

The Gifts to Israel

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The Gifts to 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 according to the flesh. ⁴They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:1–5).

This lament by the apostle Paul is understandable. Israel is ‘my own people, my kindred according to the flesh’ (v. 3). His statement that he ‘could wish [he] were accursed and cut off from Christ’ for their sake has occasioned some speculation, especially in the light of his previous statement in chapter 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God (v. 39). Possibly his meaning is that he was once like his fellow Israelites in that he ‘used to wish¹ to be anathema from Christ’, but now his heart aches that they maintain their resistance and their unbelief. But whatever his meaning, he

¹ The verb translated as ‘I could wish’ is ἠὲρόμην, the imperfect tense. It could also be translated as ‘pray’. But see C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (ICC, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 454–57 for a summary of the possible approaches to the verse.

is expressing a deep concern for the people of Israel. Of course, this paragraph is only an introduction to his treatment of the subject of the hope of Israel, which he continues to the end of chapter 11 and so his concern here must be set against the wider perspective which he develops.

But Paul's lament for Israel is not only because they are Israelites. Verses 4 and 5 list Paul's understanding of the immense privileges which Israel had received and which, by their unbelief, they were actively contradicting. A detailed exposition of these privileges has been given by Geoffrey Bingham in the NCTM Monday Pastors' Studies for September to December 1996 and February to May 1997.² I would strongly recommend that the notes relating to these studies be examined. Obviously there is no need to reproduce the full content of them here.

Paul's lament goes even further than merely seeing that Israel had somehow not taken advantage of all that it had. This list of eight or nine³ items represents a careful summary of what we might call, Paul's 'Old Testament Theology'. Although we have designated these items as 'gifts', Paul himself has not done so. He has, at best, called them 'advantages'⁴ (Rom. 3:1) and the description 'the giving of the law' in verse 4, called

² NCTM Pastor's Studies, now called Monthly Ministry Studies, can be accessed from our website:

<www.newcreation.org.au/studies/pastorstudies/pastorstudies.htm>

³ (i) Israelites; (ii) bestowal of sonship; (iii) glory; (iv) covenants; (v) bestowal of law; (vi) worship; (vii) promises; (viii) fathers; and (ix) Messiah. The number depends on whether there is special significance in the use of the word 'Israelites'.

⁴ τὸ περισσὸν (*to perisson*). Romans 11:29 does speak of the gifts and the calling of God.

‘the receiving of the law’ in the NIV, is misleading in this context. Actually this list is quite stylised, with ‘the giving of the law’ being the translation of a word,⁵ unique in the New Testament, which rhymes with the word previously translated as ‘adoption’ or ‘sonship’.

The structure of verses 4 and 5 seems to be as follows:

They are Israelites—of whom:

the bestowal of sonship and the glory and the covenants
ἡ υἰοθεσία και ἡ δόξα και αἱ διαθήκαι

and the bestowal of law and the worship and the promises
και ἡ νομοθεσία και ἡ λατρεία και αἱ ἐπαγγελίαι

of whom the fathers and out of whom the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever, Amen.⁶

ISRAELITES

Paul commences by identifying the object of his concern as ‘Israelites’. Until this point in Romans he has designated them as ‘Jews’ (1:16; 2:9, 10, 17, 28, 29; 3:1–2, 9, 29).⁷ The name ‘Jew’ derives from the name ‘Judah’ and appeared only after the return from the Babylonian exile. It refers to a person whose home was in the southern kingdom of Judah and was thus, for example, used of Mordecai in Esther 2:5, even though he was from the tribe of Benjamin. Later, it

⁵ νομοθεσία—from νόμος, law and τίθημι, to place or set.

⁶ This arrangement is taken from John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1993), p. 21.

⁷ See von Rad, Kuhn, Gutbrod, Ἰσραήλ κτλ. in Kittel and Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 356ff.

became more an ethnic distinction; a person is either a 'Jew' or one of 'the nations' (a Gentile).

