

Identity Theft? A Biblical Theological Look at Israel, Jesus, and the Church¹

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Abstract

Covenant Theology is often criticized for minimizing the role of ethnic Israel in God's redemptive purposes. By claiming that the Church is the "true Israel," covenant theologians are often labelled as anti-Semitic, being accused of replacement theology (also called supersessionism). This claim is not altogether unwarranted since several theological works quickly move from speaking about Christ as the true Israel to the Church, without first dwelling on how Israel as a type leads to Christ the antitype (Gentry & Wellum 2012:121). Unfortunately, this has led to the lumping together of theological Israel with ethnic Israel. Thus, any position that seems to undermine ethnic Israel is considered suspicious. The following article examines Israel, Jesus, and the Church through a biblical theological framework. The central point is that Israel's Old Testament identity is a type that is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ. However, the identity of Jesus is also shared by those who are united to him by faith, namely the Church.

Key Words: Covenant Theology, Dispensationalism, Israel, Church, Fulfilment, Typology, Christotelic.

1. Introduction

The subject of Israel's identity has solicited much discussion between covenant theologians and dispensational theologians. The former sees a great degree of continuity between Israel and the Church, while the latter sees a clear distinction between Israel and the Church. The following paper will attempt to answer the question: Who is the true Israel? First, the typological theme of Israel will be traced through Matthew's Gospel. After that, we will observe that through union with Christ, the Church shares in the identity of the true Israel, namely Jesus. Finally, we will consider several objections dispensational theologians have against the Church sharing the identity of the true Israel.

2. The Identity of Israel According to Matthew

As progressive revelation unfolds it becomes apparent that the question regarding Israel's identity is never intended to be static. Phrased differently, the promises given to Israel are not automatic guarantees to be received apart from faith and obedience. Simply claiming that Abraham is Israel's father is never a sufficient basis for claiming the covenant promises (cf. Mt 3:9). This raises the question: Who then is the true Israel? The Gospel of Matthew, in its structure and themes, provides a starting point for this biblical exploration.

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2.1. Genealogical Evidence

The New Testament begins in a rather interesting way. Unlike starting with the author's introduction as found in most Old Testament prophetic books, the first Gospel writer chooses to begin with a genealogy. The opening words, "book of the genealogy" (*biblos geneoseōs*), could more literally be translated as "a book of the genesis" (Carson 1984:61). Matthew's approach reveals a particular emphasis in his Gospel. It seems likely that Matthew has the fulfilment of both Genesis 12 and 2 Samuel 7 in mind. This intention is further hinted at by the words, "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham," which echoes two historical biblical covenants. In light of these features, Blomberg (2007:2) asserts, "As a descendant of David, Jesus comes as an Israelite king; as a descendant of Abraham, he will bless all the nations of the earth."

God's covenant with Abraham forms a major feature of the history of redemption recorded in the Scriptures. Matthew intentionally begins his genealogy of Jesus at that point. By carefully linking Jesus to Abraham, Matthew declares that God's promise of blessing for the nations will now be fulfilled in a single person. Paul affirms this in the epistle to the Galatians, writing, "It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ (Gal 3:16)." The earliest hint of this promise-fulfilment motif in Matthew is witnessed in the coming of the wise men from the East to worship Jesus (Mt 2). Later, Jesus prophetically announces, "Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (8:11). Finally, at the close of the Gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

A second Old Testament promise equally strengthens the thrust of Matthew's genealogy. God promised king David that his house and the throne of his offspring would be established forever (2 Sam 7:8-16). The promised Son of David will be the representative embodiment of Israel through whom the nations will be blessed. "Son of David" is an important designation in Matthew. Not only does the introduction of David become a turning point in the genealogy itself (1:6, 17), but the title occurs throughout the Gospel narrative (9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15; 22:42, 45). For France (1985:75), "The accession of David to kingship, and the loss of that kingship at the Babylonian exile; now in the coming of Jesus, son of David, that kingship is to reach its appointed goal." Matthew intends for the genealogy of Jesus to be read as the genealogy of Israel's true king, who represents the true Israel. Chou (2018:134), who holds a dispensational position, agrees with this conclusion as he writes, "David was God's son as he represented God's son Israel."

