Who is Israel?

Introduction

For centuries, the identity of **Israel** has been a focal point of biblical interpretation, theological debate, and geopolitical discussion. Many Christians today, particularly those influenced by **dispensationalism** and the **Scofield futurist perspective**, hold to the belief that Israel—defined as the modern nation-state—has a distinct and future role in God's prophetic plan. This belief asserts that during a **seven-year tribulation**, God will once again "deal with Israel," leading to a mass salvation of **ethnic Jews**. However, this view raises fundamental questions: **Who is Israel? Is the modern state of Israel the same as the biblical Israel? And does God still have a separate plan for ethnic Israel apart from the Church?**

A proper understanding of Israel requires an examination from **three perspectives: biblical, historical, and modern**. The **biblical** perspective identifies Israel as the name given to Jacob and his descendants, later forming the twelve tribes and the Old Covenant nation. The **historical** perspective, particularly in the New Testament, reveals a transition—where Israel is no longer defined by ethnicity but by **faith in Christ**. Paul makes it clear that **"they are not all Israel, which are of Israel"** (Romans 9:6), showing that true Israel consists of those who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. The **modern** perspective, which equates today's political state of Israel with the biblical nation, **fails to recognize the historical discontinuity**—especially since no pure genetic line from Jacob can be verified today, and modern Judaism is not the same as the Old Testament faith.

In addition to the misidentification of Israel, there is a **common misunderstanding about the religious system of Old**

Testament Israel. Many assume that **Judaism** was the religion of ancient Israel, but this is not accurate. The faith of Israel in the Old Testament was simply the **covenant worship of Yahweh**, governed by the **Torah (Law of Moses), the priesthood, sacrifices, and temple worship**. The term **Judaism** did not even exist during Old Testament times but emerged later, particularly during the post-exilic and Maccabean periods. By the time of Christ, **Judaism had evolved into a system heavily influenced by Pharisaic traditions**, distinct from the covenantal worship established under Moses.

These two topics—the true identity of Israel and the distinction between biblical worship and Judaism—are deeply intertwined. Misunderstanding either leads to **serious theological errors**, such as the belief that **ethnic Jews must inherit God's promises apart from Christ** or that **Judaism is the continuation of Old Testament faith**. In reality, the **true Israel today** is not an ethnic or political entity, but the body of believers—**Jew and Gentile—who have faith in Christ**. Likewise, the **faith of the Old Testament Israelites was not Judaism**, but the covenant relationship God established through Moses, which has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Understanding these distinctions is **crucial** in addressing **bad theology** that has permeated much of the evangelical world. It is not a question of mere semantics or historical curiosity—this issue impacts **how Christians interpret prophecy, salvation, and God's plan for humanity**. The truth of **God's redemptive work in Christ** must not be overshadowed by man-made theological systems that distort the true meaning of Israel and the Church.

Biblical Israel: The Man and the Nation

1. **Jacob, Renamed Israel**
    - The name "Israel" was first given to **Jacob**, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, after he

wrestled with an angel at Peniel (Genesis 32:28). God told him, *"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed."*

- Jacob's **12 sons** became the patriarchs of the **12 tribes of Israel**.

2. **The Physical Nation of Israel**
    - Jacob's descendants became a **nation** that God delivered from Egypt through Moses, established in the Promised Land under Joshua, and later ruled by kings such as David and Solomon.
    - Israel was eventually divided into two kingdoms:
        - **Northern Kingdom (Israel/Ephraim)** – conquered by Assyria (722 BC).
        - **Southern Kingdom (Judah)** – conquered by Babylon (586 BC).

3. **The Remnant and the Coming of Christ**
    - The **Old Testament prophets** spoke of a **remnant** that would remain faithful.
    - Jesus Christ came as the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, but many in Israel rejected Him (John 1:11).

Historical Israel: The True Israel of God in the New Testament

1. **Jesus as the True Israel**
    - Jesus fulfilled what Israel failed to do. He is the **true vine** (John 15:1) and the **servant of the Lord** (Isaiah 49:3-6).

- Through **His death and resurrection**, Jesus established a **new covenant** (Luke 22:20), and the people of God are no longer defined by physical descent.

