly significant. The quotation is from Isaiah 49:6 (the second 'servant song'). The servant, Israel, is to be a light to the nations, and this is what we see in these two Jewish believers. Ethnic Israel may reject their Messiah,

³ I must refer to the study, *The Fullness of the Blessing of the Spirit* (Sydney Monthly Study, August 1997, at <<http://www.newcreation.org.au>>, elsewhere expanded and printed as *Why I am Not a Pentecostal*) for a discussion of the climactic nature of the gift of the Spirit. I argued there that the gift of the Spirit is the restoration of men and women to their pristine purity. To receive the Spirit is to be in Christ, is to be a new creation. As such, then, the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, Samaria and Caesarea is no mere paradigm to be applied to later situations (others may or may not receive the Spirit in the same manner). Instead these occasions are evidence Christ has now 'opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers'.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

but the purpose of God is for all the nations, so ‘as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers’.

Paul is now clearly the apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 22:21; 26:17–18). After the first ‘missionary journey’ Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and ‘called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles’ (Acts 14:27).

At this point a critical issue arose in the life of the church, one which demanded Paul’s attention many times in his writings. It is the matter of circumcision and the Gentile believers. It is this which I anticipated above when looking at the language used by the apostles in Acts 11:1–3. The problem was not that Cornelius was a Gentile—many Gentiles had become Jews (proselytes)—but that he was uncircumcised. So Acts 15:1–5 sets out the agenda of many Jewish Christians:

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.’

In other words, Gentiles must not only become one with the Jews, they must also become members of Israel if they are to be in the kingdom of God.

There was ‘no small dissension’ over the matter. In fact Paul regarded the issue as crucial to the truth of God. However, in Acts 15 Luke is at pains to show that it was

The Nations and the Plan of God

Peter whose contribution was central to the 'resolution' of the problem. Faith is all that is required:

After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. ⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; ⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. ¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (Acts 15:7–11).

Gentiles received the Spirit, which means that God cleansed their hearts by faith. In this God made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, the point made by Peter earlier in Acts 11:12, 15, and 17:

¹² The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us.

¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them *just as it had upon us at the beginning*.

¹⁷ If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us *when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could hinder God?

Peter has been conscious since his visit to Caesarea that the issue is one of faith and that any recourse to the elements which make Jews distinctive is ruled out emphatically. James, as 'presiding elder', then gave his decision, though being careful to urge Gentiles to maintain a sensitivity to Jewish concerns (Acts 15:19–21).

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Interestingly, in Acts 16:1–3, we then have the account of Paul having Timothy circumcised. Although no reason is given, the placing of this account is important. Paul the apostle to the Gentiles is himself sensitive to the Jewish concerns and so Timothy, who is the son of a Jewish woman (see 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15), ought not treat the Jewish requirements lightly, even if, in the long run, they are not of eternal consequence (see Gal. 6:15).

Paul himself is apparently content to go along with Jewish ritual, even though he knows now it has only relative value. To the Jew he will be as a Jew (1 Cor. 9:20) even if that means going into the temple in Jerusalem and participating in the activities there (Acts 21:17–26). This was the occasion when his previous ministry among the Gentiles was raised as an excuse for a riot and Paul's consequent arrest. But the passage resonates with the uncertainty which the Jewish believers retained about Gentiles:

When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly.¹⁸ The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present.¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.²⁰ When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law.'²¹ They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs.²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.²³ So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow.²⁴ Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. *Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law.*²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication' (Acts 21:17–25).

The Nations and the Plan of God

It is not hard to see them as scared of Paul. He is clearly a man who functions in full liberty and who exposes their weakness by doing so. Furthermore, he is plainly able to state his position with authority. Nonetheless, Paul agreed to their request and so the story developed.

Eventually he arrived in Rome, a prisoner still. Three days after arriving:

... he called together the local leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, he said to them, ‘Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.¹⁸ When they had examined me, the Romans wanted to release me, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case.¹⁹ But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to the emperor—even though I had no charge to bring against my nation.²⁰ For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, *since it is for the sake of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.*’²¹ They replied, ‘We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you.²² But we would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.’

²³After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.²⁴ Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe.²⁵ So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: ‘The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah,

²⁶ ‘Go to this people and say,
You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

²⁷ For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

and understand with their heart and turn—
and I would heal them.”

