

## 4 The people of God

The subject of God's chosen people is a difficult one for many Christians. We know that God chose Israel to be his people long ago. How should we regard the nation of Israel nowadays? Does God still regard the Jews as his exclusively special people? Will he once again take up the Jews for his special dealings? Some Christians seem to regard this subject as so important that they spend a considerable amount of time and energy teaching and preaching about it, and following events in the Middle East with all-consuming interest.

This is another major theme which runs throughout the Bible. We need to follow the whole sweep of the subject, being careful to end up with the New Testament's position.

### **God's people in the Old Testament**

The story of God's chosen people begins not with Israel but with Abraham. God called him from Ur, a town not far from Basrah in modern-day southern Iraq. When directing him to go to the land which is to be shown him, God promises: 'I will make you into a great nation . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you' (Genesis 12:2-3). Note that this looks ahead to blessing not just for the nation which would result from Abraham, but for all nations.

Not all of Abraham's offspring experienced the fulfilment of this promise. Isaac was the chosen one, but Ishmael was excluded (Genesis 17:18-21). Jacob was chosen, but not Esau (Malachi 1:2-3). There is a pruning process at work.

Jacob was renamed Israel—'Prince with God' or 'He struggles with God'—when he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:28). The 12 sons of Israel became the 12 tribes of Israel. The whole nation was referred to by God as 'my people the Israelites' (Exodus 3:10).

The nation of Israel was intended to be God's own special people: 'If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5-6). This destiny was not declared for all time unconditionally, but, as we see here, it was dependant on Israel obeying God's voice and keeping the covenant.

Every child born into Israel entered into the covenant; as a sign of this every boy was circumcised at the age of eight days (Genesis 17:10-14).

### **Downsizing**

Suppose that in wartime a special mission is envisaged. Only a special kind of soldier will do to carry this out. So the commanding officer puts a body of troops through various tests, at each stage weeding out those who display inadequacies,

until in the end he is left with a small group of those who fulfil his expectations. This is the theme of a number of stories and films (not to speak of the tale of Gideon in Judges 7). God seems to have carried out a similar kind of process with his people.

Initially the people of God appears to be all the descendants of Abraham. But then the group undergoes a progressive trimming down. We have already seen the scope of the promise reduced as Isaac was selected, but not Ishmael; then Jacob, but not Esau. Then there were those who did not believe, but who died in the wilderness and never saw the promised land (Numbers 14:29–30).

A united kingdom existed not much longer than Solomon, since in the reign of his son Rehoboam the northern ten tribes (then termed 'Israel' or sometimes 'Ephraim') broke away from the southern two tribes of Judah and Benjamin (1 Kings 12:19). The northern kingdom went further and further away from the true worship of God, until they were eventually taken away into exile to the land of Assyria (2 Kings 17:6). There is no record of them ever returning from there. They are the 'lost' tribes of Israel.

The southern kingdom of Judah and Benjamin was known as 'Judah'. It is from this name that the remaining house of Israel is to this day known as the 'Jews'. Not all of Judah were faithful to the Lord. Isaiah speaks of only a remnant returning to God (Isaiah 10:20–2).

Hosea goes even further, and speaks of those who were formerly the people of God being his people no more: 'After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah [Not loved], Gomer had another son. Then the Lord said, "Call him Lo-Ammi [Not my people], for you are not my people, and I am not your God." ' (Hosea 1:8–9).

Such statements show that belonging to God's people was not simply a matter of physical descent. People could be severed from God's people if they did not follow God. Paul sees the remnant in Elijah's time as similar to the remnant today—'chosen by grace' (Romans 11:2–6). The writer to the Hebrews records that those with whom God was angry in the wilderness in the time of Moses 'were not able to enter, because of their unbelief' (Hebrews 3:16–19). Being part of the family of Israel, physically descendants of Abraham, was not enough. They needed to show the family characteristics in their attitude towards God. Without this, they were no longer reckoned part of the people of God.