On one occasion Paul identified himself as 'a Jew' (Acts 21:39), and then it was in response to the assumption that he was 'the Egyptian' (Acts 21:38). In that case it was his knowledge of Greek which prompted the topic and this was followed by him again identifying himself as a Jew when he spoke in 'Hebrew' to the Jewish crowd (Acts 22:2-3). The only other occasion where he actually identified himself as a Jew is in Galatians 2:15 and there, again, it is to distinguish himself (and Peter) as different from 'Gentile sinners'.⁸

Why, then, does Paul turn from describing them as Jews to calling them Israelites? The answer is that 'Israel' was the preferred title of the people themselves. It was their own way of recognising themselves as descended from Jacob, as the phrase 'children of Israel' shows,⁹ whereas 'Jew' was the name by which they were known to others. 'Israel' expressed a consciousness of being the people of God.¹⁰ Three times Paul announces his pedigree using this phrase:

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1).

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I (2 Cor. 11:22).

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 (Phil. 3:5).

⁸ He identifies himself as Jewish *by implication* on a large number of occasions; here it is the use of the word 'Jew' which is significant.

⁹ This title is used almost six hundred times in the Old Testament.

¹⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, p. 460.

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To be an Israelite meant that a person was ‘out of the seed of Abraham’ and so a participant in all that Abraham represented. Douglas Moo’s statement sums up the matter:

It is therefore no accident that Paul in Rom. 9–11 generally abandons the word ‘Jew,’ which has figured so prominently in chaps. 1–8, in favor of the terms ‘Israelites’ and ‘Israel.’ Paul is no longer looking at the Jews from the perspective of the Gentiles and in their relationship to the Gentiles but from the perspective of salvation history and in their relationship to God and his promises to them. The appellation ‘Israelites,’ then, is no mere political or nationalistic designation but a religiously significant and honorific title. And despite the refusal of most of the Israelites to accept God’s gift of salvation in Christ, this title has not been revoked.¹¹

Abraham was far more than an individual in history. He has a corporate status, and Israel was the nation which initially represented that:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and *in you*¹² all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:2–3).

N. T. Wright suggests that Paul’s ‘in Adam, in Christ’ theology actually takes this into consideration. He writes:

I suggest that the work done so far has not yet gone to the heart of the matter. Specifically, it has overlooked a central and, for Pauline exegesis, vital feature of the Jewish background. Speculation about Adam, in the intertestamental and

¹¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, p. 561.

¹² LXX ἐν σοί ; MT אָךְ

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rabbinic literature in particular . . . is not about ‘humankind in general.’ It is about Israel, the people of God . . . the use of ‘Adam’ themes in the Jewish literature . . . consistently makes one large and important point: God’s purposes for the human race in general have devolved on to, and will be fulfilled in Israel in particular. Israel is, or will become, God’s true humanity. What God intended for Adam will be given to the seed of Abraham. They will inherit the second Eden, the restored primeval glory. If there is a last Adam in the relevant Jewish literature, he is not an individual, whether messianic or otherwise. He is the whole eschatological people of God . . . Adam-theology, where it occurs in the Old Testament and intertestamental writings, fulfills a specific purpose. It either advances, or develops, a claim about the place of Israel in the purposes of God. It is another way of saying that the world was made for the sake of Israel, or that Israel is, or is to become, God’s intended true humanity.

Abraham’s children are God’s true humanity, and their homeland is the new Eden.¹³

Israel and Abraham are, in *one* sense, interchangeable. The privileges which belong to Israel are theirs because Israel is the seed of Abraham.

The call of Abraham provides the parameters within which to understand the role of Israel and this is the way Paul presents his argument in Romans. Having asserted that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all the nations (‘to the Jew first and also to the Greek’—Rom. 1:16), and that the righteousness of God is revealed through faith alone, Paul shows that there is a prior revelation which makes this necessary, namely the revelation of God’s wrath, and all stand under this judgement. In Romans chapter 2 Paul directs his attention to the Jew who presumed that his

¹³ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 20–23.