The focus of Matthew's genealogy is clear according to Holwerda. By linking Jesus to Abraham, Matthew declares that God's promise of blessing for the nations is now being fulfilled through Jesus. By linking Jesus to David, Matthew reveals that God's promise to David has not failed because it finds fulfilment in Jesus.

The significance of Jesus is deeply rooted in the history of Old Testament Israel, so deeply that the blessings promised to Old Testament Israel find their fulfilment only through him. He is Israel, the representative embodiment of true Israel and Israel's king (1995:34).

In his person and work, Jesus is all that Israel was meant to be. In Jesus, God himself takes the place of his covenant partner to secure the continuity of his covenant with Israel. Consequently, the definition of the true Israel is forever changed. Blomberg (1992:53) writes, “Matthew’s names for Jesus present him as the fulfilment of the hopes and prophecies of Israel but also as one who will extend God’s blessings to Gentiles. His birth marks a new epoch in human history.” In light of this, the identity of Israel can never again be defined apart from Jesus Christ.

2.2. Geographical Evidence

Egypt played a dual role in the early history of Yahweh’s covenant people. On the one hand, Egypt was a place of refuge from famine. Through the safety provided by the land, God’s people were preserved (Gen 50:20). But, on the other hand, Egypt was the historic oppressor of the nation. During the nation’s slavery, God intervened with signs and wonders to liberate his people from bondage and deliver them into the Promised Land.

Matthew sees the movement out of Egypt as typologically fulfilled in Jesus. On the surface, the tax collector’s use of Hosea 11:1 seems out of place. Jesus’ flight into Egypt was undertaken to protect from Herod, but the verse from Hosea is about the original exodus from Egypt and God’s providential deliverance. What then does Matthew intend by quoting this passage?

2.2.1. Matthew’s Use of Hosea 11:1

The fulfilment of the Old Testament Scriptures is a prominent feature in the synoptic Gospels. In particular, Matthew’s infancy narrative (Mt 1-2) makes extended use of the promise-fulfilment motif. Gaffin (2012:102) observes that Matthew 1:18-2:23 contains five of the ten “formula quotations” distinctive to the Gospel. One of these formula quotations is found in Matthew 2:15, “This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son.’”

After the wise men leave, the Lord’s angel warns Joseph that Herod will look for Jesus to kill him, so they must leave the country and escape to Egypt for safety. Matthew sums up this episode by saying that they were in Egypt until the death of Herod. In this summary statement, before the account of the slaughter of the children and the return of the family to Israel, Matthew refers to Hosea 11:1. By placing the fulfilment of Hosea here, Matthew illustrates the importance of understanding the wider context of an Old Testament passage. Utilizing clues found in the wider context of Hosea, Matthew’s use of Hosea 11:1 becomes a pivotal climatic marker in the passage. The prophet Hosea spoke of God’s unique love for Israel when the nation was helpless. Hosea himself quotes Exodus 4:22 where Yahweh declares, “Israel is my firstborn son.” As Yahweh’s son, God demonstrates his love by rescuing Israel from slavery in Egypt. There are several references to Egypt within the book of Hosea. Several of them view the Exodus event as a past event (2:15; 12:9, 13; 13:4), while others speak of a return to Egypt (7:16; 8:13; 9:3). For Gaffin (2012:106), “The exodus is the archetypal evidence that the Lord God is the Saviour of the people.” However, this is only part of Hosea’s equation.

Without ignoring this immediate context, Matthew broadens his view of Hosea to the larger context of the book and the Old Testament (Barrett 2018:238). Earlier in Hosea (ch 10) the prophet

describes the earlier glory days of Israel. However, times of glory have been supplanted by the wickedness of the current nation. “These associations,” writes Gaffin (2012:106), “along with the other references to Egypt point to what some fairly see as Hosea’s Egypt typology.” Israel’s punishment for apostasy and rebellion results in the reversal of the Exodus. The impending exile in typological Egypt (Assyria) will be like returning to slavery. The judgment of God upon the nation will not mark the end of Yahweh’s dealings with his covenant people. The reversal of the exile, the deliverance from bondage, fills the nation with hope. Just as Yahweh loved his son and rescued him the first time, so his love will drive another rescue (cf. Pss 74:10-15; 77:14-15). For Garrett (1997:222), “Here [Hosea 11] the slavery in Egypt is the pattern for the second period of enslavement in an alien land (v5), and the exodus from Egypt is the type for a new exodus (vv10-11).” Israel will return from typological Egypt (Hos 11:11). Yahweh will call his Son out of Egypt.