### **Christ as Israel**

Have you ever thought of Christ as Israel? If the people of God are those who have a special relationship with him and who please him in what they are and what they do, then who better to fill this role than the Son of God himself? There are various passages of scripture which affirm that this is indeed what Christ is.

A figure appearing in various places in Isaiah is 'the servant of the Lord'. Sometimes this one is described as 'Israel, my servant' (Isaiah 41:8–9), as if the whole nation is being addressed. At other times, a single person appears in view: 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my

Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out' (Isaiah 42:1–4).

These are the verses which Matthew sees fulfilled in Christ (Matthew 12:18–21). More is to follow. In Isaiah 52:13, we once more read, 'See, my servant'. The passage about this servant continues through the well-known chapter 53. This is the servant who was 'pierced for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities' (v. 5).

That this passage is about Christ is beyond doubt. When Philip heard the Ethiopian eunuch reading this chapter he 'began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus' (Acts 8:35).

One picture which the prophets use for Israel is that of a grape vine, as in Jeremiah 2:21. The parable in Isaiah 5:1–7 depicts Israel as a vineyard planted by the Lord of hosts, which should have produced the fruit of justice and righteousness. Israel as a whole failed to do this, as both Isaiah and Jeremiah declare. However, Jesus proclaims 'I am the true vine' (John 15:1), showing his claim to be all that Israel should have been.

Christ is regarded as representative of the whole people of God. The clearest passage to demonstrate this is: 'The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say, "and to seeds", meaning many people, but "and to your seed", meaning one person, who is Christ' Galatians 3:16. This is rather daring of Paul, since the word 'seed' in Hebrew and Greek, as in English, does not need to be plural in order to refer to all offspring or issue. However, Paul is convinced that the promise in Genesis 12:7 is properly fulfilled in Christ as the seed of Abraham.

For all these reasons it is apparent that Christ is regarded in the Bible as the true Israel of God.

### **God's people in the New Testament**

You don't have to read far in the New Testament to see that God now has a special people: the church. Most of the epistles were written to local churches. They are those 'loved by God' (Romans 1:7), 'the church of God' (1 Corinthians 1:2), 'the church . . . in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thessalonians 1:1).

It is only natural that the members of the church should be those who are Christians. So what is a Christian? Some consider that a Christian is someone who goes to church; but going to church does not make you a Christian any more than living in a garage makes you a motor-car. Some think that you become a Christian when you are baptised, but in the New Testament people were baptised when they believed (Mark 16:16; Acts 10:47; 16:33–4).

It was in Antioch that the term 'Christian' was first used. It was applied there (perhaps disparagingly) to those who were disciples of Christ (Acts 11:26). Christ's great commission was for his apostles to go out and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). A disciple is a student, a learner. Christians are those ready to learn of Christ.

Many other terms are used to describe Christians. Christians are believers, those who believe in Christ, those who receive him and become children of God: 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12). Christians are those who are saved because they have believed: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:31). These are those who 'call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Christians are the elect, i.e. those chosen by God. Paul endured 'everything for the sake of the elect' (2 Timothy 2:10). The reason he was an apostle was 'for the faith of God's elect' (Titus 1:1). All Christians are called saints, as you will see by looking at every reference to the word 'saint' in the New Testament.

Israelites entered into the covenant at birth, which was confirmed when the boys were circumcised at eight days old. People become Christians by the new birth, being 'born again' (John 3:3). For believers in Christ, 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation' (Galatians 6:15).

### The merging of the streams

It appears, then, that there are two groups of people who are properly described as the people of God. How do these relate to one another? There are various possibilities.

You might suppose that God, seeing the apostasy of Israel, rejected them once and for all, and replaced them with the church. Is this what has happened? Let Paul reply: 'Did God reject his people? By no means!' (Romans 11:1).

