Understanding the Chosen People: A Biblical Perspective

Introduction

The identity of God's chosen people has undergone significant transformation throughout biblical history. This brief outline will explore key scriptural references and historical contexts regarding the identity of the Herods, the term "Jew," and the implications of Judah's lineage and the development of Judaism.

The Conversion of Gentiles to Judaism

In the book of Esther, we see a pivotal moment when many non-Jews embraced Judaism. Esther 8:17 states:

- "And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them."

This highlights how the Jewish community, empowered by their deliverance, garnered respect and conversion among surrounding peoples. Further emphasizing this inclusivity, Esther 9:27 notes:

- "The Jews ordained and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon **all such as joined themselves unto them**…"

This indicates the acceptance of new adherents to the Jewish community, illustrating a blend of ethnic identities within

the Jewish community.

Judah’s Lineage and Identity

Judah, a key figure in Israel’s history, married a daughter of a Canaanite. This union raises questions about the purity of the Israelite bloodline, as their offspring were not purely of Jacob’s stock. Such complexities in lineage illustrate the multifaceted nature of identity within Israel and challenge the perception of ethnic exclusivity.

The Herods: Edomite Identity

The Herodian dynasty, which ruled during the New Testament era, originated from Edom. Herod the Great, an Idumean (Edomite), converted to Judaism but was not of Israelite descent. This raises concerns about the legitimacy of their claim to Jewish identity and their governance in Judea. The Herods exemplify the intertwining of political power and religious identity in the context of ancient Israel.

The Hasmonean Dynasty and Edomite Conversion

During the Hasmonean dynasty, John Hyrcanus played a pivotal role in the forced conversion of the Edomites (Idumaeans) to Judaism. This act further complicated the understanding of Jewish identity, as many who identified as Jews during this time were of mixed heritage. The historical context of forced conversions illustrates the complexities of faith and ethnicity in the evolving Jewish identity.

The Babylonian Exile and the Development of Judaism

The southern kingdom of Judah was carried away into Babylon around 586 BC, leading to significant shifts in religious practices. During the exile, the Jews faced challenges that contributed to the development of a form of Judaism that diverged from earlier practices.

- Many scholars argue that the emphasis on the **Talmud**, which became central in later Jewish thought, reflected a departure from the Torah as passed down by Moses.
- This period marked the beginning of what some view as a more corrupt form of Judaism, with practices that strayed from original commandments.

As noted in Matthew 15:9 –

- "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

This verse highlights the concern over human traditions overshadowing divine commandments.

The Use of the Term "Jew"

Initially, the tribe of Judah was referred to as Judahites; the term "Jew" first appears in 2 Kings 16:6 –

- "At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drave the Jews from Elath…"

The term "Jew" is derived from the Greek "Iewes," which reflects the evolution of language over time. Importantly, there was no letter "J" in Greek; the pronunciation transitioned to "Iewes," leading to the modern term "Jew."

According to Strong's Concordance, the breakdown for the term used in 2 Kings 16:6 is Yᵉhûwdîy:

- "a Jehudite (i.e. Judaite or Jew), or descendant of Jehudah (i.e. Judah)."

Thus, the term "Jew" is intended to signify someone from the lineage of Judah. However, many labeled as Jews today may not

be true Judahites, as indicated in Revelation 2:9 –

- "I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."

This verse underscores the contention regarding identity and authenticity among those claiming to be Jews.

Spiritual Israel and the New Covenant

The New Testament expands the definition of God's chosen people. In Galatians 3:28-29, it is emphasized that in Christ, all believers are heirs to the promise, regardless of ethnicity.

- "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Furthermore, 1 Peter 2:9 states:

- "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation…"

This reinforces the notion that faith in Christ redefines who is included in God's chosen people. So, one final question that we also need to ask: is there biblical significance to the establishment of Israel in 1948?

Review

The evolution of the term "Jew," along with the historical contexts of Judah's lineage, the Herodian dynasty, the Babylonian exile, and the forced conversion of the Edomites,

illustrates the complex identity of God's chosen people. The development of Judaism during and after the Babylonian exile, particularly the shift towards Talmudic traditions, indicates a departure from the original practices established by Moses. Understanding these nuances is essential for a comprehensive view of biblical narratives and the inclusivity of the Gospel.

The New Covenant: Fulfilled in Christ, Offered to All

In **Jeremiah 31:31-32**, the prophet speaks of a new covenant that God will establish with the houses of Israel and Judah:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord."

This promise of a new covenant is significant in biblical theology because it points directly to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and the work He accomplished on the cross. This new covenant is not a mere extension of the old Mosaic covenant but a complete fulfillment and transformation of it. As the passage states, it is "not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers," showing that the old way of relating to God through the law was inadequate to deal with human sinfulness.