²⁸ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen’ (Acts 28:17–28).

Not only does the book of Acts conclude with Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God (28:30) but it does so with the mission to Gentiles as a fundamental part of it. Ethnic Israel’s dullness leads to the gospel being preached to the Gentiles.

Paul and the Jew–Gentile Question

To a certain extent we can see the Jew–Gentile question appearing in some form or another in many of Paul’s letters. The participants are not always named, but it is not hard to see Jews as the ones being offended when some Corinthians eat meat offered to idols for example. Of course, it is not the Jew–Gentile question which is of ongoing significance but Paul’s response to it. So the matter of liberty and how we use it is of more importance than the original question, especially when, as I have suggested, for most of us the presence of Jewish Christians is not even suspected, far less a problem in church life. Still, Paul’s letters were real letters and so an examination of the letter to the Romans against its immediate background is not out of place.

Why did Paul write Romans? The answer seems to be hidden in Romans 15:23–25:

But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you ²⁴ when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints . . .

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Paul is on his way to Jerusalem with relief funds but after that he wants to go west to Spain, using Rome as a base as he had once used Antioch. Knowing the Roman church as he does (although he has never visited them), he writes to them, providing a theological rationale of his missionary endeavours.

It seems that in Rome there is a strain among the believers which is somewhat the opposite of that problem he dealt with in the Galatian letter. Among the Galatian churches there was the pressure to get the Gentiles to recognise that 'righteousness' meant membership of the people of God, with which there was no argument, but that the implication was that it meant that Gentiles should be circumcised in order to be righteous, that is, to be justified. The Judaisers were thus insisting, as in the Acts 15 council, that Gentiles should come within the boundary markers of ethnic Israel.

In the Roman church there was the opposite problem of the danger of Gentiles writing-off the Jews. The long section of Romans 14:1–15:13 seems to say that the opinion was prevalent that if Jews maintained their dietary laws they were not only second class citizens within the church but were actually outside the church and the gospel. So:

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. ³ For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, 'The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.' ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

⁵ May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷ Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. ⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs,⁹ and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name’;

¹⁰ and again he says,

‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’;

¹¹ and again,

‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him’;

¹² and again Isaiah says,

‘The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.’

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:1–13).

The letter to the Romans is written from the standpoint of the overall purpose of God, which we have seen so prominently throughout the scriptures, and therefore deals with the subject of the righteousness of God as ‘God’s covenant faithfulness’.

‘Righteousness’ is essentially a legal term, referring to a relationship to the law. To be righteous is to be consistent with the law and to be justified (literally, though unhelpfully, ‘righteo-fied’) is to be made consistent. But how can we say that God is righteous, especially if we understand the law of God as being the expression of his own nature? My definition of ‘the righteousness of God’ would then be this: *The righteousness of God is his total consistency with his own nature which he both expresses and expects, and which he works for us in Christ.*¹ But how do we see God’s

¹ This definition takes into account both the subjective and objective elements of the genitive in Romans 1:17.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

righteousness worked out in the affairs of history? Tom Wright's approach is helpful:²

... the righteousness of God [is] essentially the covenant faithfulness, the covenant justice, of the God who made promises to Abraham, promises of a worldwide family characterized by faith, in and through whom the evil of the world would be undone.³

Keeping in mind the way the purpose of God is revealed to be accomplished through Israel, Romans 1:16–17 makes good sense:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'

The gospel, the power of God to salvation (that is, of the whole world), is for the Jew first and also for the Greek. It is for both because Romans 1:18–32 details the fact that *all* are under God's wrath. Thus, 'You have no excuse, whoever you are' (Rom. 2:1) and:

There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.¹¹ For God shows no partiality (Rom. 2:9–11).

The same universal approach is seen in Romans 2:12–16, where the first use of the word 'law' (Gk. νόμος, *nomos*) is found in the letter:

² And has been largely adopted in what follows. See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, pp. 231–57.

³ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 234.

