

## Is The Church the True Israel?

<p> The question being asked here is whether the early church saw itself as the true Israel? It should be noted that by this we are not speaking of ‘spiritual Israel’, except in so far as Israel were supposed to be spiritual, or of a parallel Israel, but as to whether they saw themselves as actually being the continuation of the real Israel whom God had promised to bless.

<p> In this regard the first thing we should note is that Jesus spoke to His disciples of ‘building His congregation/church (ekklesia)’ (Matthew 16.18). Now the Greek Old Testament often used ekklesia to refer to the congregation of Israel when translating the Pentateuch (see Deuteronomy 4.10; 9.10; 18.16; 23.3, 8; 32.1 ). This suggests then that Jesus was here thinking in terms of building the true congregation of Israel. It thus ties in with John 15.1-6 where He calls Himself the true vine, in contrast with old Israel, the false vine.

<p> While this did come after He had said that He had come only to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’, that is those of Israel who were as sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 10.6; 15.24 compare 9.36 and see Jeremiah 50.6), it also followed the time when His thinking clearly took a new turn following His dealings with the Syro-phoenician woman, when He began a ministry in more specifically Gentile territory. So while at the core of His ‘congregation’ were to be those Jews who responded to His teaching and became His followers, He undoubtedly envisaged a wider outreach.

<p> There is therefore good reason for thinking that in His mind the ‘congregation/church’ equates with the true ‘Israel’, the Israel within Israel (Romans 9.6), as indeed it did in the Greek translations of the Old Testament where ‘the congregation/assembly of Israel’, which was finally composed of all who responded to the covenant, was translated as ‘the church (ekklesia) of Israel’. That being so we may then see it as indicating that He was now intending to found a new Israel, which it later turned out would include Gentiles. Indeed this was the very basis on which the early believers called themselves ‘the church/congregation’, that is, ‘the congregation of the new Israel’, and while they were at first made up mainly of Jews and proselytes, which was all that the Apostles were expecting until God forcibly interrupted them, this gradually developed into including both Jews and Gentiles.

<p> Indeed in Acts 4.27-28 Luke demonstrates quite clearly that the old unbelieving Israel is no longer, after the resurrection, the true Israel, for we read, "For in truth in this city against your holy Servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles *and the peoples of Israel*, were gathered together, to do whatever your hand and your council foreordained to come about." Note the four ‘items’ mentioned, the Gentiles, the peoples of Israel, ‘King’ (Tetrarch) Herod and Pontius Pilate the ruler. And note that these words follow as an explanation of a quotation from Psalm 2.1 in Acts 4.25- 26, which is as follows:

‘Why did *the Gentiles* rage,  
And *the peoples* imagine vain things,  
The *kings* of the earth set themselves,  
And *the rulers* were gathered together,  
Against the Lord and against His anointed --.’

<p> The important point to note here is that ‘the peoples’ who imagined vain things, who in the original Psalm were nations who were enemies of Israel, have now become in Acts ‘the peoples of Israel’. Thus the ‘peoples of Israel’ who were opposing the Apostles and refusing to

believe are here seen as the enemy of God and His Anointed, and of His people. It is a clear indication that old unbelieving Israel was now seen as numbered by God among the nations, and that that part of Israel which had believed in Christ were seen as the true Israel. As Jesus had said to Israel, 'the Kingly Rule of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing its fruits' (Matthew 21.43). Thus the King now has a new people of Israel to guard and watch over.

<p> The same idea is found in John 15.1-6. The false vine (the old Israel - Isaiah 5.1-7) has been cut down and replaced by the true vine of 'Christ at one with His people' (John 15.1-6; Ephesians 2.11-22). Here Jesus, and those who abide in Him (the church/congregation), are the new Israel. The old unbelieving part of Israel has been cut off (John 15.6) and replaced by all those who come to Jesus and abide in Jesus, that is both believing Jews and believing Gentiles (Romans 11.17-28), who together with Jesus form the true Vine by becoming its 'branches'.

<p> The new Israel, the 'Israel of God', thus sprang from Jesus. And it was He Who established its new leaders who would 'rule over ('judge') the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matthew 19.28; Luke 22.30). Here 'the twelve tribes of Israel' refers to all who will come to believe in Jesus through His word, and the initial, if not the complete fulfilment, of this promise occurred in Acts. This appointment of His Apostles to rule 'over the tribes of Israel' was not intended to divide the world into two parts, consisting of Jew and Gentile, with the two parts seen as separate, and with Israel under the Apostles, while the Gentiles were under other rulers, but as describing a united Christian 'congregation' under the Apostles. Thus those over whom they 'ruled' would be 'the true Israel' which would include both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. These would thus become the true Israel.

<p> This true Israel was founded on believing Jews. The Apostles were Jews, and were to be the foundation of the new Israel which incorporated Gentiles within it (Ephesians 2.20; Revelation 21.14). And initially all its first foundation members were Jews. Then as it spread it first did so among Jews until there were 'about five thousand' Jewish males who were believers to say nothing of women and children (Acts 4.4). Then it spread throughout all Judaea, and then through the synagogues of 'the world', so that soon there were a multitude of Jews who were Christians. Here then was the initial true Israel, a new Israel within Israel.