By quoting Hosea 11:1, Matthew sees not only the fulfilment of a word prediction, but also the fulfilment of a type (Blomberg 2007:7; Beale 2020:35). He recognizes a correspondence between the preservation of the son, Israel, and the Son, Christ. Thus, in going to Egypt, the primaeval place of slavery, persecution, and affliction, Jesus illustrates what Yahweh will do for his people both physically and spiritually. Chou (2018:135) writes, “God’s love for Israel in the first Exodus has driven him to work out what is required for the new Exodus.” A “new exodus” motif is present leading to the salvation of sinners, not only for Israel but for all nations. This motif is reflected in Blomberg’s writing:

Just as God brought the nation of Israel out of Egypt to inaugurate his original covenant with them, so again God is bringing the Messiah, who fulfils the hopes of Israel, out of Egypt as he is about to inaugurate his new covenant (1992:67).

At the heart of Yahweh’s redemptive purposes is his commitment to his promises. The promised exodus, in other words, will be accomplished by the true Son. Thus, for Matthew, Jesus himself is the locus of the true Israel. Barrett (2018:239) writes, “It [the Exodus] was a necessary progression in God’s fulfilling His covenant promise to Abraham, at the heart of which was the promise of the Seed.” Israel, as God’s son (Ex 4:22), is called to be Yahweh’s servant. However, the nation failed to live according to Yahweh’s covenant expectations. Jesus, the Messianic servant, will prove to be the faithful Son where the nation had been the faithless son. Additionally, within the context of the covenant promises to David, the son of David is declared to be the son of God (2 Sam 7:12-14).

When Matthew presents Jesus as the *telos* (goal) of Hosea 11:1, he intends for the reader to see overtones of a new exodus, an act of deliverance that will finally end the oppression of God’s people. God had promised that his people would once again be reborn, renewed, and restored in a new exodus. “By declaring Hosea 11:1 fulfilled in this event,” writes Holwerda (1995:40), “Matthew proclaims not only that Jesus is Israel, God’s beloved Son, but also that the long-awaited exodus has begun.”

2.3. Heavenly Evidence

Matthew records two occasions of a voice speaking from heaven. In both these instances the pronouncement is largely the same, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” with only a slight addition in the second, “listen to him!” (Mt 3:17; 17:5).

On the first occasion, the voice is heard after Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. John was the forerunner of the Messiah (cf. Isa 40:3). His message centred on repentance considering the nearness of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 3:2). The prophet's baptism demonstrated recognition of one's sin, a desire for spiritual cleansing, and a commitment to follow God's law in anticipation of the Messiah's arrival (France 1985:91). John also confronted the false Jewish leaders of his day, who presumed they were God's children simply because they were descendants of Abraham (Mt 3:8).

But in approaching John, Jesus had not come to confess any sin but "to fulfil all righteousness." "To fulfil all righteousness," according to Blomberg (1992:81), "means to complete everything that forms part of a relationship of obedience to God." In response to this action and declaration by Jesus, God sent the Spirit to qualify Jesus for his Messianic task and then announced from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This act of identification shows that he is willing to take upon himself the judgment that Israel deserves (Schreiner 2008:172).

The voice from heaven quotes both Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Together they reflect Jesus' dual role: a Kingly Messiah and a Suffering Servant (Blomberg 2007:14). But who is this servant described by Isaiah?

The Servant Songs of Isaiah (Isa 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) refer to the Servant of the Lord. The first song (Isa 42:1-9) depicts the Lord's Servant establishing justice. In the second song (49:1-7), the Servant is a light to the Gentiles (49:6), such that his praise reaches the ends of the earth (42:10). The third Servant Song (Isa 50:4-9) demonstrates the faithfulness of the Servant to the Lord (vv4-5). This faithfulness, however, will result in suffering (v6). And in the fourth Servant Song (Isa 52:13-53:12) it becomes clear that the victory of the Servant will be achieved through suffering.

