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New Testament Israel

Fundamental continuity bridges
the great transition from
Israel to Christianity.

By WALTER F. SPECHT

THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITINGS EXPRESS the conviction of the followers of Jesus that the Christian community took the place of the Jews as the special people of God. The apostle Paul speaks of Christians as “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16),* “Abraham’s offspring” (chap. 3:29), and “the true circumcision” (Phil. 3:3). James, the brother of our Lord, designates them as “the twelve tribes in the dispersion [Jews residing outside of Palestine]” (James 1:1). Peter’s first letter is addressed “to the exiles of the dispersion” in Asia Minor, “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Peter 1:1, 2).

In response to Peter’s question regarding the reward that disciples who had left all to follow Jesus were to receive, our Lord promised, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). It is evident that the apostles are not destined to rule over literal Israel, since our Lord plainly told the Jews, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (chap. 21:43).

To emphasize their claim to be the special people of God, Christians appropriated the designation, the *ekklēsia* (“assembly” or “church”) of God. In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) *ekklēsia* was one of two words used to denote the people of Israel in their religious character as the “congregation of the Lord.” The other Greek word was *sunagōgē*, “synagogue,” which became the designation for the Jewish community. It was not long before there developed a keen rivalry between

the church and the synagogue. As a name for the Christian community *ekklēsia* is first found in Acts 5:11. However, according to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus expressed His determination to build His *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18). How did Jesus go about building this new Israel, this new people of God? And how was the new community related to the old?

To begin with, Jesus regarded His mission of teaching and healing as being primarily for the Jews. He told the Syrophenician woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (chap. 15:24). Most likely this is to be interpreted as meaning “the lost sheep, namely (or, that is to say), Israel.” There seems to be, here, an allusion to the words of Jeremiah 50:6, “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains” (cf. Eze. 34:6; Isa. 53:6). Jesus put forth every effort in bringing back these “lost sheep.” He also directed His disciples on their first missionary tour alone, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6).

But the Jewish people as a whole rejected our Lord’s messianic mission of salvation. “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11). There were, however, a substantial number who responded in faith to Jesus’ message and work. This faithful remnant constituted the nucleus of a new Israel, a new people of God. They were our Lord’s “little flock” (Luke 12:32; Matt 26:31). At the center of these faithful ones were the 12 apostles.

The fact that Jesus chose 12 such men is significant. It suggests that just as the 12 patriarchs were the founders of ancient Israel, so these 12 men are the founders of a new Israel to which our Lord promised a kingdom (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). The later choice of 70 others (Luke 10:1) is apparently modeled after the 70 elders of Israel appointed by Moses (Num. 11:16).

Continuity, Israel, and the Church

It is important to recognize the unity and continuity of the New Testament people of God with Israel in Old Testament times. Mere descent from Abraham was never an iron-clad guarantee of membership in God’s people. The apostle Paul was able to show from Old Testament history that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom. 9:6). Rather, the true Israel is “a remnant, chosen by grace” (chap. 11:5). The concept of a faithful remnant within Israel is prominent in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa. 4:2ff.; 10:20-22). They constituted the real Israel within Israel. There thus developed the view even back there, of a spiritual Israel, the real people of God. The early Christian church was made up of faithful Jews in the first century who responded to the Christian message.

The fact of the continuity between the church and the faithful of Israel is illustrated in Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24). In this metaphor the olive tree, according to Ellen G. White, represents “the true stock of Israel—the remnant who had remained true to the God of their fathers” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 378 f.). Branches, representing Jews, were broken off from it “because of their unbelief” (verse 20). Wild olive shoots, representing the Gentiles, were, contrary to na-

*Bible texts in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

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ture, "grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree" (verse 17). Natural branches (Jews) who turned in faith to Christ could also be grafted into the tree, "for God has the power to graft them in again" (verse 23).