<p> But then God revealed that He had a more expanded purpose for it. Proselytes (Gentile converts) and God-fearers (Gentile adherents to the synagogues), people who were already seen as connected with Israel, began to join and they also became branches of the true vine (John 15.1-6) and were grafted into the olive tree (Romans 11.17-28). They became 'fellow-citizens' with the Jewish believers ('the saints', a regular Old Testament name for true Israelites who were seen as true believers). They became members of the 'household of God'. (Ephesians 2.11-22). And so the new Israel sprang up, following the same pattern as the old, and incorporating believing Jews and believing Gentiles. That is why Paul could describe the new church as 'the Israel of God' (Galatians 6.16), because both Jews and Gentiles were now 'the seed of Abraham' (Galatians 3.29).

<p> Those who deny that the church is Israel and still equate Israel with the Jews must in fact see all these believing Jews as cut off from Israel (as the Jews in fact in time did). For by the late 1st century AD, the Israel for which those who deny that the church is Israel contend, was an Israel made up only of Jews who did not see Christian Jews as belonging to Israel. As far as they were concerned Christian Jews were cut off from Israel. And in the same way believing Jews who followed Paul's teaching saw fellow Jews who did not believe as no longer being true Israel. They in turn saw the unbelieving Jews as cut off from Israel. As Paul puts it, 'they are not all Israel who are Israel' (Romans 9.6).

<p> For the new Israel now saw themselves as the true Israel. They saw themselves as the 'Israel of God' (Galatians 6.16). And that is why Paul stresses to the Gentile Christians in Ephesians 2.11-22; Romans 11.17-28 that they are now a part of the new Israel having been made one with the true people of God in Jesus Christ. In order to consider all this in more detail let us look back in history.

<p> When Abraham entered the land of Canaan having been called there by God he was promised that in him all the world would be blessed, and this was later also promised to his seed (Genesis 12.3;18.18; 22.18; 26.4; 28.14). But Abraham did not enter the land alone. In Genesis 14 we are told that he had three hundred and eighteen fighting men 'born in his house', in other words born to servants, camp followers and slaves. One of his own slave wives was an Egyptian (Genesis 16) and his steward was probably Syrian, a Damascene (Genesis 15.2). Thus Abraham was patriarch over a family tribe, all of whom with him inherited the promises, *and they came from a number of different nationalities (Genesis 15.2; 16.1)*. Only a small proportion were actually descended from Abraham directly.

<p> From Abraham came Isaac through whom the most basic promises were to be fulfilled, for God said, 'in Isaac shall your seed be called' (Genesis 21.12; Romans 9.7; see also Genesis 26.3-5). Thus the seed of Ishmael, who was himself the seed of Abraham, while enjoying promises from God, were excluded from the major line of promises. While prospering, they would not be the people through whom the whole world would be blessed. And this was also true of Abraham's later sons born to Keturah. Thus the large part of Abraham's descendants were at this stage already cut off from the full Abrahamic promises. As Paul puts it, as we have seen, 'In Isaac will your seed be called' (Romans 9.7).

<p> Jacob, who was renamed Israel, was born of Isaac, and it was to him that the future lordship of people and nations was seen as passed on (Genesis 27.29) and from his twelve sons came the twelve tribes of the 'children of Israel'. But as with Abraham these twelve tribes would include retainers, servants and slaves. The 'households' that moved to Egypt would include such servants and slaves. The 'seventy' were accompanied by wives, retainers, and their children. So the 'children of Israel' even at this stage would include people from many peoples and nations. They included Jacob/Israel's own descendants and their wives, together with their servants and retainers, and their wives and children, 'many 'born in their house' but not directly their seed (Genesis 15.3). Israel was already a conglomerate people. Even at the beginning they were not all literally descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Most were rather 'adopted' into the family tribe.

<p> When eventually after hundreds of years they left Egypt they were then joined by a 'mixed multitude' from many nations, who with them had been enslaved in Egypt, and these joined with them in their flight (Exodus 12.38). So to the already mixed people of Israel were united with the mixed multitude and became even more of a mixture. At Sinai these were all joined within the covenant and became 'children of Israel', and when they entered the land all their males were circumcised as true Israelites (Joshua 5.8). Among these was an 'Ethiopian' (Cushite) woman who became Moses' wife (Numbers 12.1). Thus we discover that 'Israel' from its commencement was an international community. Indeed it was made clear from the beginning that any who wanted to do so could join Israel and become an Israelite by submission to the covenant and by being circumcised (Exodus 12.48-49). Membership of the people of God was thus from the beginning to be open to all nations by submission to God through the covenant. And these all then connected themselves with one of the tribes of Israel, were absorbed into them, and began to trace their ancestry back to Abraham and Jacob even though they were not true born, and still retained an identifying appellation such as, for example, 'Uriah the Hittite'. (Whether Uriah was one such we do not know, although we think it extremely probable. But there must certainly have been many who did it). And even while

**Moses was alive it proved necessary to make regulations as to who could enter the assembly or congregation of the Lord, and at what stage people of different nations could enter it (Deuteronomy 23.1-8), so that they could then become Israelites.**