From the descriptions of the Servant of Yahweh found in various passages of Isaiah, the best interpretation is one that identifies the Servant as referring in some sense both to Israel and to one who, by representing Israel, renews Israel (Holwerda 1995:43). But Matthew intends to identify Jesus as God's anointed Servant, who is well pleasing to God because of the righteousness that he fulfils. France (1985:96) contends, "Jesus' Messianic mission...is thus spelt out around three key concepts: he is the Davidic Messiah, the Son of God, and the Servant whose mission is to bear the sins of his people." Simply put, Jesus is the one in whom the hopes of Israel converge.

2.4. Wilderness Evidence

The wilderness was an important location in the history of Israel. There, Yahweh had tested Israel as a father disciplines his son (Deut 8:5). Israel, however, had failed to learn the lessons Yahweh had intended for them. But now the true Son of God faces the same test at the outset of his mission (Mt 4:1-11). At this point, the idea of Jesus as the true Israel develops even further (France 1985:97).

In the wilderness Jesus fasts forty days and forty nights, a time which may reflect the forty years of Israel's wandering in the wilderness (Deut 8:2). During this time, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6 and 8, all of which refer to the experience of Israel. These passages from Deuteronomy are part of a lengthy sermon in which Moses rehearses Israel's history of sin and failure during the wanderings in the wilderness. He then uses that history to admonish Israel and to encourage obedient living when Israel enters the Promised Land. By being tested, Jesus proves himself faithful to God. The relevance of such passages cannot be reduced to merely topographical overlap (France 1975:67). Where Israel failed, Jesus proved to be a true Son of God.

2.5. Prophetic Evidence

The Old Testament prophets anticipated a future in which God would rule, bring healing, and overcome evil. At that time, God's covenant people would be gathered, and righteousness would spring forth before the nations (Ezek 34; Isa 61). At the start of his ministry, Jesus announces the arrival of that future kingdom (Mt 4:17). For Jesus, God's kingdom is not only near, it has arrived. In Jesus, the kingdom's blessings are poured out and promises are fulfilled.

The first instance of the kingdom's arrival is observed in Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 9:1-2 (Mt 4:15-16). Originally Isaiah had prophesied that Zebulun and Naphtali would be brought into contempt. This occurred when Yahweh judged the northern territories of Israel using the Assyrian empire (Blomberg 2007:18). The light dawning upon the land would initially refer to Israel's return from exile. But Isaiah looks beyond the immediate future. He sees that Yahweh will glorify himself by fulfilling the promises and restoring his people under the offspring of David. The light dawning on that horizon begins with the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.

The second instance is found in Matthew 15:29-31. On this occasion, Jesus goes up onto a mountain, and crowds bring him sick people, whom Jesus heals. This description of Jesus' ministry contains a clear allusion to Isaiah 35:5-6:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy (ESV).

These, however, are the blessings promised to the covenant nation of Israel as they move on the highway to eschatological Zion (Isa 35:8ff). But on this occasion, these blessings demonstrate the arrival of the kingdom of heaven, and they are blessings extending beyond the boundaries of Israel (France 1985:248).

This is reinforced by the preceding context with the healing of a Canaanite woman, a term which few would use in the first century (Blomberg 2007:54). Because of her "great faith" her daughter is healed. Here a Gentile woman and her daughter share in the compassion of the Davidic Shepherd-King, he who heals and feeds his people, even though she receives only scraps from the table (Mt 15:27).

Additionally, on several occasions, Jesus sees his own experience in the light of the Psalms which originally referred to the suffering and vindication of Israel. The most prominent of these is Psalm 118:22, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 23:39 (cf. Mk 12:10-22). The rejected cornerstone of Psalm 118 originally referred to the dramatic victory of Israel, but Jesus sees himself as the *telos* of this passage. Moreover, Jesus is the suffering servant, a title which was originally designated for Israel (Isa 52:13-53:12). Jesus is God's servant who is anointed with the Spirit (Mt 12:18-21; cf. Isa 42:1-4).