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified.¹⁴ When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves.¹⁵ They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all (Rom. 2:12–16).⁴

In this section, 'the law' is obviously the Jewish law, the Torah. Here the point is possibly worth making that 'law' for modern readers has been subsumed under the canopy of 'legal obligations'. It has been suggested that *our* view of law may possibly be more the result of Luther (and Calvin) reading the attitude towards salvation by medieval Catholicism into Paul than from any true understanding of the Judaism of the time of Jesus and the early church.⁵ But when Paul speaks of law he speaks of Torah. Thus, in Romans 2:13 he refers to those who *do* the law. But how does one do the law? In spite of contemporary Judaism, Paul insists that circumcision is not keeping the law. He actually contrasts the two in Romans 2:25:

⁴ Some translations insert brackets around verses 14–15, in an attempt to avoid the possible reading that some will be acquitted on the day of judgement (v. 16). While that may be helpful, there is no manuscript evidence to support it.

⁵ Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (IVP, Downers Grove, 1994, p. 22), says that it is easy to:

... miss the significance of a subtle hermeneutical step that [Luther and Calvin have] taken. Often in the course of discussing Paul's letters, these Reformers place the Roman Catholic Church, its scholars, such as Thomas, and its hierarchy in the role that Judaism occupies in Paul's statements about the law. Paul's statements about justification by faith apart from works of the law are taken, without hesitation, to be statements about the medieval system of salvation by meritorious works.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision.

On the contrary, in Romans 9:30–32 he makes the point that keeping the law always meant faith:

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith;³¹ but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law.³² Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.

The reason for this is simply that this is what Abraham did. In chapter 4 Paul devoted his attention to the way Abraham was justified by faith.

Well, if Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith and if a Jew has no privilege through his observance of circumcision, then what advantage is there?

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (Rom. 3:1–2).

Jews had the oracles of God, that is, they had the revelation of God, so that, in Israel, the nations could see the truth of God. This is what the prophets had said in Isaiah 2:2–4 and Zechariah 8:20–23.

But, if that was their privilege, what if (ethnic) Israel proved to be unfaithful to its commission? Does that somehow nullify God's faithfulness (that is, his *hesed*, his steadfast love, Rom. 3:3–4)? No, God will be faithful to his own purpose (that is, will be righteous) no matter what. If this is so, then Israel's privilege does not mean that they are better off, since even the Old Testament indicates that Israel, and so all, are under sin (Rom. 3:10–18).

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

In this light, we can see the *other* purpose of the law in Romans 3:19–20. Torah silences all who claim to be members of the people of God through their own merit. It exposes their failure to see that God has always demanded faith. That is why Abraham is discussed in chapter 4 and, of course, simple reflection on Torah will reveal that the central feature of Israel's worship was not the obedience of the people but the sacrifices which were God's gift to his people in order to keep them in consistency with his revealed character and within his purposes. Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness and so, by implication, was the faith of Israel.

In Romans 5:12–21, Paul deals with the contrast between Adam and Christ. He insists that there was law before there was Torah (v. 13). Law, as the revelation of God's eternal being, was a principle of creation; so why was Torah given? The answer to that question is found in Romans 5:20. Law came in, either *in order to* increase the trespass (purpose), or *with the result that* (result) the trespass was increased. Either way, Wright's comment is helpful:

The point is not that the creator decides, arbitrarily, to save some and condemn others. Rather, he sees that the only way of rescuing his world at all is to call a people, and to enter into a covenant with them, so that through them he will deal with evil. But the means of dealing with evil is to concentrate it in one place and condemn—execute—it there. The full force of this condemnation is not intended to fall on this people in general, but on their representative, the Messiah.⁶

The gifts given to Israel, and in particular the law, are thus to be seen as having a clear and direct purpose. Paul's list of the gifts given to Israel in Romans 9:1–5 is therefore significant:

Three features of 9:1–5 are important for our present purposes. First, Paul's evident grief at the failure of the Jews to believe must always

⁶ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 239.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

be kept in mind. This shows on the one hand that their failure is not, in his mind, a mere accident which only appears to cut them off from salvation, but does not do so really; and, on the other hand, that his approach to the issue is not that of the armchair theologian calmly dissecting someone else's fate, but that of the vitally involved human being, with all his natural sympathies alert and operative. The hints of parallels with 7.7–25 reinforce this point: Paul looks at 'his flesh' in rebellion against the gospel, and in himself . . . he identifies with them.

Second, the list of Jewish privileges in 9.4f. is not arbitrary, but echoes precisely those privileges which, throughout Romans up to this point, Paul has shown to be transferred to the Jews' representative Messiah, and, through him, to all those who are 'in him', be they Jewish or Gentile. Sonship, glory, covenants, law, worship, promises, patriarchs: all has become the glory of the church in Christ. This intensifies the irony—and, for Paul, the agony—of the present situation.