**<p> That this was carried out in practise is evidenced by the numerous Israelites who bore a foreign name, consider for example ‘Uriah the Hittite’ (2 Samuel 11) and many of the mighty men of David (2 Samuel 23.8-28). These latter were so close to David that it is inconceivable that some at least did not become true members of the covenant by submitting to the covenant and being circumcised when it was clearly open to them through the Law. Later again it became the practise in Israel, in accordance with Exodus 12. 48-49, for anyone who ‘converted’ to Israel and began to believe in the God of Israel, to be received into ‘Israel’ on equal terms with the true-born, and that by circumcision and submission to the covenant. These were later called ‘proselytes’. In contrast people also left Israel by desertion, and by not bringing their children within the covenant, when for example they went abroad or were exiled. These were then ‘cut off from Israel’, as were deep sinners. ‘Israel’ was therefore always a fluid concept, and was, at least purportedly, composed of all who submitted to the covenant.**

**<p> When Jesus came His initial purpose was to call back to God ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matthew 10.6), those in Israel who were seeking a Shepherd, and in the main for the first part, with exceptions (e.g. John 4), He limited His ministry to Jews. But notice that those Jews who would not listen to His disciples were to be treated like Gentiles. The disciples were to shake their dust off their feet (Matthew 10.14). So even during Jesus' ministry there was a cutting off as well as a welcoming. After His dealings with the Syro-phoenician woman, He appears to have expanded His thinking, or His approach, further and to have moved into more Gentile territory, and later He declared that there were other sheep that He would also call and they would be one flock with Israel (John 10.16).**

**<p> Thus when the Gospel began to reach out to the Gentiles those converted were welcomed as part of the one flock. The question that arose then was, ‘did they need to be circumcised in order to become members of the new Israel?’ Was a special proselytisation necessary, as with proselytes to old Israel, which was to be evidenced by circumcision? That was what the circumcision controversy was all about. The Judaisers said 'yes' and Paul said 'No'. And the question was only asked because all saw these new converts as becoming a part of Israel. If they had not seen these Gentiles as becoming a part of Israel there would have been no controversy. There would have been no need for circumcision. It was only because they were seen as becoming proselyte Israelites that the problem arose. That is why Paul's argument was never that circumcision was not necessary because they were not becoming Israel. He indeed accepted that they would become members of Israel. But rather he argues that circumcision was no longer necessary because all who were in Christ were circumcised with the circumcision of Christ. They were already circumcised by faith. They had the circumcision of the heart, and were circumcised with the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2.11), and therefore did not need to be circumcised again.**

**<p> Thus in Romans 11.17-24 he speaks clearly of converted Gentiles being ‘grafted into the olive tree’ through faith, and of Israelites being broken off through unbelief, to be welcomed again if they repent and come to Christ. Whatever we therefore actually see the olive tree as representing, it is quite clear that it does speak of those who are cut off because they do not believe, and of those who are ingrafted because they do believe (precisely as it was to happen with Israel), and this in the context of Israel being saved or not. But the breaking off or casting off of Israelites in the Old Testament was always an indication of being cut off from Israel. Thus we must see the olive tree as, like the true vine, signifying all who are now included within the promises, that is the true Israel, with spurious elements being cut off**

because they are not really a part of them, while new members are grafted in. The difficulty lies in the simplicity of the illustration which like all illustrations cannot cover every point.

<p> Furthermore it should be noted that 'olive tree' is the very name by which YHWH called Israel for in Jeremiah 11.16 we read, 'YHWH called your name 'an olive tree, green, beautiful and with luscious fruit'. The importance of this comes out in that those who are actually said to be 'called by name' by YHWH are very few (Adam, Jacob/Israel and Magormissabib, the last being an indication of the judgment that was coming on him in Jeremiah 20.3). So, as Paul knew, 'olive tree' was YHWH's name for the true Israel.

<p> This then raises an interesting question. If unbelieving Israel can be cut off from the olive tree, what in Paul's mind is the olive tree? For this illustration suggests that unbelieving Israel had been members of the olive tree, and if the olive tree is true Israel then does that mean that they had once been members of true Israel?

<p> Exactly the same question could be posed about the branches of the vine which are pruned from the vine in John 15.1-6 and are burned in the fire. They too 'appear' to have been members of the true vine. And the same could be said of those caught into the net of the Kingly Rule of Heaven who are finally ejected and brought into judgment (Matthew 13.47-50). They too 'appear' to have been a part of the Kingly Rule of God. Thus the olive tree, the true Vine and the Kingly Rule of Heaven are all seen as seeming to contain false members. On this basis then none of them could surely be the true Israel?

<p> This argument, however, is clearly false. For the true Vine is Jesus Himself. Thus the fact that some can be cut off from the true Vine hardly means that the true vine is to be seen as partly a false vine. The illustration simply indicates that they should never have been there in the first place. They were spurious. Outwardly they may have appeared to have been members of the true vine, but inwardly they were not. The same can be said to apply to the Kingly Rule of God. Those who were gathered into the net of the Kingly Rule of God divide up into 'children of the Kingly Rule' and 'children of the Evil One'. The latter were never thus children of the Kingly Rule. They were never a true part of the Kingly Rule. They were children of the Evil One all the time. Indeed their very behaviour revealed that they were not under God's Kingly Rule. In the same way then the olive tree is an Israel composed of true believers, and is such that unbelieving Jews are cut off because essentially they are proved not to have been a part of it. Outwardly they had appeared to be, but they were not. In each case it simply means that there were spurious elements connected with them that were masquerading as the real thing, which simply have to be removed. Rather than being in the basic concept, the problem arises from the difficulty of conveying the concept in simple pictorial terms. For the true Vine can hardly really have false members, otherwise it would not be the true Vine. In each case, therefore, it is can clearly be seen that in fact those 'cut off' or 'ejected' were never really a part of what they were seen to be cut off from, but had only physically given the appearance of being so.