Some consider that this present age, the age of the church, is an interlude within the history of Israel. During this time, some would say, 'the prophetic clock has stopped ticking'. God's dealings with his people Israel are suspended, to be resumed when Christ comes again and takes the church to be with himself. Then, they say, God will once again take up his ancient people Israel. We will consider some of these matters more thoroughly in a later chapter. For the moment, suffice it to say that it is extremely hard to find any evidence from clear passages of scripture that this interpretation is true. On the contrary, we find very clear evidence about the relationship of Israel and the church.

The astonishing thing is that the New Testament reveals, not that Israel has been rejected, nor that Israel has been replaced by the church, but that Israel and the church have been fused together into a single whole. This new people of God, fashioned on Christ, is the culmination of God's purposes for his own special people.

Do you find this hard to believe? Then look at Ephesians 2:11-22. Paul speaks to Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) Christians. When they were 'separate from Christ' (v.12), i.e. before they became Christians, they were 'excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise' (v. 12). Now they have been 'brought near through the blood of Christ' (v. 13), they are 'no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people' (v. 19). What can this mean but that

they now possess citizenship in God's Israel? 'The Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 3:6).

In chapters nine to eleven of Romans Paul expresses his concern for 'my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel' (9:3-4). These seem to be the chapters in Romans which are least read. Studies in the book often deal with chapters one to eight, and then resume at chapter twelve. The chapters in between, though not without difficult parts, give invaluable information about the relationship between Israel and the church.

In Romans 11:17-21 Paul uses the picture of an olive tree to represent God's people. Some branches have been 'broken off because of unbelief' (v. 19). The Gentile believers are like a 'wild olive shoot' (v. 17) which has been grafted in to the tree, and 'stand by faith' (v. 20). The lesson to be drawn here is that together Jews and Gentiles who believe comprise the whole of the people of God, in one line of descent from the Israel of the Old Testament. The church does not *replace* Israel: the church, comprising both Jews and Gentiles who believe, *is* now the true Israel of God.

### Who are Jews?

The question which then arises is, what about those who are Jews, who are physically descended from Israel? The clear answer is that physical descent does not guarantee inclusion in God's people. Paul declares that 'Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children' (Romans 9:6-7). As we have seen, branches which by nature formed part of the olive tree may be broken off. This should not be surprising to us. After all, the same thing happened throughout the Old Testament.

The fact is that in the New Testament there are Jews and Jews. There are those who by physical descent count themselves as Jews, and there are those who are counted by God as part of his people because they follow the faith of the patriarchs. So Paul says, 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly' (Romans 2:28). Abraham is 'the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised' (Romans 4:11). 'Those who believe are children of Abraham' (Galatians 3:9). John the Baptist warned people not to trust in the fact that Abraham was their father, since 'out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham' (Matthew 3:9). Jesus confronted people who said, 'Abraham is our father' (John 8:39) and told them, 'You belong to your father, the devil' (v. 44). Physical descent alone is far from being an adequate qualification for membership of God's people.

Then what about those descended from Israel? Are they now all excluded from God's people when all the promises were originally made to them? Paul faces this question at the start of Romans 11. 'Did God reject his people? By no means' (v. 1). He gives evidence for this conclusion: 'I am an Israelite myself . . . God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew' (v. 1). Those among the Jews who believe in

Christ form part of the ancient people of God along with Gentiles who believe. Paul is himself an example of this. 'What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The rest were hardened' (v. 7).

The result is that many Jews rejected their Christ, but when the offer was thrown open to them, many Gentiles gladly received it. Have the Jews lost their opportunity for all time? 'Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!' (Romans 11:11). The Gentiles have taken advantage of the gospel: 'Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious' (v. 11). But the promise still remains of a great ingathering of Jews who will believe in Christ and re-enter into their ancient status as part of the church: 'If their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fulness bring!' (v. 12).

Paul had 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' (Romans 9:2) because so many of his fellow-Jews had excluded themselves from the salvation God provided in Christ. They had every right to be part of God's kingdom (v.4), and even now the gospel is 'the power of God for salvation; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile' (Romans 1:16).