Although there was a continuity between the new Israel and the faithful remnant of ancient Israel, there was also a new element, the inclusion of Gentiles as an integral part of the new. The acceptance of Gentiles as part of the people of God was not due to human planning, but to the divine leadership of God's Spirit. Upon sending Peter to Caesarea to instruct Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and finally to baptize him and his household as Christians, the Spirit instructed Peter to disregard his Jewish scruples against associating with Gentiles (Acts 10, 11). "Who was I," Peter explained, "that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17).

The persecution of Christians that arose in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen served to scatter them. Wherever they went they spread the Christian faith. At Antioch on the Orontes River in Syria they raised up the first Gentile church (verses 19-26). The apostle Paul was divinely called as a special apostle to the Gentiles (chap. 9:15; 22:21; 26:16-18, 23).

Not only were Gentiles accepted as members of the Christian community but the Jerusalem Conference decided that it was not necessary for them to be circumcised and accept the Jewish laws in order to be Christians. Nevertheless, they were regarded as on an equality with the Jews. Both were "fellow heirs" and "members of the same body" (Eph. 3:6). Though once "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise," they had been brought near by the blood of Christ. They were therefore "no longer strangers and sojourners" but "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (chap. 2:12, 19).

The gospel of Jesus Christ recognizes no nationality or race. Peter with difficulty learned that "'God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him'" (Acts 10:34, 35). In Christ "there is no distinction between Jew and

Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him'" (verse 12). In Christ Jesus all men become sons of God through faith (Gal. 3:26). "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (verse 29).

The basis of salvation is not natural descent, but faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is not national, but personal. Anyone of any nation or race who accepts Christ in faith will be saved (Rom. 10:13). That faith makes him also a child of Abraham, who through faith became righteous. "The purpose was," Paul says, "to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (chap. 4:11, 12).

Who Is a True Israelite?

Thus the true Israelite is not necessarily a physical descendant of Abraham. "For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly. . . . He is a Jew who is one inwardly" (chap. 2:28, 29). John the Baptist declared that God was capable of raising up children to Abraham from stones (Matt. 3:9). The true descendants of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham.

The new Israel, thus constituted, appropriated the promises and titles anciently given to the Hebrews. This is most clearly shown in 1 Peter 2:9, 10, which applies designations drawn from Exodus 19:5, 6, to Christians. They are "a chosen race," an elect people, chosen by God as truly as was ancient Israel. They are also a "royal priesthood," a designation corresponding to the "kingdom of priests" in Exodus 19:6. As the Hebrews were to comprise a kingdom consisting of priests, so the church constitutes a body of priests, each of whom has a direct access to God. Like Israel of old (Deut. 7:6; 14:2), Christians comprise a "holy" nation. They are a holy people because God has separated them from all other people to be dedicated to Him. They are therefore "God's own people" or, in the words of the K.J.V., "a peculiar people," "peculiar" in the sense of belonging exclusively to God as His special treasure. Recalling the message in the names of Hosea's children (Hosea 1:6-11), Peter adds, "Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy."

Why has God called a new Israel as His special people? Peter answers, "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). It is the function of the church to witness to the excellencies of God. God has not called the church to privilege only but to a weighty responsibility. Every Christian is to testify to God's grace and love in leading him out of darkness into the light of truth.

Jesus Christ, as Paul expressed it, "gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14). The risen Christ gave His church the task of making disciples of all nations and of teaching them to obey our Lord's commands (Matt. 28:19, 20). The church is to display the manifold wisdom, and power, and love of God to the world (Eph. 3:10). □

The Potter's Hand

By ETHEL JONES

The Potter looked down on the broken hearts,
The hearts He must mend today,
No time could be lost, lest the destroyer come
And snatch them all away.

Some took a while their break to repair;
They were made of stubborn clay.
Others, so hard they couldn't be worked,
With sorrow He cast away.

Many rejoiced at the healing touch;
They were a happy band;
For high on each heart, for the world to see,
Was the print of the Potter's hand.