Jewishness entitled him to a special and more lenient treatment from God. On the contrary, boasting of the possession of the law (*Torah*) is meaningless if that law condemns you. Or boasting that the rite of physical circumcision provides some sort of status is a failure to see that it is, at best, ‘an outward . . . sign of an inward and spiritual grace’.

So then, does the Jew have any privileges? Does his circumcision mean nothing? The reply is the Jews were ‘entrusted with the oracles of God’ (Rom. 3:1–2). They are the ones to whom God has committed his special revelation. Blessing for the nations will come as those nations come *to Zion* to learn instruction (that is, *Torah*, Isa. 2:2–4). But Israel must be a people of faith for this privilege to be a blessing. What is more, this is the evidence from Abraham’s life. His *faith* was ‘reckoned as righteousness’ because what was needed for righteousness was not the weighing of merit but the forgiving of sin (Rom. 4:3–8).

Now when a Gentile comes to faith, he has Abraham as his father, as does a Jew (Rom. 4:11, 16–17a), even though Abraham is not his ‘forefather according to the flesh’ (Rom. 4:1). I suspect that this lies behind the imagery of Romans 11:16ff., where the picture is of believing Gentiles being grafted into the place from which unbelieving Jews were broken off. But it should be noted that they are not described as merely joining Israel; they ‘are grafted in their place to share the rich *root* of the olive tree’. The Gentile becomes a sharer¹⁴ in the richness of the plan of God in Abraham.

Unbelieving Jews, on the other hand, are cut off from that very blessing. To be a genuine descendant of

¹⁴ συγκοινωνός.

Abraham is different from being a Jew (Rom. 9:6–8), so that to be an Israelite is to be a person who stands in the context of faith in the promises God made to Abraham, and rejecting the fulfilment of those promises becomes a horrible contradiction. Hence Paul's distress.

The six items—adoption; glory; covenants; law; worship; and promises—express the way the privilege of being an Israelite was experienced. But the question ought to be posed: Why were these items given to this people? In answer, we should again see that the call of Abraham had the blessing of the nations in view, and that the blessing of the nations relates directly to the restoration of creation.

THE PRIVILEGES

Adoption¹⁵

When addressing Pharaoh, Moses was to say:

Thus says the LORD: Israel is my firstborn son. ²³ I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me' (Exod. 4:22–23).

Also, Israel's distinctiveness was because they were 'sons¹⁶ of the LORD [their] God' (Deut. 14:1). If the question is asked why this title was used, it is Luke who provides the answer: '*Adam* [was] the son of God' (Luke 3:38). It may well be that the Old Testament does not spell out the details, but with the hindsight of salvation history it can be said that Israel was given the

¹⁵ See G. Bingham, NCTM Monday Pastors' Study 2/9/96.

¹⁶ *Not* 'children' as in the NRSV.

adoption because through this people all that was true of Adam, but which he had rejected, was being restored.

Given that Adam, prior to his sin, was a man of the Spirit, the assertion by Paul that ‘all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God, for you . . . have received the Spirit of adoption’ (Rom. 8:14–15) is obvious. The restoration of the Spirit to humanity is the restoration of sonship, so that the *telos* of present history will be expressed in the declaration, ‘I will be his God and he will be my son’ (Rev. 21:7). The fact that this statement is in the same terms as the covenant formula to Israel, for example Leviticus 26:12, ‘I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people’, ought to be conspicuous. Israel is the paradigm for all the restored nations.

Glory¹⁷

The description of the call of Abraham is given by Stephen in Acts 7:2, ‘The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham’. When we add to this statement Isaiah 42:8, ‘my glory I give to no other’ and Psalm 8:5, Man (v. 4)¹⁸ has been crowned ‘with glory and honor’, we must say that Adam—mankind—has been created to participate in the glory of God, that in his sin he has ‘fallen short of the glory of God’ and that historically Abraham stands at the commencement of the restoration of the glory.