<p> The same is true of the 'church' today. There is an outward church composed of all who attach themselves and call themselves Christians, and there is a true church composed of all who are true believers and are 'in Christ'. It is only the latter who benefit, and will benefit, from all that God has promised for His 'church'.

<p> In the same way, as Paul has said, not all Israel are (or ever were) the true Israel (Romans 9.6). Many professed to be but were spurious 'members'. They were fakes. Their hearts were not within the covenant. They were 'not My people' (Hosea 2.23). This stresses the difference between the outward and the inward. Not all who say 'Lord' Lord' will enter the Kingly Rule of God, but only those will enter who by their lives reveal that they truly are what they profess to be (Matthew 7.21).

<p> This idea also comes out regularly in the Old Testament where God made it quite clear that only a proportion of Israel would avoid His judgments (e.g. Isaiah 6.13). The remainder (and large majority) would be ‘cut off’, for although outwardly professing to be His people they were not His people. And thus it was with the people of Israel in Jesus’ day. They were revealed by their fruits, which included how they responded to Jesus.

<p> But in Ephesians 2 Paul makes clear that Gentiles can become a part of the true Israel. He tells the Gentiles that they had in the past been ‘alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise’ (2.12). They had not been a part of it. Thus in the past they had not belonged to the twelve tribes. But then he tells them that they are now ‘made nigh by the blood of Christ’ (2.13), Who has ‘made both one and broken down the wall of partition --- creating in Himself of two one new man’ (2.14-15). Now therefore, through Christ, they have been made members of the commonwealth of Israel, and inherit the promises. So they are ‘no longer strangers and sojourners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God, being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets’ (2.19-20). ‘Strangers and sojourners’ was the Old Testament description of those who were not true Israelites. It is therefore made as clear as can be that they have now entered the ‘new’ Israel. They are no longer strangers and sojourners but are now ‘fellow-citizens’ with God’s people. They have entered into the covenant of promise (Galatians 3.29), and thus inherit all the promises of the Old Testament, including the prophecies.

<p> So as with people in the Old Testament who were regularly adopted into the twelve tribes of Israel (e.g. the mixed multitude - Exodus 12.38), Gentile Christians too are now seen as so incorporated. That is why Paul can call the church ‘the Israel of God’, made up of Jews and ex-Gentiles, having declared circumcision and uncircumcision as unimportant because there is a new creation (Galatians 6.15-16), a circumcision of the heart. It is those who are in that new creation who are the Israel of God.

<p> In context ‘The Israel of God’ can here only mean that new creation, the church of Christ, otherwise he is being inconsistent. For as he points out, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters any more. What matters is the new creation. It must therefore be that which identifies the Israel of God. For if circumcision is irrelevant then the Israel of God cannot be made up of the circumcised, even the believing circumcised, for circumcision has lost its meaning. The point therefore behind both of these passages is that all Christians become, by adoption, members of the twelve tribes.

<p> There would in fact be no point in mentioning circumcision if he was not thinking of incorporation of believing Gentiles into the twelve tribes. The importance of circumcision was that to the Jews it made the difference between those who became genuine proselytes, and thus members of the twelve tribes, and those who remained as ‘God-fearers’, loosely attached but not circumcised and therefore not accepted as full Jews. That then was why the Judaisers wanted all Gentiles who became Christians to be circumcised. It was because they did not believe that they could otherwise become genuine Israelites. So they certainly saw converted Gentiles as becoming Israelites. There could be no other reason for wanting Gentiles to be circumcised. (Jesus had never in any way commanded circumcision). But Paul says that that is not so. He argues that they can become true Israelites without being physically circumcised because they are circumcised in heart. They are circumcised in Christ. So when Paul argues that Christians have been circumcised in heart (Romans 2.26, 29; 4.12; Philippians 3.3; Colossians 2.11) he is saying that that is all that is necessary in order for them to be members of the true Israel.

<p> A great deal of discussion often takes place about the use of ‘kai’ in Galatians 6.16, ‘as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be on them and mercy, and (kai) on the Israel of God’. It is asked, ‘does it signify that the Israel of God is additional to and distinct from those who

**‘walk by this rule’, or simply define them?’ (If the Israel of God differs from those who ‘walk by this rule’ then that leaves only the Judaisers as the Israel of God, and excludes Paul and His Jewish supporters. But can anyone really contend that that was what Paul meant?) The answer to this question is really decided by the preceding argument. We cannot really base our case on arguments about ‘kai’. But for the sake of clarity we will consider the question.**

**<p> Kai is a vague connecting word. It cannot be denied that ‘kai’ can mean ‘and’ in some circumstances, and as thus indicate adding something additional, because it is a connecting word. But nor can it be denied that it can alternatively, in contexts like this, mean ‘even’, and as thus equating what follows with what has gone before, again because it is a connecting word (it does not mean ‘and’, it simply connects and leaves the context to decide its meaning). ‘Kai’ in fact is often used in Greek as a kind of connection word where in English it is redundant altogether. It is not therefore a strongly definitive word. Thus its meaning must always be decided by the context, and a wise rule has been made that we make the decision on the basis of which choice will add least to the meaning of the word in the context (saying in other words that because of its ambiguity ‘kai’ should never be stressed). That would mean here the translating of it as ‘even’, giving it its mildest influence.**