2. **Believers as Spiritual Israel**
   - **Romans 9:6-8** – *"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children…"*
   - **Galatians 3:7, 3:28-29** – *"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham… And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*
   - **Galatians 6:16** – *"And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God."*
   - Paul makes it clear that **the true Israel is not defined by physical lineage but by faith in Christ**.

Modern Israel: The Political State vs. the True Israel Today

1. **Not the Modern Political State**
   - The current nation of **Israel (founded in 1948)** is a geopolitical entity, not the biblical covenant people of God.
   - Many Christians mistakenly equate **modern Zionism with biblical prophecy**, but biblical Israel is **not about a physical land or ethnic identity**; it is about a **people of faith in Christ**.

2. **The Church as the Fulfillment of Israel**
    - The **church (Jew and Gentile in Christ)** is the **continuation and fulfillment** of Israel.
    - **Ephesians 2:14-16** – *"For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us… that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross."*
    - The **Old Covenant nation served its purpose**, and now **God's people are those who trust in Christ**.

Conclusion: Israel is Not an Ethnic or Political Entity, But a People of Faith

- **Old Testament Israel** was the nation from **Jacob's descendants**.
- **Christ is the fulfillment of Israel's purpose**.
- **True Israel today** is the body of believers—both Jew and Gentile—who have faith in Christ.
- **Physical lineage does not determine one's place in God's covenant**; faith in Jesus Christ does.

The fundamental problem that reveals the weaknesses in dispensationalist theology concerning modern Israel and end-time prophecy becomes evident through careful examination. This is particularly true regarding the Scofield futurist (dispensationalist) assertion that God will interact with "Israel" during a forthcoming seven-year tribulation. This perspective presupposes that the contemporary political state of Israel equates to the biblical Israel, a claim that has been critically analyzed and challenged here at Dare To Think. The following bullet-point synopsis provides a breakdown of what's been addressed on the question of "Who is Israel?",

which has been evaluated using scripture and looking at the historical record to see if there is legitimacy of today's Israel.

1. The False Equating of Modern Israel with Biblical Israel

Evangelical Christians who follow **dispensationalist theology** have **misinterpreted scripture** by:

- **Equating modern Jews with biblical Israelites** (even though there is no clear genetic continuity to Jacob).
- **Equating the modern state of Israel (founded in 1948) with the covenant nation of the Old Testament**.
- **Assuming that a future "restoration" of Israel means national salvation for ethnic Jews** rather than the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ.

2. The Reality: Ethnic Israel as a Pure Lineage No Longer Exists

- In the Old Testament, **to be "Israel" meant to be a direct descendant of Jacob**.
- But after **centuries of mixing**, **dispersions** (Assyrian exile, Babylonian exile), and **conversions** (like the Edomites under John Hyrcanus), the idea of a **pure ethnic Israelite people is no longer valid**.
- This means that **modern people who identify as "Jewish" today are not necessarily Israelites of Jacob's lineage**.
- The people who practice **Judaism** today follow a religion that is **not the biblical faith of the Old Testament Israelites**, but rather **a post-Babylonian tradition** influenced by the Talmud, Pharisaic legalism, and later rabbinic teachings.

So, if **ethnic Israel no longer exists in a pure form**, and **Judaism is not the Old Testament faith**, how can dispensationalists claim that God will "save Israel" in the end times?

3. Dispensationalism's Error: Misunderstanding Who Is "Israel"

Dispensationalists **misuse** scriptures like **Romans 11:26 ("And so all Israel shall be saved")** to claim that God will bring mass salvation to ethnic Jews in the end times.

However, when we read **Romans 9:6-8**, Paul already defines **who "Israel" truly is**:

- *"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel."* (Romans 9:6)
- *"Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called."* (Romans 9:7)
- *"That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed."* (Romans 9:8)

Paul is crystal clear:

- Just because someone is **physically descended** from Abraham does **not** mean they are truly **Israel**.
- **"Children of the promise" (believers in Christ) are the true Israel.**
- This means that **the Church (Jew and Gentile in Christ) is the Israel that will be saved**—not a physical nation.

4. The Fulfillment of Israel is in Christ

and the Church

- The **true Israel** is **those who follow Christ**, not those who claim genetic descent from Jacob.
- **Galatians 3:29** – *"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."*
- **Ephesians 2:14-16** – Jew and Gentile believers are **one new man in Christ**.
- The **land promises** made to Israel in the Old Testament were **fulfilled** (Joshua 21:43-45) and are no longer relevant in the New Covenant.