¹⁷ See NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study 14/10/96.

¹⁸ Two words are used for ‘man’ in verse 4, אָדָם (*enosh*) and אָדָם (*adam*) and they are used in parallelism in a number of places in the Old Testament (Isa. 13:12; 51:12; Ps. 73:5; 90:3; etc.). אָדָם may carry the idea of frailty or mortality, see Maass, אָדָם in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (eds G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972), pp. 345ff.

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While there are a number of occasions when the glory of God is seen in the Old Testament, two stand out. The first is the dedication of the Tent of Meeting in Exodus 40:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35),

and the second is the dedication of the Temple in 1 Kings 8:10–11:

And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹ so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

The glory of God was so palpably present that neither Moses nor the priests could even enter. When Moses, later, was interceding for the forgiveness of Israel, The Lord replied:

I do forgive, just as you have asked; ²¹ nevertheless—as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD . . . (Num. 14:20–21).

The being of the Lord is one with his purpose that the earth will be filled with his glory. The later promise that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (Hab. 2:14; cf. Isa. 11:9) stands in contrast with the loss of glory in Israel, as in 1 Samuel 4:21, ‘Ichabod . . . the glory has departed’, and Ezekiel 10:18–19 and 11:22–23, where the glory of the Lord left the Temple and Jerusalem. But the principle was that the nations would see the glory of God in Israel (cf. Isa. 66:18–20).

The Covenants¹⁹

The plural ‘covenants’²⁰ in Romans 9:4 probably refers to the various covenants made by God throughout Israel’s history, such as those with Abraham (Gen. 15:17ff.; 17:2ff.; cf. Exod. 2:24), with Israel itself at Sinai (Exod. 19:5; 24:1–8), at Moab (Deut. 29:1ff.) and the covenant with David (2 Sam. 23:5; etc.). From what has already been said, we may expect to see that these covenants have a particular function in terms of the restoration of the creation.

Peter describes God as the ‘faithful Creator’ (1 Pet. 4:19), urging that, on that basis, he may be trusted with the readers’ ‘souls’. This is in keeping with such statements as Deuteronomy 7:9:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty [חֶסֶד, *chesed*] with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations.

God’s faithfulness is his own trustworthiness to fulfil his own commitment to his covenant. He is true (אָמֵן *amen*, Isa. 65:16) to his own purpose. If, as it has been stressed in the past, God’s covenant with Noah was not something new but a previously existing covenant ratified,²¹ then the writer was subtly recognising that from the moment of creation covenant was in operation. Creation, and therefore Man, was formed in covenant with God.

¹⁹ See NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study 4/11/96.

²⁰ Some MSS have the singular, but the majority have the plural and, as set out above, the plural also matches the plural ‘promises’. See also Eph. 2:12, ‘strangers to the covenants of promise’.

²¹ See NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study 4/11/96, p. 2 and fn. 1.

This is brought out in the use of the covenant words 'blessing' and 'cursing' (e.g. Deut. 30:19–20): Man's whole vocation is given as blessing (in Gen. 1:28) and the never closed seventh day of creation was also blessed (Gen. 2:3), whereas the serpent (a creature, Gen. 3:1) and the ground (Gen. 3:17) are cursed following the sin of Man. These two aspects of covenant are in operation. Sin may have offended God but it has not rendered his covenant inoperative. However, if Man will not live in the blessing then he must live in the curse.

These two aspects are then seen in the call of Abraham, where the nations, presently under the judgement of God, will be blessed in Abraham. In other words, the many covenants made with Abraham and then with Israel are essentially functions of the one 'eternal covenant' (Heb. 13:20). For Israel, then, to regard their covenant relationship with God as an end in itself was a tragedy.