**<p> That that is the correct translation comes out if we give the matter a little more thought. The whole letter has been emphasising that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek (3.28), and that this arises because all are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise. So even had we not had the reasons that we have already considered, how strange it would then be for Paul to close the letter by distinguishing Jew from Greek, and Gentiles from the believing Jews. He would be going against all that he has just said. And yet that is exactly what he would be doing if he was exclusively indicating by the phrase ‘the Israel of God’ only the believing Jews. So on all counts, interpretation, grammar and common sense, ‘the Israel of God’ must include both Jews and Gentiles.**

**<p> In Galatians 4.26 it is made clear that the true Jerusalem is the heavenly Jerusalem, the earthly having been rejected. This new heavenly Jerusalem is ‘the mother of us all’ just as Sarah had been the mother of Israel. All Christians are thus the children of the freewoman, that is, of Sarah (4.31). This reveals that they are therefore the true sons of Abraham, signifying ‘Israel’. To argue that being a true son of Abraham through Sara is not the same thing as being a son of Jacob/Israel would in fact be to argue contrary to all that Israel believed. Their boast was precisely that they were ‘sons of Abraham’, indeed the true sons of Abraham, because they ‘came’ from Sara’s seed.**

**<p> Again in Romans he points out to the Gentiles that there is a remnant of Israel which is faithful to God and they are the true Israel (11.5). The remainder have been cast off (Romans 10.27, 29; 11.15, 17, 20). Then he describes the Christian Gentiles as ‘grafted in among them’ becoming ‘partakers with them of the root of the fatness of the olive tree’ (11.17). They are now part of the same tree so it is clear that he regards them as now being part of the faithful remnant of Israel (see argument on this point earlier). This is again declared quite clearly in Galatians, for ‘those who are of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham’ (Galatians 3.7).**

**<p> Note that in Romans 9 Paul declares that not all earthly Israel are really Israel, only those who are chosen by God. It is only the chosen who are the foreknown Israel. See 9.8, 24-26; 11.2. This is a reminder that to Paul ‘Israel’ is a fluid concept. It does not have just one fixed meaning. It can mean all Jews. It can mean all believing Jews. It can mean all unbelieving Jews, excluding believing Jews, depending on Paul’s context. Thus ‘they are not all Israel who are Israel’ indicates already two definitions of Israel (Romans 9.6).**

**<p> The privilege of being a ‘son of Abraham’ is that one is adopted into the twelve tribes of Israel. It is the twelve tribes who proudly called themselves ‘the sons of Abraham’ (John 8.39,**

53). That is why in the one man in Christ Jesus there can be neither Jew nor Gentile (Galatians 3.28). For they all become one as Israel by being one with the One Who in Himself sums up all that Israel was meant to be, the true vine (John 15.1-6; Isaiah 49.3). For 'if you are Abraham's seed, you are heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3.29). To be Abraham's 'seed' within the promise is to be a member of the twelve tribes. There can really be no question about it. The reference to 'seed' is decisive. You cannot be 'Abraham's seed' through Sara and yet not a part of Israel. (If we want to be pedantic we can point out that Edom also actually ceased to exist and did become by compulsion, a part of Israel, under John Hyrcanus. Thus Israel was once again to be seen as an openly conglomerate nation. Furthermore large numbers of what were now seen as Galilean Jews (but some of whom had been Gentiles) had been forced to become Jews in the two centuries before Christ. Having been circumcised they were accepted as Jews even though not born of the twelve tribes).

Paul can even separate Jew from Jew saying, 'he is not a Jew who is one outwardly --- he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and the circumcision is that of the heart' (2.28-29 compare v.26). The true Jew, he says, is the one who is the inward Jew. So he distinguishes physical Israel from true Israel and physical Jew from true Jew.

In the light of these passages it cannot really be doubted that the early church saw the converted Gentiles as becoming a member of the twelve tribes of Israel. They are 'the seed of Abraham', 'sons of Abraham', 'spiritually circumcised', 'grafted into the true Israel', 'fellow-citizens with the saints in the commonwealth of Israel', 'the Israel of God'. What further evidence do we need?

In Romans 4 he further makes clear that Abraham is the father of all who believe, including both circumcised and uncircumcised (4.9-13). Indeed he says we have been circumcised with the circumcision of Christ (Colossians 2.11). All who believe are therefore circumcised children of Abraham.

When James writes to 'the twelve tribes which are of the dispersion' (1.1) he is taking the same view. (Jews living away from Palestine were seen as dispersed around the world and were therefore thought of as 'the dispersion'). There is not a single hint in his letter that he is writing other than to all in the churches. He therefore sees the whole church as having become members of the twelve tribes, and sees them as the true 'dispersion', and indeed refers to their 'assembly' with the same word used for synagogue (2.2). But he can also call them 'the church' (5.14).

Yet there is not even the slightest suggestion anywhere in the remainder of his letter that he has just one section of the church in mind. In view of the importance of the subject, had he not been speaking of the whole church he must surely have commented on the attitude of Jewish Christians to Christian Gentiles, especially in the light of the ethical content of his letter. It was a crucial problem of the day. But there is not even a whisper of it in his letter. He speaks as though to the whole church. Unless he was a total separatist (which we know he was not) and treated the ex-Gentile Christians as though they did not exist, this would seem impossible unless he saw all as now making up 'the twelve tribes of Israel'.