Third, the climactic privilege is that from the Jewish race, according to the flesh, is the Messiah . . . The Jews are the people of the Messiah, but they are this according to the flesh. And the Messiah to whom they belong is not merely 'theirs', but is also 'God over all, blessed for ever' . . . the Jewish Messiah is God over *all*, Jew and Gentile alike. Within the very heart of the Jewish privilege there lies the vocation which proves the Jews' apparent undoing: that the Messiah, who encapsulates her destiny in himself, is God's means of salvation not for her alone but for the whole world. More specifically, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the Messiah in his death brought to a head the sorry tale of Israel's own acting out of the sin of Adam . . . As long as Israel clings to the fact of ancestral privilege, she cannot but miss out on God's intended universal salvation . . . The God who made promises to Israel is also the creator of the whole world; but if that is so his promises cannot be confined to Israel alone, and to imagine that they are is to deny his very character.⁷

The importance of this is spelled out in Romans 9:30–10:4. Torah had its purpose, but Israel's failure was to mistake Torah's purpose for the goal. In other words, law became an end in itself, so that law was never really understood:

⁷ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, pp. 237–8.

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

What then are we to say? Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; ³¹ but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. ³² Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, ³³ as it is written,

‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make
people stumble, a rock that will make them fall,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

^{10:1} Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ² I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. ³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (Rom. 9:30–10:4).

To say that Christ is the end of the law, then, does not mean that law is finished. Rather, it means that he is the goal of Torah. When he comes Torah’s purpose is accomplished. Paul’s anguish for Israel is that in rejecting Christ in favour of Torah they had in fact rejected Torah. Wright again:

The Torah really is the νόμος δικαιοσύνης, the boundary marker of covenant membership; but it is so in a paradoxical fashion, since it can only be fulfilled by faith, not by the ‘works of the law’, the badges of Jewish membership (Sabbath, dietary laws, circumcision) which kept Jews separate from Gentiles. The result is that Israel has stumbled over the stumbling stone, which in one sense is clearly the Torah and in another is clearly the Messiah, or the preaching about him. Israel’s rejection of Jesus as Messiah simply *is* the logical outworking of her misuse of the Torah, her attempt to treat it as a charter of automatic national privilege. But this ‘fall’ was itself, it appears, part of the plan of God, who gave the Torah (there is no suggestion here that the Torah is a bad thing) and who, after all, sent the Messiah. Here is the irony of Romans 9–11, foreshadowed indeed in Galatians 3 and Romans 5–8 but now spelt out in detail: Israel’s disobedience is already actually part of the covenant plan, part of

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

God's intention from the beginning. The Torah has indeed concentrated sin in Israel, and now we see its full extent. As well as 'ordinary' sin—the *breaking* of God's law—which was the problem in ch. 7, Israel is now shown to be guilty of a kind of meta-sin, the attempt to confine grace to one race. The result of this idolatry of national privilege is that Israel clings on to the terrible destiny—of being the place where sin was concentrated—which she was meant to allow her Messiah to bear on her behalf.

. . . Israel, already charged in 7.13–20 with ignorant *sin*, is now also seen to be ignorant of the δικαιοσύνη τοῦ θεοῦ, 10.2—that is, of God's own covenant faithfulness and its nature and shape, in other words of what God was righteously, justly and faithfully doing in her history. She was bent, instead, on pursuing τὴν ἰδίαν δικαιοσύνην, that is, a status of covenant membership which would be for Jews and Jews only. In doing so, she did not submit to God's own covenant plan: because Christ all along was the secret goal of Torah, the τέλος νόμου, so that her rejection of Christ and her abuse of Torah, turning it into a charter of racial privilege, were really one and the same thing. The notorious crux of 10.4 can, I think, be reduced to these terms: that the Torah is neither abolished as though it were bad or demonic, nor affirmed in the sense in which the Jews took it. It was a good thing, given deliberately by God for a specific task and a particular period of time. When the task is done and the time is up, the Torah reaches its goal, which is also the conclusion of its intended reign, not because it was a bad thing to be abolished but because it was a good thing whose job is done . . . The Messiah is the fulfillment of the long purposes of Israel's God. It was for this that Torah was given in the first place as a deliberately temporary mode of administration. In the Messiah are fulfilled the creator's paradoxical purposes for Israel and hence for the world. He is the climax of the covenant.