The Giving of the Law²²

As I mentioned above, this phrase is not an accurate translation of the Greek word νομοθεσία (*nomothesia*); the words 'giving' (NRSV) or 'receiving' (NIV) being necessary in English. However, there is another issue which ought to be noted, namely, that the word 'law' sometimes carries a quite specific sense in the New Testament as a reference to the Jewish law, the *Torah*, or Instruction.

²² See NCTM Monday Pastors' Study 2/12/96.

What was deposited in Israel was not simply the whole law of God but that law in a particular covenantal form. The ‘law of God’, that law by which God himself subsists and so the law by which all created beings function, is fundamental within creation. So, when speaking of the universal judgement in Romans 2, Paul states that:

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 (Rom. 2:12).

There are some who are ‘apart from the law’, not meaning that there is no law but that they are not the recipients of *Torah*. Romans 5:13–14 explains this:

... sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

Sin was in the world before there was *Torah* but had there been no ‘law of God’ then it would not have been reckoned, but as it was, death exercised dominion because the law of God was (and is) a present reality from Adam onwards. Thus Romans 2:14–15:

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 them.

The law of God ‘is written on the hearts’, a phrase I suspect deliberately reflecting Jeremiah 31:33, meaning that at creation the law was written on the hearts

of men and women. 'So, they are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened' (Rom. 1:20–21). Hence the purpose of the new covenant is that there will be a new creation with the law again written on the heart.

The means by which that would take place was to be Israel. They would be the people with a revelation from God of his own being and they would live in conformity with the instruction he gave. The particularity of their *Torah* is seen in many of the regulations which cannot simply be divided into 'moral' or 'ceremonial'. The *Torah* is a whole revelation to Israel. See, for example, Exodus 31:15–17, where God expressly says that the observance of the sabbath is 'a sign forever between me and the people of Israel':

Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.¹⁶ Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.¹⁷ It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.

The horrible divisions which have afflicted the nations since Babel²³ will be removed when the nations stream to Israel to be instructed because the *Torah* will flow from them (Isa. 2:2–4).

The bestowal of *Torah* on Israel was an immense privilege since it was to be the means by which the

²³ Or, since Adam, cf. Acts 17:26, 'From one [*ancestor*] he made all the nations to inhabit the earth' (NRSV).

whole creation was to be restored. When instruction goes forth from Zion, it will be ‘the word of the LORD from Jerusalem’.

The Worship²⁴

Once again, the question of ‘the worship’ needs to be asked in the context of salvation history. What does it mean for Israel to have the worship? Without recounting the details, we should be reminded that Adam’s role was to lead the creation in worship, to take this worship to the ends of the earth, to be ‘Edenising’ the world. This goal was not lost, as Isaiah 66:22–23 declares:

For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the LORD;
so shall your descendants and your name remain.

²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the LORD.

The exclusion from Eden (Gen. 3:23f.) was exclusion from worship, and this was expressed in hostility to those who, like Abel, were people of faith. Cain was a man constructing his own worship and who was not ‘accepted’, for whom there was no forgiveness in worship.²⁵ True, there were those at the time of Seth who ‘began to invoke the name of the LORD’ but they are far short of ‘all the families of the earth’.

When Noah and his family came out of the ark, as the new ‘Adam’ he worshipped (Gen. 8:20–21a) but the

²⁴ See NCTM Monday Pastors’ Study, 3/2/97.

²⁵ See G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC, vol. 1, Word, Waco, 1987), p. 104: ‘If you do well, is there not forgiveness?’

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result was not the Edenising of the world but the rejection of that whole principle in the construction of the tower in Babel (Gen. 11:1–9).

With Abraham there was again worship (Gen. 12:7–8; 13:18), climactically demonstrated in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. The fulfilment of his worship was seen in the worship offered by his descendants, the people of Israel whose worship was an expression of the heavenly paradigm (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:5–6). Therefore, to be a true participant in Israel's worship was a rich privilege. Here there was forgiveness and a recognition that the worship was according to the mind and will of God.