2.6. Who is the True Israel?

Together, these five clues reveal that the true identity of Israel lies in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Schreiner (2008:271) concludes, "Matthew's emphasis on fulfilment indicates that Jesus is the true Israel who fulfils what God always intended when he chose Israel to be his people." In other words, Jesus fulfils every preparatory and anticipatory aspect of the history of redemption in the Old Testament in general — and in the history of Israel in particular — because he is the true Israel of God. In this way, Israel typologically points forward to the coming of the true Israel, the Lord Jesus who inaugurates a new covenant in his blood (Gentry & Wellum 2012:121). France writes:

Jesus' types are drawn from a wide range of aspects of Israel seen in the Old Testament; they are not restricted to any one period or any single class...he sees in the *experiences* of Israel foreshadowings of his own; he sees the *hopes* of Israel fulfilled in himself (1998:75; emphasis original).

Undergirding this understanding of Jesus is the biblical idea of the corporate person, the idea that one person can represent a group or a nation and that the nation can be representatively embodied in one person (Holwerda 1995:34). Vlach, himself a dispensational theologian, agrees with this position:

A proper understanding of Jesus as "true Israel" (if we use that title) should be in the context of understanding Jesus as the corporate Head of Israel. He embodies perfectly everything God intended for Israel to be. In this sense, we can say Jesus is 'true Israel' because He embodies Israel perfectly (2012:48).

To put it another way, Jesus Christ is not merely analogous to the Old Testament nation of Israel, nor simply parallel to her in terms of his experience. Jesus is Israel because God's purposes, promises, and predictions for the nation find their *telos* in his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation (Storms 2013:42).

3. The Corporate Nature of the New Covenant

It is rather tempting to conclude with Matthew that Jesus is the true Israel. However, the New Testament has more to say on the matter at hand. As the Messiah, Jesus is the covenant representative. Berkhof highlights:

Like the first Adam, He [Christ] did not represent a conglomeration of disjointed individuals, but a body of men and women who were to derive their life from Him, to be united by spiritual ties, and thus to form a spiritual organism. Ideally

this body, which is the Church, was already formed in the covenant of redemption, and formed in union with Christ, and this union made it possible that all the blessings merited by Christ could be passed on to those whom He represented in an organic way (1938:448).

In other words, to be united to Jesus is to be in the covenant through his representative headship. In other words, the story of one man (Jesus) is understood as the story of the people. Therefore, all those who are in Jesus through union with him share in the identity of the True Israel. To put it another way, Jesus is the antitypical fulfilment of Israel, and the Church through union with Christ can be rightfully called the new Israel (Gentry & Wellum 2012:106). As Beale affirms:

Christ is the true Israel; as true Israel, he represents the church as the continuation of true Israel from the OT. Christ came to do what Israel should have done but failed to do. Those who identify by faith with Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, become identified with him and his identity as true eschatological Israel (2011:652).

It is not an allegorical or spiritualizing hermeneutic by which the Church is to be identified with Israel, but rather what Beale (2011:655) calls a “legal representative” or “corporate” hermeneutic that underlies this identification of the Church. “The old covenant nation of Israel,” argues Robertson (1979:289), “typologically anticipated the new covenant reality of the chosen people of God assembled as a nation consecrated to God.” Stated differently, Jesus is the true Israel, and the Church becomes the Israel of God as it unites itself to the True Israel. Poythress contends that:

With whom is the new covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite. Because Christ is an Israelite and Christians are in union with Christ, Christians partake of the benefits promised to Israel and Judah in Jeremiah. Thus, one might say that Israel and Judah themselves undergo a transformation at the first coming of Christ, because Christ is the final, supremely faithful Israelite (1994:106).

Simply put Jesus Christ is the head of the new race and all who are united to him by faith are members of that race. These theological affirmations are consistent with the biblical witness. Isaiah envisions the divine perpetuation of Christ’s spiritual posterity (Isa 59:20-21). God creates this spiritual posterity by his Word and his Spirit. Storms maintains:

The True Israel of this eschatological age is no longer the nation of the old covenant but the Christian community, inaugurated by a new covenant through a mediator greater than the Israelite priesthood; for Jesus not only repeats the work of the prophet, priest and king, but in him it is perfected. In this new community the hopes of the Old Testament Israel are fulfilled (2013:41).