5. The End-Time Israel is the Body of Christ, Not a Political Nation

- The **end-times focus** is **not on modern Israel**, but on **the Church, the true Israel of God**.
- Christ's **kingdom is not of this world** (John 18:36), meaning that the physical land of Israel is **not part of God's final redemptive plan**.
- **Revelation 7** speaks of the 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, but these are **symbolic of the redeemed**, not literal ethnic Jews.

Conclusion: Dispensationalism is Built on a False Premise

- Modern **Israel is not biblical Israel**.
- Modern **Judaism is not the Old Testament faith**.
- **There is no pure ethnic lineage from Jacob today**.
- The **Church (Jew and Gentile in Christ) is the true Israel**.
- The **7-year tribulation and future salvation of ethnic Israel is a false doctrine**.

The real **“Israel of God”** (Galatians 6:16) is **those who have faith in Christ**, and any theology that **separates Israel and the Church** is fundamentally flawed.

The inquiry “Who is Israel?” might seem straightforward at first glance; however, a deeper examination reveals complexities that are often overlooked in both scriptural readings and historical analyses related to this topic.

Who Are Ethnic Jews?

What is the answer to the question—**who are ethnic Jews today**? This is a complex subject because **the term “Jew” has changed in meaning over time** and does not necessarily refer to a **pure-blooded descendant of Judah**.

1. The Original “Judahites” (Judaites)

- The **term “Jew” (from the Greek *Ioudaios*)** originally referred to the **tribe of Judah** or those from the **southern kingdom of Judah** after the split of Israel (1 Kings 12).
- In the Old Testament, people from **Judah** (along with remnants of Benjamin and Levi) were called **Judahites (Yehudim)**.
- After the **Babylonian exile**, the term **Yehudim** (Jews) was used for those who returned to Judea, regardless of tribal identity.

2. The Mixing of Peoples: No Pure Lineage

Over time, **ethnic purity was lost** due to:

1. **Assyrian Exile (722 BC)** – The **northern ten tribes** were

scattered and mixed with Gentiles.

2. **Babylonian Exile (586 BC)** – Many Judahites were exiled, and others remained, mixing with surrounding peoples.
3. **The Hasmonean Dynasty (2nd Century BC)** –
    - **John Hyrcanus (Maccabean ruler) forcibly converted Edomites (Idumaeans) to Judaism** and incorporated them into the nation.
    - **Herod the Great was an Edomite**, showing how non-Israelites became identified as "Jews."

4. **Roman Period (1st Century AD)** – By the time of Jesus, "Jew" could refer to **those living in Judea, those practicing the Jewish religion, or descendants of Abraham**—but there was **no guarantee of tribal purity**.

3. Who Are the Jews Today?

- Modern Jews **do not** have a direct, verifiable ethnic connection to Judah, and certainly not to all twelve tribes.
- Many **Ashkenazi Jews** (who make up the majority today) have **European and Khazar lineage**, meaning they are not ethnically Israelite but adopted Jewish identity over time.
- **Sephardic Jews** and **Mizrahi Jews** have Middle Eastern ancestry but are still a **mixed people** due to centuries of dispersion and intermarriage.
- **DNA studies confirm** that modern Jews are a mixture of various ethnic groups and **cannot be traced directly to biblical Israel**.

4. The Big Problem for Dispensationalists

- If **modern Jews are not purely from Judah (or even**

Israelite at all in some cases), how can they claim the **land promises** or expect a **future national salvation** as dispensationalists teach?

- Even in Jesus' time, He said to the Pharisees:
  "I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me" (John 8:37).
  But then He clarifies that **spiritual descent, not physical lineage, is what matters**:
  "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham" (John 8:39).
- This shows that **Jesus rejected ethnic claims to salvation and instead pointed to faith in Him**.

5. Conclusion: "Jews" Today Are a Mixed People

- The term **"Jew" today is more of a cultural, religious, and national identity** than an actual ethnic lineage to Judah.
- Many so-called "Jews" **have no genetic relation to Jacob at all**.
- The **true Israel of God** is **not a physical people or nation but those who are in Christ** (Galatians 6:16).
- **Judahites of the Old Testament are not the same as the Jews of today**, and thus, dispensational claims about Israel's future restoration are based on a false assumption.