Paul concludes his illustration of the olive tree by explaining that at the moment a hardening has come upon many of the Jews. This will continue until 'the full number of the Gentiles come in. And so all Israel will be saved' (Romans 11:25-6). How are we to interpret the reference to 'all Israel' here? He has already made it clear that there is only one way to be saved—through Christ's salvation. You will find in Romans the clearest exposition of this truth in the whole of the Bible. Can he then suppose that God will change his mind and accept everyone on the basis of physical descent from Israel and the patriarchs? This interpretation falls foul of everything which has been said in Romans, and especially in chapters nine to eleven. It seems to refer to a great ingathering of Jews back into the true people of God which we have seen is now the church. Does it mean that every single physical descendant of Israel will believe in Christ? Such a claim would be extremely surprising. Many have already died in unbelief.

I suggest that what Paul is saying is that when the number of Gentile believers nears completion, then there will be a great ingathering of Jews into the church, and so the whole spiritual Israel of God will be complete—all the true Israel will be saved.

### **God's new people**

Peter takes the words applied to Israel of the Old Testament: 'You will be my treasured possession . . . a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5-6). He then uses these same concepts and applies them to the church: 'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Peter 2:9).

Jesus, speaking to the Jews, said: 'I have other sheep, that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one

flock and one shepherd' (John 10:16).

Jesus' purpose was 'for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one' (John 11:52). Those Jews (the 'circumcised') and Gentiles (the 'uncircumcised') who share the faith of Abraham are brought together in a new manifestation of the people of God, still called 'Israel': 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:15-16)'.

The 'rule' or 'standard' which Paul speaks of here is that keeping the law is irrelevant (neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counting for anything), and that what is all-important is a 'new creation'. This term is used in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul says that 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation'. The Israel of God now consists of those, Jews and Gentiles alike, who have come to new birth by accepting Christ's salvation.

### **Revelation 7**

In Revelation 7:3-8 we find 144,000 of the 'servants of our God' (v. 3) sealed on their foreheads, from 'all the tribes of Israel' (v. 4), 12,000 from each tribe. What are we to make of this multitude?

It is hard to take this passage as referring to literal descendants of Israel. For one thing, the tribe of Dan is omitted. Joseph is included as well as Manasseh, though the tribe of Joseph was for most purposes treated as the two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh.

In Chapter 2 a warning was given to interpret what is unclear in the light of what is clear. The position regarding Israel is clear throughout the New Testament. A general picture emerges of the people of God as being those who are believers in Christ, and of God excluding those who are simply descended physically from Israel but do not have faith. Such a position is shown in the earlier chapters of Revelation, with references to 'those who say they are Jews and are not' (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The church has a spiritual line of descent both from the 12 apostles and from the 12 tribes of Israel. This is shown in Revelation chapter 21, where the gates of the new Jerusalem are inscribed with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (v. 12) and the foundations of the wall have the names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb (v. 14).

So I suggest that the 144,000 in Revelation 7 is to be taken figuratively as a picture of the church. The number itself may be taken to represent the completeness of the church, coupled with the fact that 12 is associated with the people of God. James also addresses his letter 'To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' (James 1:1), though his message is obviously addressed to 'believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ' (James 2:1).

Does this interpretation strike you as credible? If not, can you suggest another interpretation which tallies with the rest of the New Testament?

## **Conclusion**

There is now in God's sight 'no difference between Jew and Gentile' (Romans 10:12). Christ himself has 'made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility' (Ephesians 2:14).

I hope you will agree that there is ample evidence to conclude that there is now one people of God, comprising all, whether Jew or Gentile, who have believed in Christ and have come to God on the basis of his all-atoning sacrifice. Moreover, this new people of God is in true line of (spiritual) descent from Israel in the Old Testament. This fact is so clearly attested in the New Testament that we may use it as another of our pillars. Teaching which denies that there is only one people of God, the church, believers both Jew and Gentile, should be regarded as suspect.