4. Case Closed?

It is at this point that covenant theologians and dispensational theologians disagree. Some have suggested that to claim Jesus is the true Israel is biblically unwarranted because the term does not appear in Scripture. Such a claim, however, is quickly shown to be indefensible. For example, Jesus was tried on the charge that he claimed to be “king of the Jews” (Mk 15:2, 26, 32). However,

no such claim is recorded in Scripture. Nevertheless, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Mt 21:1-11; cf. Zech 9:9), an act which the people interpreted with royal overtones (v9). Moreover, Jesus used language rich with kingly symbolism. His favourite title for himself was “Son of Man” (Dan 7:13). Jesus viewed his ministry through the lens of the “Servant of Yahweh” (Isa 49). Simply because the term “true Israel” does not appear in Scripture regarding Jesus, does not mean that it must be rejected.

More pressing, however, is the claim that while Matthew 2:15 teaches that Christ is the true Israel, it does not bring an end to Israel’s national identity and function in the plan of God. Vlach (2012:48) contends, “The presence of the true Israelite, Jesus, does not mean that the people of Israel lose their significance. On the contrary, the people of Israel are restored and made what they were supposed to be because of Jesus Christ.”

There are two things which could be said in response to Vlach’s claim. Firstly, suppose we are correct to conclude that Israel typologically points forward to the coming of the true Israel, namely Jesus Christ. In that case, it follows that we must interpret Old Testament ethnic Israel in the same light as other typological images. For example, the author of Hebrews argues that the sacrificial system typologically anticipated the once-for-all sacrifice of the Messiah (Heb 9:11-10:18). Therefore, to continue presenting sacrificial offerings to Yahweh is to deny the sufficiency of the atonement of Christ. In other words, the presence of the true offering does not mean that the original offering lost its significance, but it does not mean that the offering is restored because of Jesus Christ (to follow Vlach’s sentiment). This is because once a type has been fulfilled it is rendered *plaiōō* (declared obsolete; Heb 8:13).

Secondly, the New Testament does not distinguish between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, as Vlach indicates. Paul expressly says that Jesus creates in himself one new man in place of the two (Eph 2:15). This strikes at the heart of dispensationalism, which maintains the belief that Israel and the Church are two distinct people of God each with their own covenant promises (MacArthur 2017:747-48). Through the work of Christ, Gentiles have been incorporated as fellow citizens, receiving an equal status with believing Jews in the one new man, Christ. According to Storms:

Believing Gentiles do not ‘replace’ anyone as recipients of God’s covenant promise. No believing Jew in any age has been either displaced or replaced by a believing Gentile. Rather, believing Gentiles have been admitted into the commonwealth of Israel to share equally in the promised blessings, the two (believing Jew and believing Gentile) now comprising the ‘one new man,’ the Church (2013:188).

4.1. What About Romans 11?

That God still has a distinct, future plan for ethnic Israel is assumed to be supported by Romans 11. However, does the passage provide sufficient evidence for this? Crucial to understanding Paul’s question, “Has God rejected his people?” is a dilemma he introduces several chapters earlier. The passage, therefore, must be set in its proper context within the book as a whole.

That Paul's fellow Israelites have hardened themselves to the gospel causes great sorrow and unceasing anguish for the apostle (9:2). So great is his anguish that the apostle wishes he could be accursed for the sake of his Jewish kin, if this could bring them to salvation (9:3). In the midst of this, the apostle writes, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring" (9:6-7). Paul seems to assert that those Israelites who reject God's way of salvation cannot blame him for their hardheartedness. In the very same chapter, the apostle argues that God is not unrighteous by showing mercy to some and not others, since his mercy is underserved. Moreover, God's absolute sovereignty does not cancel out the Jews' responsibility to turn to him.