There is therefore something brought to an end by Christ. The cross brings to a halt any suggestion of Jewish national privilege, as Paul says with characteristic brevity in Galatians 2.21 ('if covenant membership were through Torah, Christ died in vain') . . . within this bringing to an end of Jewish national privilege, he also brings to an end the process of concentrating *sin* within Israel . . . This means that the παντί of 10.4b can be given its full weight. If he has fulfilled God's purpose for Israel (that she should be the means of dealing with the world's sin), then Gentiles can now be welcomed into the covenant family. But if he has brought it to its goal, and hence its

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

terminus, Israel's ambiguous vocation to be the people in whom sin was to be concentrated in order that it be dealt with, then Israel too is free, when she acknowledges him as Messiah, to enjoy covenant membership without, any longer, the former ambiguity.⁸

Torah, as the boundary marker of Jewish identity or, dare I say it, of Israel, is finished. 'When I reach my goal I stop travelling; not because my journey was a silly idea but because it was a good idea now fully worked out'.⁹

Now Torah's first purpose is clear and operative. Both Jew and Gentile are set free to obey the law in faith. The following passages make this plain:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions (Rom. 6:11-12).

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹ For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, pp. 240-2.

⁹ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 244.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

¹³ And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷ These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸ Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹ ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’?

²² All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

^{3:1} So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³ for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. ⁷ These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. ⁸ But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. ¹¹ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col. 2:8–3:11).

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

If we were to ask what parts of the Old Testament law Christians today should keep, we would be asking a question for which there is no answer. If the goal of Torah has been reached then the Christian, whether Jew or Gentile, is not concerned with Jewish laws which have served their purpose. The point is that now we are free to obey the law, of which Torah was but a temporary expression. And the law we now are free to keep is not written on tablets of stone but on the heart. This is so simple, for it was what the prophets themselves had anticipated. Jeremiah 31:31–34 for instance:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.³² It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.³⁴ No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Why should this intimacy with the law be so? It is because that is the way men and women were created. Romans 2: 12–16 is the reason for the promise of Jeremiah and not its result. Because Man is the image of God, it is to the image of God that he is to be restored. And if Man is the living and personal image of God, so the law is the written, preceptual image of God.¹⁰ Because external law always works wrath through guilt (Rom. 4:15), justification brings the restoration of law as the internal drive of the (re)created Man.

¹⁰ J. A. Motyer, ‘Law’ in W. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 624.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Much attention in the New Testament is given to Israel and the Torah. But there is more. The covenant to which God is faithful with Israel is itself a factor in the overall covenant of creation.¹¹ So Israel's Messiah is, in fact, 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). If he is the climax of Israel's covenant, he is so because he is the climax of the covenant of creation. He is 'Adam at last'.

So in him the nations find their true identity. They do not find it in Israel, rather in partnership with Israel they find it in the one new man (Eph. 2:15). The passage Ephesians 2:11–22 reflects the historical reality:

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy

¹¹ See G. Bingham, *Love's Most Glorious Covenant* (Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997); W. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology* (Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984).

Paul and the Jew-Gentile Question

temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

But now the historical reality gives way to the eschatological reality. Now there is the people of God and that people is his 'peoples',¹² in unity but with the richness of their diversity.

From one ancestor came the nations. The vision of Revelation 21 and 22 is that the nations are present again, unified in the last Adam, presenting right worship in the new Jerusalem, which is nothing less than the presence of God himself.

¹² Thus Revelation 21:3. Other manuscripts have 'people'.

ADDENDUM

The Future of Israel

Romans chapters 9–11 is a passage which has puzzled many. Demanding our immediate attention is the phrase in Romans 11:26, ‘and so all Israel will be saved’.¹ Some have suggested that this refers to the salvation of the Gentiles who thus fill up Israel. The reference to Israel would not be to physical Israel but to Israel as a designation for the people of God. But is Israel ever a designation for the whole people of God, the new humanity? I think not. Instead, I suggest that Paul’s meaning is simply found within the passage itself.