The tragic turning from worship of God to worship of worship is seen in Isaiah 1:10–17:

When you come to appear before me,
who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more;
¹³ bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
I am weary of bearing them (Isa. 1:12–14).

The blessing of the worship became a curse:

And now, O priests, this command is for you. ² If you will not listen, if you will not lay it to heart to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse on you and I will curse your blessings; indeed I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. ³ I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and I will put you out of my presence (Mal. 2:1–3).

The Promises²⁶

Given the stern warnings, the fact of judgement upon Israel is not surprising. But along with the judgement was the promise that there is blessing when the judgement purifies Israel. Thus Malachi continues:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap;³ he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years (Mal. 3:1–4).

There is actually no Hebrew word for 'promise' in the Old Testament, but the thought is prominent. The purpose of God has been made known and even if it involves judgement it is with a view to the ultimate blessing of Israel:

For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope (Jer. 29:10–11).

God has spoken and the prophets have received that word:

²⁶ See NCTM Monday Pastors' Study 3/3/97.

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Surely the Lord GOD does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets.⁸ The lion has roared; who will not fear? The Lord GOD has spoken; who can but prophesy? (Amos 3:7–8).

History is moving towards the goal of God, not because of the ability of Israel but because ‘the mouth of the LORD has spoken’ (Isa. 40:5) and ‘the word of our God will stand forever’ (Isa. 40:8).

Zechariah’s prophecy recognises this:

- ⁶⁸ Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he *looked favorably* on his people
and *redeemed* them.
⁶⁹ He *raised up* a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy
prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
⁷² Thus he *showed* the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and *remembered* his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham . . .
(Luke 1:68–73).

The verbs indicate all that God did in the past, even though English perfect tenses are used in most translations.²⁷ But all that God did in the past was in accordance with what ‘he [had] spoke[n] through the mouth of his holy prophets’. He showed the mercy which was ‘promised’. But after his resurrection Jesus accused the two on the road to Emmaus of being ‘foolish . . . and slow of hearing to believe all that the prophets have declared’ (Luke 24:25), and earlier he said that

²⁷ The words in italics are all aorist tenses.

Jerusalem was ‘the city that kills the prophets’ (Luke 13:34). The precious and very great promises which God had given to Israel and which, had they believed them, would have kept them in constant touch with the vast plan of God for creation, had been generally rejected or interpreted in far more restricted terms.

The Fathers and the Messiah²⁸

The fathers (the patriarchs) are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and it is possible that this reference provides some sort of conclusion to the list of privileges or advantages which Israel had by saying again, in a different way, that they are Israelites. ‘The oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham’ was equally ‘his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ (Exod. 2:24).

All these advantages are theirs. But there is far more. Out of²⁹ Israel has come the Messiah, the one who has fulfilled in himself all that Israel was called to be in itself and for the nations. By rejecting him, Israel had demeaned itself, for it had failed to see itself as the matrix for the salvation of the world in him.

THE BLESSINGS BECOME A CURSE

The role of Israel was always with the nations in view. Israel, however, almost always rejected that role, as in

²⁸ See NCTM Monday Pastors’ Studies for 7/4/97 and 5/5/97. See also my paper for the 1998 NCTM Pastors’ School, ‘Jesus the Messiah: Messianic Truth’.

²⁹ ἐξ ὧν.

the story of Jonah. Isaiah had foretold that, far from the nations being somehow absorbed into Israel, Israel was intended to stand as one of the nations in the restoration of the blessing of the world:

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' (Isa. 19:24–25).