Within the context of this passage, Paul then responds to the charge that God cannot be trusted. This allegation is made through the observation that so many Israelites are in unbelief. The dilemma that Paul sees is this: Has this unbelief of the Jews made the word of God null and void? If God cannot be trusted to fulfil his covenant promises to the Old Testament Israel, how can he be trusted to fulfil his promises to the New Testament Church? According to this claim, if God's promise that all ethnic Israelites are to be saved then clearly his purpose has failed and his word is void.

In his defence, Paul denies God ever intended to save all ethnic Israel. His purpose has always been to save a remnant within Israel. Storms (2013:179) identifies them as, "A spiritually elect remnant within the physically ethnic nation." Paul's point, in other words, is that there is an Israel within Israel. When commenting on this passage, John Murray explains:

The purpose of this distinction is to show that the covenantal promise of God did not have respect to Israel after the flesh but to this *true* Israel and that, therefore, the unbelief and rejection of ethnic Israel as a whole in no way interfered with the fulfilment of God's covenant purpose and promise. The word of God, therefore, has not been violated (1965:2:10).

To put it another way, not every person who is a physically ethnic Israelite is a spiritually elect Israelite. Thus, the promise in Genesis 12 did not indicate that all physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be saved or even inherit the blessings entailed by the covenant.

4.1.1. The Lord's Soteriological Intention for Ethnic Israel

Paul begins Romans 11 with a significant pronouncement. Having claimed that ethnic Israel has rejected the Messiah, he asks, "Has God rejected his people?" Remarkably, in answer to his own question, Paul presents proof that God's purpose for Israel is being fulfilled in the present era – himself. The apostle points to the tangible evidence of God's present activity among the Jews – his own salvation. This serves as proof, according to Mounce (1995:214) that, "If God had rejected the entire nation of Israel, then Paul would not have been able to claim a right standing before God."

Paul later affirms this interpretation with the clause, "At the present time there is a remnant" (v5). Even though the promise did not include all physical descendants of Abraham, a remnant of Israel still remains purely because of the grace of God. As Sproul (1994:187) highlights, this remnant was, "A small number of Israelites whom God has chosen, because of his mercy and not because

of what they have done.” Crucial to understanding these verses, one must recognize that the saving of some ought not to be regarded as the deliverance of a pitiful few compared with the fullness to be saved at the end of time (Robertson 2000:174). Paul, here, speaks of a remnant according to the election of grace. The apostle’s hope is based on the idea that a remnant would remain throughout the ages. Although it may appear outwardly as God has cast off the Jews, he is working through some of them.

These verses orientate the reader of Romans to the question of God’s present dealing with ethnic Israel. While it is true that not all Jews currently believe the gospel, Paul highlights it has never been God’s purpose to save the totality of ethnic Israel (Robertson 2000:169). But this is not the end of the apostle’s concern; Paul presents a positive expectation of Israel’s response to the preaching of the gospel. Paul hopes his kinsmen will be grafted in like the Gentiles, provided they do not continue in their unbelief. It is clear, therefore, that this expectation cannot be relegated to some future time.

This present working of the gospel to ethnic Jews is bolstered by the threefold “now” (*nyn*) in Romans 11:30-31. The Gentiles were at one time disobedient but *now* have received mercy. The Jews also have *now* been disobedient and may receive mercy (Robertson 2000:179). These passages warn the casual reader and the careful exegete against assuming that the entirety of Romans 11 deals with Israel’s distinctive future. Since references to the present role of Israel are found throughout the chapter, the soteriological intention of God towards ethnic Jews is a present activity.

4.1.2. The Lord’s Eschatological Intention for Ethnic Israel

Having determined God’s soteriological intention for ethnic Israel, our focus must now turn to God’s eschatological intention for the nation. That God has not cast off his people is generally understood by dispensational theologians to indicate that he intends to deal distinctively with ethnic Israel in the future. This sentiment is reflected in MacArthur (2017:749) who writes, “Though God is working through the international church in his present age...and though the church shares in the blessings of the new covenant...in the future God will again turn his attention to the nation of Israel in fulfilment of his promises to them.”

