

Israel and the Church: What's the Relationship?

Summary Introduction

For centuries, Christians have wrestled with how Israel and the Church relate in God's plan of redemption. Some have believed that the Church replaced Israel, while others have claimed that Israel remains a separate covenant people alongside the Church. Yet Scripture reveals a more unified and profound truth: God has one covenant people—those in Christ—who together form the true Israel of God. This essay examines the biblical and historical evidence showing that the promises once given to Israel are fulfilled in Christ and extended to all believers, not through physical descent, but through faith.

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Scripture unfolds the single, unified story of God and His people. Central to this divine narrative is the relationship between Israel and the Church—a relationship often misunderstood in modern theology. Many interpretive systems have attempted to explain how the Church fits into God's covenant promises, but two dominant errors have emerged through history: the **replacement view** and the **dual-people view**. Scripture, however, presents a more faithful picture—not replacement, not separation, but **reconstitution** in Christ, the one true Seed of Abraham.

Two Popular Misunderstandings

The first major error is the **replacement view**, which teaches that Israel's rejection of Christ caused God to cast them off and establish an entirely new people—the Church. This idea traces back as early as the second century, when some early church fathers, such as **Justin Martyr** (*Dialogue with Trypho* 11, 123), interpreted Israel's unbelief as final abandonment by God. Later theologians built upon this assumption, leading to what is now called **supersessionism** or replacement theology. Yet the apostle Paul explicitly warned against such arrogance:

- “Hath God cast away his people? God forbid.”
- “Boast not against the branches” (*Romans 11:1–2, 18*).

God's covenant promises were never nullified; rather, they found their fulfillment in Christ and in all who are united to Him by faith.

The opposite error is the **dual-people view**, which claims that Israel and the Church are two distinct groups within God's plan—Israel continuing as His earthly people and the Church as His heavenly people. This framework gained popularity in the 19th century through **John Nelson Darby**, whose dispensational system later influenced the **Scofield Reference Bible (1909)** and shaped much of modern evangelical thought. According to this view, Israel retains a separate covenantal destiny, and the Church is merely a temporary “parenthesis” in God's redemptive plan.

However, Scripture teaches no such division. Paul declares that Christ:

- “Is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken

down the middle wall of partition between us" (*Ephesians 2:14–16*).

- "There is neither Jew nor Greek... for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (*Galatians 3:28*).

Both of these misunderstandings—replacement and dual-people theology—fail to grasp the continuity of God's covenant purposes through Christ. The Bible teaches not replacement or addition, but reconstitution: God's people are one, united by faith and not by fleshly descent.

Reconstitution, Not Replacement or Addition

Before Christ, a dividing wall existed between Israelites and Gentiles. Gentiles were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" and "strangers from the covenants of promise" (*Ephesians 2:12*). Yet even in the Old Testament, salvation was never limited to lineage. Rahab of Jericho and the repentant Ninevites (*Joshua 2:9–11*; *Jonah 3:5–10*) demonstrate that God's mercy extended to all who trusted in Him. Still, Israel's identity in that era was tied to genealogical descent from Jacob, though Scripture repeatedly emphasized the need for circumcision of the heart (*Jeremiah 4:4*; *Romans 2:28–29*).

Over time, however, the idea of a pure Israelite lineage was eroded:

- Judah married the daughter of a Canaanite man and had three sons by her (*Genesis 38:2–3*).
- During the Babylonian exile, intermarriage became widespread (*Ezra 9:2*; *Nehemiah 13:23–27*).
- After the return from Babylon, many could no longer prove their lineage (*Ezra 2:59*; *Nehemiah 7:61*).

- By the 2nd century B.C., **John Hyrcanus** forcibly converted the Idumaeans (Edomites), merging them with the Judeans.

By the time of Christ, the term “Jew” (Greek *Ioudaios*) referred primarily to a **Judean**—a regional or religious identity, not necessarily a pure descendant of Jacob. Thus, when modern writers speak of “ethnic Jews,” the phrase must be understood in its cultural or religious sense rather than its biblical one. The true genealogical Israel—the unmixed descendants of Jacob—no longer exists as a traceable people.

Yet God’s promises were never dependent upon physical descent. They were always designed to be fulfilled in **Christ**, the promised Seed (*Galatians 3:16*), and extended to all who are joined to Him by faith.

The Israel of God

Through Christ’s redemptive work, the old wall of division was broken down. The believing remnant of Israel, together with believing Gentiles, became the one new man—the Church. Paul calls this redeemed body “**the Israel of God**” (*Galatians 6:16*).

- No longer does external circumcision define the people of God, but the inward circumcision of the heart wrought by the Spirit (*Romans 2:28–29*).
- Those once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (*Ephesians 2:13*).

Unbelieving Judeans, symbolized by the branches broken off from the olive tree, may still be grafted back in through faith (*Romans 11:23–24*). But this “grafting in” does not restore an ethnic distinction; it restores individuals to the

one spiritual body, the Church.

Paul longed for this restoration, expressing “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” for his kinsmen according to the flesh (*Romans 9:2–3*). His desire was not for a political nation to be revived, but for his brethren to be reconciled to Christ, the true Vine.

Implications for the Modern Church

Because God’s covenant purposes are fulfilled in Christ, believers must hold a proper attitude toward both history and the modern world.

1. Toward the Jewish People

Christians must never display arrogance or disdain. Paul warns, “Be not high-minded, but fear” (*Romans 11:20*). Salvation remains open to all who believe, regardless of heritage.

2. Toward the Modern State of Israel

Political support for Israel can be a matter of prudence or conscience, but it is not a divine requirement. The oft-quoted promise, “I will bless them that bless thee” (*Genesis 12:3*), applies to those who bless the seed of Abraham—Christ and His Church—not to modern national entities. God’s covenant blessings rest on faith, not geography or ethnicity.

3. Toward God’s Promises

Every promise made to Israel, including the land promise, finds fulfillment in Christ and His body:

- At Sinai, God said, “Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and an holy nation” (*Exodus 19:6*).
- Peter applies this to the Church: “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation” (*1 Peter*

2:9).

- The meek shall inherit not a single territory, but the entire earth (*Psalms 37:11; Matthew 5:5*).

The promise has not been revoked or reassigned—it has been expanded to encompass the **new creation**.

Conclusion: One Covenant People

The Church does not replace Israel, nor does it stand beside Israel as a second people of God. Rather, it **is** Israel—reconstituted, redeemed, and fulfilled in Christ. God's covenant people have always been defined by faith, not by blood. The distinctions of flesh and lineage were temporary shadows pointing to a greater spiritual reality.

In Christ, there is one Shepherd and one flock, one bride, one holy nation.

“For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us” (Ephesians 2:14).