To that extent, Israel's unique role within salvation history was to come to an end when the blessing came to the nations. One of the reasons why there was so much pressure put on Gentile believers by Jewish believers was exactly in this area: many of the Jewish believers still felt that the Gentiles (nations) ought to be absorbed into Israel and adopt those elements which had marked out Israel as the carrier of the blessing, namely circumcision,³⁰ sabbath observance³¹ and the dietary laws.³²

The climax of Israel's role was seen in Jesus. Although we have usually taken the language in a very general way, could we not perhaps see the language of the Gospels pointing in this direction? For instance, what does it mean to fulfil all righteousness (Matt. 3:15)? Could it be that at last there is someone who will give complete expression to the covenant relationship,

³⁰ See Rom. 2:25–29; 3:1; 4:9–12; 15:8; 1 Cor. 7:18–19; Gal. 2:3, 12; 5:2–3, 6, 11; 6:12–15; Col. 2:11; 3:11, as well as the regular designation of Jews as 'the circumcision', surely a reference to their undue emphasis on the rite.

³¹ Rom. 14:5–6.

³² Rom. 14:2–6, 13–21; 1 Cor. 8; Gal. 2:11–14; Col. 2:21; 1 Tim. 4:3–5.

with Israel's Messiah, in the person of Jesus, submitting fully to the law on Israel's behalf?³³ If that is so then Israel will at last fulfil its function.

More pointed is Matthew 5:17–18:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

Verse 18 speaks of the full weight of the law being in force 'until all is accomplished'. When is that to be? And which law is in mind? Given verse 17, the law is surely the *Torah*. There is no question of the eternal law of God *ever* passing away, but when all righteousness is fulfilled and when the kingdom is established then the law and the prophets will have served their salvation–historical purpose. This would be Jesus, then, announcing that in himself the climax of Israel's purpose is about to be reached (cf. Rom. 10:4, Paul is saying that Messiah is the goal, the *telos*, of the *Torah*).

Luke 4:18–30 indicates the response of the Jews to this sort of announcement. When Jesus said that the promise of the anointing of the Spirit was being fulfilled in their hearing, and when he described the blessing going to the Gentiles, the crowd in Nazareth attempted to kill him. Once again they were rejecting the prophetic word (v. 24).

What we call Jesus' earthly ministry was one of teaching and healing, all within the context of Israel and all prior to the Cross and the Resurrection. He was

³³ See similarly, William J. Dumbrell, *The New Covenant: The Synoptics in Context: Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Bible Society of Singapore, Singapore, 1999), p. 26.

declaring the kingdom of God in word and deed. He ordered the disciples, at that stage, to ‘go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but [to] go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt. 10:5–6). This compassion for Israel was because they were ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (Matt. 9:36). The language, superficially pastoral, was in fact drawn from Numbers 27:17 and referred to Israel as a people without a leader. Now, like Israel wanting a king ‘like the nations round about’, they had rejected God from being king over them and were lost in the presence of ‘the king of the Jews’. Their leaders, especially those who claimed to uphold the law and the prophets (the Pharisees), were focused on their own self-aggrandisement (Matt. 23:5–12). They would cross sea and land to make a single convert but, in doing so, would lay on the convert heavy burdens which were hard to bear and at the same time were locking people out of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 23:4, 13–15). On the other hand, Jesus’ burden was light and the yoke which he placed on people was easy to bear (Matt. 11:30). The contrast between Jesus and the leaders of Israel was becoming stronger and the division deeper.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was as King, fulfilling the promise of Zechariah 9:9 (Matt. 21:5). Luke describes the Pharisees attempting to silence the exultant disciples, and Jesus’ response that ‘if these were silent, the stones would shout out’ (Luke 19:39–40).

The worship in the Temple had become polluted as the court of the Gentiles had been used as the place where the sacrificial animals were sold and the foreign money exchanged. The result was effectively the exclusion of Gentiles from worship. It is Mark’s account

THE GIFTS TO ISRAEL

which gives the full quote, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’ (11:17; cf. Isa. 56:7). Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple (see Mal. 3:1–4) was associated with the story of the cursing of the fig tree. This was no act of pique but rather an enacted parable, based on Jeremiah 8:13:

When I wanted to gather them, says the LORD,
there are no grapes on the vine,
nor figs on the fig tree;
even the leaves are withered,
and what I gave them has passed away from them.