Paul’s opening question in Romans 11 may be far more radical than initially assumed. The apostle asks: Has God rejected Israel as they relate to his purpose of redemption? Ethnic Israel has, after all, rejected God’s chosen servant; they crucified Jesus – the Messiah. Is it not, therefore, logical to conclude that God will in turn reject ethnic Israel? Surely Paul, at this point in the epistle, would have hastened to assure the Jews that it was only a matter of time until God would establish an earthly kingdom emanating from Jerusalem, thus reassuring them of some distinctive future (Grier 1945:49; Robertson 2000:168) This form of rhetoric may have been – humanly speaking – the most natural.

The answer, according to Paul, is an emphatic “No!” The reason – astonishingly – is because the apostle is himself an Israelite. Robertson helpfully points out:

Paul does not marshal evidence that relates to the future of the Jews. He points instead to the reality of God’s working in the present...The apostle’s answer

deals not with the condition of Israel in the distant future, but with the condition of Israel in the present age (2000:172).

In other words, Paul's answer to the question of God's eschatological intention for ethnic Israel is not to be found in a mass turning of Jews to Christ in the future. Rather, his answer deals with the present condition of Israel in the present era.

Such a conviction serves as the groundwork for Romans 11:12 and 15. A dispensational interpretation of the passage contrasts the rejection of the Jews in this present Church age with their acceptance of the gospel in a consequent era, or after the present age of gospel proclamation has ended. Thus, according to Paas (2018:217) "The passage offers no support to the idea that Israel's period of rejection coincides with the present gospel age, while their acceptance is reserved for a subsequent era."

A second, more likely, interpretation is that the whole cycle should be interpreted as being fulfilled in the present gospel era. Preferring this later interpretation, Robertson (2000:172) believes that the apostle describes a temporal sequence, "The Jewish people reject their Messiah; then Gentiles believe; then the Jews are provoked by jealousy and return in faith; then the world receives even richer blessing as a consequence of this return of the Jews." Likewise, Moo (1996:720) writes, "God imposes a hardening on most of Israel while the Gentiles come into the Messianic salvation, with the Gentiles' salvation leading in turn to Israel's jealousy and her own salvation."

The apostle, it seems, has come to perceive a method in God's way of dealing with both Jews and Gentiles. The rejection of Israel has led to the salvation of the Gentiles. In turn, the salvation of the Gentiles is moving the Jews to jealousy, which – in his view – will bring about their repentance. According to Hoekema, the word fullness (*plērōma*) must be understood in an eschatological sense:

Though Israel has been hardened in its unbelief, this hardening has always been and will continue only to be a partial hardening, never a total hardening. In other words, Israel will continue to turn to the Lord until the Parousia, while at the same time the fullness of the Gentiles is being gathered in (1978:145).

Elsewhere, Robertson (1979:216) adds an interesting note to the matter. He suggests that the complete number of the *remnant* of Israel is identical precisely to the *fullness* of Israel. In light of this, it is not necessary to posit some future date in which the fullness will supersede the remnant.

Finally, Paul warns Gentile believers in verse 25 not to become "conceited" (NIV) or "ignorant" (NKJV) by exalting themselves over unbelieving Jews as this hardening will only be partial until the "fullness of the Gentiles has come in." "Fullness" here must also be understood in the same way: the total number of Gentiles that God intends to save through history. What does Paul mean by this?

Having surveyed Romans 11, the apostle clearly states that God's eschatological plan for the Jewish nation is no different from that of the Gentiles. While these two groups may now respond to the gospel differently, it does not indicate that God has entirely different plans for either. In light of this Grier (1945:49) emphatically says, "The New Testament has nothing to say about a return

of the Jews to their own land, with Christ reigning on a throne at Jerusalem over a kingdom which the Jews will have a national pre-eminence.”

5. Conclusion

Who is the true Israel? Has the Church committed identity theft by claiming to be the True Israel? Biblically speaking, the answer to these questions has never simply been a matter of ancestry. Jesus is the antitypical fulfilment of Israel. More than that, Jesus is the corporate representative of the true Israel. God now recognizes as Israel all who respond in faith and obedience to the presence and will of God revealed in Jesus Christ. If the Church shares in the identity of the true Israel, then the Church is not just an interim arrangement but a people standing in continuity with Old Testament true Israel. Thus, rather than being anti-semitic, Covenant Theology is an attempt to uphold and maintain the continuity of biblical revelation.

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