Peter also writes to 'the elect' and calls them 'sojourners of the dispersion', but when he does speak of 'Gentiles' he always means unconverted Gentiles. He clearly assumes that all that come under that heading are not Christians (2.12; 4.3). The fact that the elect includes ex-Gentiles is confirmed by the fact that he speaks to the recipients of his letter warning them not to fashion themselves 'according to their former desires in the time of their ignorance' (1 Peter 1.14), and as having been 'not a people, but are now the people of God' (1 Peter 2.10), and speaks of them as previously having 'wrought the desire of the Gentiles' (1 Peter 4.3). So it is apparent he too sees all Christians as members of the twelve tribes (as in the example above,



**‘the dispersion’ means the twelve tribes scattered around the world).**

**<p> Good numbers of Gentiles were in fact becoming members of the Jewish faith at that time, and on being circumcised were accepted by the Jews as members of the twelve tribes (as proselytes). In the same way the Apostles, who were all Jews and also saw the pure in Israel, the believing Jews, as God’s chosen people, saw the converted Gentiles as being incorporated into the new Israel, into the true twelve tribes. But they did not see circumcision as necessary, and the reason for that was that they considered that all who believed had been circumcised with the circumcision of Christ.**

**<p> Peter in his letter confirms all this. He writes to the church calling them ‘a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession’ (1 Peter 2.5, 9), all terms which in Exodus 19.5-6 indicate Israel.**

**<p> Today we may not think in these terms but it is apparent that to the early church to become a Christian was to become a member of the twelve tribes of Israel. That is why there was such a furore over whether circumcision, the covenant sign of the Jew, was necessary for Christians. It was precisely because they were seen as entering the twelve tribes that many saw it as required. Paul’s argument against it is never that Christians do not become members of the twelve tribes (as we have seen he actually argues that they do) but that what matters is spiritual circumcision, not physical circumcision. Thus early on Christians unquestionably saw themselves as the true twelve tribes of Israel.**

**<p> This receives confirmation from the fact that the seven churches (the universal church) is seen in terms of the seven lampstands in chapter 1. The sevenfold lampstand in the Tabernacle and Temple represented Israel. In the seven lampstands the churches are seen as the true Israel.**

**<p> Given that fact it is clear that reference to the hundred and forty four thousand from all the tribes of Israel in Revelation 7 is to Christians. But it is equally clear that the numbers are not to be taken literally. The twelve by twelve is stressing who and what they are, not how many there are. There is no example anywhere else in Scripture where God actually selects people on such an exact basis. Even the seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19.18) were a round number based on seven as the number of divine perfection and completeness. The reason for the seemingly exact figures is to demonstrate that God has His people numbered and that not one is missing (compare Numbers 31.48-49). The message of these verses is that in the face of persecution to come, and of God’s judgments against men, God knows and remembers His own. But they are then described as a multitude who cannot be numbered (only God can number them).**

**<p> It is noticeable that this description of the twelve tribes is in fact artificial in another respect. While Judah is placed first as the tribe from which Christ came, Dan is omitted, and Manasseh is included as well as Joseph, although Manasseh was the son of Joseph. Thus the omission of Dan is deliberate, while Ephraim, Joseph’s other son, is ‘excluded by name’, but included under Joseph’s name. (This artificiality confirms that the idea of the tribes is not to be taken literally). The exclusion of Dan is because he was seen as the tool of the Serpent (Genesis 49.17), and the exclusion of the two names is because the two names were specifically connected with idolatry.**

**<p> In Deuteronomy 29.17-20 the warning had been given that God would ‘blot out his name from under heaven’, when speaking of those who gave themselves up to idolatrous worship and belief, and as we have seen idolatry and uncleanness were central in the warnings to the seven churches. Thus the exclusion of the names of Ephraim and Dan are a further warning against such things.**

<p> It is unquestionable that the <i>names</i> of both Ephraim and Dan were specifically connected with idolatry in such a way as to make them distinctive. Hosea declared, 'Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone, their drink is become sour, they commit whoredom continually' (Hosea 4.17-18). This is distinctly reminiscent of the sins condemned in the seven churches. It is true that Ephraim here means the whole of Israel, as often, but John saw *the name* of Ephraim as besmirched by the connection with idolatry and whoredom.

<p> As for Dan, it was a man of the tribe of Dan who 'blasphemed the Name' (Leviticus 24.11), it was Dan that was first to set up a graven image in rivalry to the Tabernacle (Judges 18.30) and Dan was the only tribe mentioned by name as being the site of one of the calves of gold set up by Jeroboam, as Amos stresses (Amos 8.14; 1 Kings 12.29-30; 2 Kings 10.29). Indeed Amos directly connects the name of Dan with 'the sin of Samaria'. Thus Dan is closely connected with blasphemy and idolatry. And to cap it all 'Dan will be a serpent in the way, and an adder in the path' (Genesis 49.17). He is the tool of the Serpent. Typologically therefore he is the Judas of the twelve. How could he not then be excluded? It is also voices in Dan and Ephraim which declare the evil coming on Jerusalem (Jeremiah 4.15), closely connecting the two.