The cursing of the tree was announcing that fruitless Israel, with its polluted worship, was finished; ‘may no fruit come from you again’ (Matt. 21:19; cf. John 15:1–8). This imagery was repeated in some of the parables which followed.

First was the story of the two sons in Matthew 21:28–32, in which Jesus likened the chief priests and elders to the son who claimed to do the father’s bidding but in reality did not. Tax-collectors and prostitutes were entering the kingdom before those leaders. The leaders were like the tenants in the story of the vineyard (Matt. 21:33–46), based obviously on Isaiah 5. Here were people given great privileges. They were not slaves and were living securely behind a protective fence with the only requirement being that they provide produce at the time of harvest. The murdering of the Son would result in the execution of the tenants and the leasing of ‘the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time’ (Matt. 21:41), a reference to the fact that then the kingdom of God would be taken away from Israel ‘and given to a nation [singular] that produces the fruits of the kingdom’ (Matt. 21:43).

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The parable of the guests invited to the wedding (Matt. 22:1–14) pointed to the eschatological hope of the wedding banquet and the general unwillingness of the leaders of Israel to attend on terms other than their own, or to attend at all. Matthew 24:1–36 dealt with the ‘destruction of Jerusalem and the end of Israel’.³⁴ Dumbrell describes Matthew 24:37–25:46 as ‘Five Parables against Israel’:

- a. The unprepared generation of Noah surprised by the massive judgment of the flood 24:37–41.
- b. The unprepared householder surprised by a thief 24:42–44.
- c. The faithful versus the wicked servant surprised by the return of the master 24:45–50.
- d. The prepared versus the unprepared maidens 25:1–13 . . .
- e. The servants who were unproductive with their Lord’s resources 25:14–30 . . .³⁵

In these parables, being prepared for the time of judgement is a matter for Israel, in the light of the privilege and responsibilities it has been given. Luke 12:48 summarises the issue:

But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

Dumbrell’s comment is helpful:

Discipleship is to be associated with vigilance, continued readiness for the kingdom. But what is meant by the return of the Son of Man will be clarified in Luke 21, when his return will be seen as associated with the fall of Jerusalem. Verses

³⁴ Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, p. 76.

³⁵ Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, p. 77.

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47–48 indicate that if punishment is necessary, it will be meted out commensurate with responsibility given.³⁶

Salvation by grace through faith is not being considered here. The issue is the way in which Israel has responded to its calling as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Thus Matthew 25:30–46, the division between the sheep and the goats, the conclusion of Jesus' public ministry, has nothing to do with personal salvation. It concerns the separation of the nations, including Israel. When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will sit on the throne of his glory as King (vv. 31, 34). Whatever else, the parameters of the judgement are similar to those in Isaiah 58, which explained why Israel did not receive the blessing of God. For example:

. . . day after day they seek me
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'
Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.
⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.
Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.
⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?
Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?
Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

³⁶ Dumbrell, *The New Covenant*, p. 182.

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- ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
- ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
- ¹⁰ if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday
(Isa. 58:2–10).³⁷

The blessings which had come to Israel in gifts and calling are irrevocable. There remain ‘the children of the promise’ (Rom. 9:8). God has not ‘rejected his people’ (Rom. 11:1f.). But for Israel to know the goal of those blessings they must cease their unbelief (Rom. 11:23). Israel must now find itself as one *of* and one *with* the nations who all ‘share the rich root of the olive tree’ (Rom. 11:17). Only as they belong to the Messiah are they ‘Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise’ (Gal. 3:29). As in Matthew 25:31–34, it is not possession of the gifts, but faith in the one to whom the gifts led, which is decisive.

³⁷ It is this passage which explains the ministry of the anointed one in Isa. 61:1ff.