In Romans 9:1–5 we have seen that Paul laments the failure of Israel to believe in her Messiah. That failure does not, of course, mean that the plan of God has failed or somehow been frustrated. On the contrary, God had always indicated that mere physical descent from Abraham was not in his mind when expressing his purpose through Abraham’s seed. His intention was always that there should be the children of promise (Rom. 9:6–8), a group distinct within the children of the flesh. This is consistent with the promise of the two seeds in Genesis 3:15.

¹ See the comments on pages 3–4 which relate this to Paul’s closing words in Galatians.

Addendum: The Future of Israel

But who constitute the children of promise? Romans chapter 11 answers this question. God has his remnant, but the mystery lies in the way that remnant comes to be revealed. Ethnic Israel rejects the Messiah and, as we have seen, this results in the gospel being preached to the Gentiles. But the gospel was always intended to include the Jews in the blessing so that Paul understands that the salvation of Gentiles will actually provoke Jews to jealousy for their, until now, lost heritage. As a result, through the salvation of the full number of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25), all Israel, not nor ever intended to be ethnic Israel, will be saved. Why should this be so? It is because God who is faithful to the covenant of creation is also faithful to the covenant within the covenant, so that Israel is beloved for the sake of their ancestors (Rom. 11:28). Hence the promise stands that:

Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.
²⁷ And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins (Rom. 11:26–27).

Who can comprehend this? God has intended mercy to all (Rom. 11:30–32) but far from men and women or nations being able to analyse or manage this plan, all we—or they—can do is worship in stunned amazement:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?’

³⁵ Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?’

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33–36).

Some of My Teachers (a.k.a. a Bibliography)

Bingham, Geoffrey C. 'The Several Gifts of Israel', *NCTM Pastors' Studies*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996–1997.

———. *Love's Most Glorious Covenant*, Redeemer Baptist Press, Castle Hill, 1997.

Barnett, Paul. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997.

Bruce, F. F. *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, IVP, Leicester, 1976.

———. *Commentary on the Book of the Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, 1972.

———. *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (NIGTC) Paternoster, Exeter, 1982.

Carson, D. A. (ed.). *Right With God: Justification in the Bible and the World*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1992.

de Lacey, D. R. 'Gentiles' in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne et al. (eds), IVP, Downers Grove, 1993.

Dumbrell, W. J. *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984.

Bibliography

- Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth, Peterborough, 1996.
- . *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1993.
- Fee, Gordon D. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson, Peabody, 1994.
- Fung, Ronald Y. *The Epistle to the Galatians*, (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988.
- Hamlin, E. J. 'Nations' in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, G. A. Buttrick (ed.), Abingdon, Nashville, 1962.
- Hammond, N. G. L. and Scullard, H. H. (eds). *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970.
- Kruse, Colin G. *Paul, the Law and Justification*, Apollos, Leicester, 1996.
- Küng, Hans. *The Church*, Search Press, London, 1976.
- Lightfoot, J. B. *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1976.
- Lumby, J. Rawson. *The Acts of the Apostles: With Introduction and Notes*, University Press, Cambridge, 1912.
- McKnight, S. 'Gentiles' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green and Scot McNight (eds), IVP, Downers Grove, 1992.
- Marshall, I. H. *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC), IVP, Leicester, 1983.
- . 'Church' in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green and Scot McNight (eds), IVP, Downers Grove, 1992.
- Metzger, Bruce M. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, n.p., 1971.

Jews, Gentiles and the People of God

Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996.

Motyer, J. A. *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1993.

———. ‘Law’ in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell (ed.), Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1984.

Moule, C. F. D. *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977.

Neill, S. and Wright, N. T. *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988.

Piper, John. *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 2000.

Richardson, Don. *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Regal Books, Ventura, 1984.

Robinson, D. W. B. *Faith’s Framework: The Structure of New Testament Theology*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1996.

Schreiner, T. R. ‘Proselyte’ in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, G. W. Bromiley (ed.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1986.

Thielman, Frank. *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1994.

Webb, Barry. *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles’ Wings*, IVP, Leicester, 1996.

Westerholm, Stephen. *Israel’s Law and the Church’s Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988.

———. *Preface to the Study of Paul*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997.

Bibliography

———. ‘Pharisees’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, J. B. Green and Scot McNight (eds), IVP, Downers Grove, 1992.

Wright, N. T. *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992.

———. *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London, 1992.

———. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Lion Publishing, Oxford, 1997.