<p> That what is excluded is the name of Ephraim and not its people (they are included in Joseph) is significant. It means that the message of these omissions is that the very names of those who partake in idolatry and sexual misbehaviour will be excluded from the new Israel (compare the warnings to the churches, especially Thyatira). The exclusion of the name of Dan is therefore to warn us that those who are not genuine will be excluded from the new Israel. But that does not mean that there were not many Danites who had become Christians.

<p> So here in Revelation, in the face of the future activity of God against the world, He provides His people with protection, and marks them off as distinctive from those who bear the mark of the Beast. God protects His true people. And there is no good reason for seeing these people as representing other than the church of the current age. The fact is that we are continually liable to persecution, and while not all God's judgments have yet been visited on the world, we have experienced sufficient to know that we are not excluded. In John's day this reference to 'the twelve tribes' was telling the church that God had sealed them, so that while they must be ready for the persecution to come, they need not fear the coming judgments of God that he will now reveal, for they are under His protection.

<p> In fact the New Testament tells us that all God's true people are sealed by God. Abraham received circumcision as a seal of 'the righteousness of (springing from) faith' (Romans 4.11), but circumcision is replaced in the New Testament by the 'seal of the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 1.22; Ephesians 1.13; 4.30). It is clear that Paul therefore sees all God's people as being 'sealed' by God in their enjoyment of the indwelling Holy Spirit and this would suggest that John's description in Revelation 7 is a dramatic representation of that fact. His people have been open to spiritual attack from earliest New Testament days (and before) and it is not conceivable that they have not enjoyed God's seal of protection on them. Thus the seal here in Revelation refers to the sealing (or if someone considers it future, a re-sealing) with the Holy Spirit of promise. The whole idea behind the scene is in order to stress that all God's people have been specially sealed.

<p> In Revelation 21 the 'new Jerusalem' is founded on twelve foundations which are the twelve Apostles of the Lamb (21.14), and its gates are the twelve tribes of the children of Israel (21.12). Indeed Jesus said that he would found his 'church' on the Apostles and their statement of faith (Matthew 16.18) and the idea behind the word 'church' (ekklesia) here was as being the 'congregation' of Israel. (The word ekklesia is used of the latter in the Greek Old Testament). Jesus had come to establish the new Israel. Thus from the commencement the church were seen as being the true Israel, composed of both Jew and Gentile who entered

within God's covenant, the 'new covenant', as it had been right from the beginning, and they were called 'the church' for that very reason.

<p> In countering these arguments it has been astonishingly said that *'Every reference to Israel in the New Testament refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'* And another expositor has added the comment, *'This is true in the Old Testament also.'*

<p> Such statements are not only a gross oversimplification, but in fact they are totally untrue. They simply assume what they intend to prove, and are in fact completely incorrect. For as we have seen above if there is one thing that is absolutely sure it is that many who saw themselves as Israelites were not *physical descendants* of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many were descended from the servants of the Patriarchs who went down into Egypt in their 'households', and were from a number of nationalities. Others were part of the mixed multitude which left Egypt with Israel (Exodus 12.38). They were adopted into Israel, and became Israelites, a situation which was sealed by the covenant.

<p> Indeed it is made quite clear that anyone who was willing to worship God and become a member of the covenant through circumcision could do so and became accepted on equal terms as 'Israelites' (Exodus 12.47-49). They would then become united with the tribe among whom they dwelt or with which they had connections. That is why there were regulations as to who could enter the assembly or congregation of the Lord, and when (Deuteronomy 23.1-8). Later on proselytes would also be absorbed into Israel. Thus 'Israel' was from the start very much a conglomerate, and continued to be so. That is why many Galileans and the Edomites were forced to become Jews and be circumcised once the Jews took over their land. From then on they were seen as part of Israel.

<p> Nor is it true that in Paul 'Israel' always means physical Israel. When we come to the New Testament Paul can speak of 'Israel after the flesh' (1 Corinthians 10.18). That suggests that he also conceives of an Israel not 'after the flesh'. That conclusion really cannot be avoided.

<p> Furthermore, when we remember that outside Romans 9-11 Israel is only mentioned by Paul seven times, and that 1 Corinthians 10.18 clearly points to another Israel, one not after the flesh (which has been defined in verses 1-18), and that it is one of the seven verses, and that Galatians 6.16 is most satisfactorily seen as signifying the church of Jesus Christ and not old Israel at all (or even converted Israel), the statement must be seen as having little force. In Ephesians 2.11-22 where he speaks of the 'commonwealth of Israel' he immediately goes on to say that in Christ Jesus all who are His are 'made nigh', and then stresses that we are no more strangers and sojourners but are genuine fellow-citizens, and are of the household of God. If that does not mean becoming a part of the true Israel it is difficult to see what could.

<p> Furthermore in the other four references (so now only four out of seven) it is not the present status of Israel that is in mind. The term is simply being used as an identifier in a historical sense in reference to connections with the Old Testament situation. Thus the argument that 'Israel always means Israel' is not very strong. Again in Hebrews all mentions of 'Israel' are historical, referring back to the Old Testament. They refer to Israel in the past, not in the present. In Revelation two mentions out of three are again simply historical, while many would consider that the other actually does refer to the church (Revelation 7.4). (Mentions of pre-Christian Israel obviously could not include the 'church', the new Israel. But they certainly do include Gentiles who have become Jews).