Christ as the Fulfillment of the New Covenant

The New Testament reveals that this new covenant was indeed fulfilled in Christ. Jesus Himself said at the Last Supper:

"This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for

you."
— **Luke 22:20**

The word "testament" here is synonymous with "covenant," and Christ's sacrificial death on the cross established the new covenant spoken of by Jeremiah. According to **Strong's Concordance**, the Greek word for "testament" is **diathēkē (διαθήκη)**, which means "a disposition," or more specifically "a contract" or "devisory will." This term, used in **Hebrews 9:20**, signifies a formal arrangement or agreement between God and humanity. The use of this word highlights that the new covenant is not just a spiritual renewal but a binding, legal contract where Christ's blood is the seal.

This covenant, which Christ initiated, provides the ultimate atonement for sin, replacing the repetitive sacrifices under the old covenant with His once-for-all sacrifice. **Hebrews 9:12** emphasizes the eternal nature of this redemption:

"Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us."

This verse makes it clear that the old covenant, based on animal sacrifices, was temporary and could not permanently remove sin. However, Christ's sacrifice, as the mediator of the new covenant, offers eternal redemption.

Hebrews 9:15 further clarifies:

"And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance."

This demonstrates that Christ's death brought redemption not only for those under the old covenant but for all who accept Him. The "eternal inheritance" promised is now accessible through the new covenant, which was sealed by the blood of

Christ. It is this "contract" between God and humanity, mediated by Christ, that offers forgiveness and eternal life.

Christ's Atonement: Available to All

This covenant is not limited to ethnic Israel but extends to all mankind. **As the Apostle Paul wrote**:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."
— **Romans 1:16**

Christ's death and resurrection offer salvation to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. Ethnic or cultural distinctions no longer define who is part of God's people; rather, it is faith in Christ that brings one into the family of God.

Israel's Rejection of Christ and the New Covenant

It is also clear from scripture that the majority of Israel, particularly its religious leaders, rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah:

"He came unto his own, and his own received him not."
— **John 1:11**

This rejection of Christ meant that Israel, as a nation, did not enter into the new covenant established by His blood. The Jews' reliance on their identity as the physical descendants of Abraham, as well as their adherence to the Mosaic Law, did not grant them righteousness before God. Paul addresses this issue:

"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, ***They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God****:*[1] *but the children of the promise are counted for the*

seed."
— **Romans 9:6-8**

Paul is making the argument that physical descent from Abraham does not automatically make someone part of the true Israel. The true children of God are those who have accepted Christ by faith, the "children of the promise." This shows that the people of God are no longer determined by ethnicity or adherence to the old covenant, but by faith in Christ.

The New People of God: Jew and Gentile United in Christ

The New Testament emphasizes that the church—composed of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ—now constitutes the people of God. **Paul explains this beautifully in his letter to the Ephesians**:

"Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ."
— **Ephesians 2:11-13**

Here, Paul speaks to Gentile believers, saying that though they were once "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," they have now been brought near to God through Christ's sacrifice. This unity in Christ transcends all ethnic and cultural distinctions, making both Jews and Gentiles members of the same spiritual family.

Paul further writes:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in

Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."
— **Galatians 3:28-29**

The promise that was once confined to the physical descendants of Abraham is now extended to all who are in Christ, regardless of their ethnic background. This is the heart of the new covenant: all who place their faith in Jesus Christ are counted as God's chosen people.

Ethnic Israel and the Rejection of Christ

For those who claim to be Jews today, if they reject Christ, they are not truly God's people according to the New Covenant. As Jesus said to the religious leaders of His day:

"If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham."
— **John 8:39-40**

In rejecting Christ, they rejected the very fulfillment of the promises made to their forefathers. Paul laments this:

"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."
— **Romans 10:1-3**

While Israel may have zeal for God, their failure to recognize Christ as the Messiah has led them to miss the true righteousness that comes through faith in Him. Therefore, it is not ethnic heritage that determines one's relationship with God, but faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: The True Children of God

In conclusion, the new covenant prophesied in **Jeremiah 31** was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice on the cross atoned for the sins of Israel and all humanity. As **Hebrews 9** explains, Christ's atoning death was the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that brings eternal redemption, replacing the temporary sacrifices of the old covenant. The Greek word **diathkē**, meaning "contract" or "covenant," emphasizes that this new covenant is a binding agreement, sealed by Christ's blood. While Israel as a nation largely rejected Christ, this new covenant is extended to both Jews and Gentiles. The true children of God are those who accept Christ by faith, not those who rely on their ethnic heritage or adherence to the old covenant. The old covenant has been done away with, and now all must come to Christ to be counted as God's people. Ethnic identity, including being a "Jew," holds no advantage apart from faith in Christ; those who reject Christ are just as lost as anyone else. Only in Christ are we made heirs of the promise and children of God.