<p> In Romans 9-11 it is made very clear that Israel can mean more than one thing. When Paul says, 'they are not all Israel, who are of Israel' (Romans 9.6) and points out that it is the children of the promise who are counted as the seed (9.8), we are justified in seeing that there

are two Israels in Paul's mind, one which is the Israel after the flesh, and includes old unconverted Israel, and one which is the Israel of the promise.

<p> And when he says that 'Israel' have not attained 'to the law of righteousness' while the Gentiles 'have attained to the righteousness which is of faith' (9.30-31) he cannot be speaking of all Israel because it is simply not true that none in Israel have attained to righteousness. Jewish-Christian believers have also attained to the righteousness which is of faith, and have therefore attained the law of righteousness. For many thousands and even tens of thousands had become Christians as we have seen in Acts 1-5. Thus here 'Israel' must mean old, unconverted Israel, not all the (so-called) descendants of the Patriarchs, and must actually exclude believing Israel, however we interpret the latter, for 'Israel did not seek it by faith' while believing Israel did.

<p> Thus here we see three uses of Israel, each referring to a different entity. One is all the old Israel, which includes both elect and non-elect (11.11) and is therefore a partly blind Israel (11.25), one is the Israel of promise (called in 11.11 'the election') and one is the old Israel which does not include the Israel of promise, the part of the old Israel which is the blind Israel. The term is clearly fluid and can sometimes refer to one group and sometimes to another.

<p> Furthermore here 'the Gentiles' must mean those who have come to faith and not all Gentiles. It cannot mean all Gentiles, for it speaks of those who have 'attained to the righteousness of faith' (which was what old Israel failed to obtain when it strove after it). It means believing Gentiles. Thus that term is also fluid. (In contrast, in 1 Peter 'Gentiles' represents only those who are unconverted. Thus all words like these must be interpreted in their contexts).

<p> When we are also told that such Gentiles who have come to faith have become 'Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise' (Galatians 3.29) we are justified in seeing these converted Gentiles as having become part of the new Israel, along with the converted Jews. They are now actually stated to be 'the seed of Abraham'. This clarifies the picture of the olive tree. Old unconverted Israel are cut out of it, the converted Gentiles are grafted into it. Thus old Israel are no longer God's people while the converted Gentiles are.

<p> It may then be asked, 'What then does Paul mean when he says that 'all Israel will be saved'?' (Romans 11.26). It clearly cannot mean literally 'all' of old Israel, both past and present, for Scripture has made quite clear that not all of them will be saved. Let us consider the possibilities:

<p> 1). Does it then mean all Israel at the time that the fullness of the Gentiles has come in? That is unlikely as there is no stage in world history where <i>all</i> the people of a nation have been saved at one point in time. It would not be in accordance with God's revealed way of working. But more importantly it would also make nonsense of those many passages where God's final judgment is poured out on Israel, and it is therefore clear that all Israel will not be saved. How can all Israel be saved and yet face His judgment?

<p> 2). Does he then mean 'all the true Israel', those elected in God's purposes, 'the remnant according to the election of grace' (11.5), who will be saved along with the fullness of the Gentiles? That is certainly a possibility if we ignore all the Scriptures that we have looked at and see believing Jews as not made one with believing Gentiles (as Ephesians 2 says they were). But if it is to happen in the end times it will require a final revival among the Jews in the end days bringing them to Christ. For there is no other name under Heaven given among men by which men can be saved. We would certainly not want to deny the possibility of God doing that. That may be why He has gathered the old nation back to the country of Israel. But

that does not mean that God will deal with them as a separate people.

<p> 3). Or does it mean ‘all Israel’ who are part of the olive tree, including both Jews and the fullness of the Gentiles? All the new Israel, made up of the fullness of the Gentiles and the fullness of the Jews? That seems to be its most probable significance, and most in accordance with what we have seen above. After all, ‘all Israel’, if it includes the Gentiles, could not be saved until the fullness of the Gentiles had come in.

<p> It is important in this regard to consider that Paul’s message was in Romans 9-11. It was that God began with Abraham and then began cutting off many of his seed, leaving the remnant according to the election of grace, those whom He foreknew. Then He began incorporating others in the persons of believing Gentiles as we have seen, and these increased in proportion through Christ, and all who believed became members of the olive tree. Thus this was now ‘all Israel’, those whom God had elected from eternity past. </ul>

<p> But what in fact Paul is finally seeking to say is that in the whole salvation history God’s purposes will not be frustrated, and that in the final analysis all whom He has chosen and foreknown (11.2) will have come to Him, whether Jew or Gentile.

<p> In the light of all this it is difficult to see how we can deny that in the New Testament all who truly believed were seen as becoming a part of the new Israel, the ‘Israel of God’.

<p> But some ask, ‘if the church is Israel why does Paul only tell us so rarely?’. The answer is twofold. Firstly the danger that could arise from the use of the term, causing people to be confused. And secondly because he actually does so most of the time in his own way. For another way of referring to Israel in the Old Testament was as ‘the congregation’ (LXX church). Thus any reference to the ‘church’ does indicate the new Israel.

<p> But does this mean that old Israel can no longer be seen as having a part in the purposes of God. If we mean in separation *as* old Israel then the answer is yes. As old Israel they are no longer relevant to the purposes of God for the true Israel are the ones who are due to receive the promises of God. It is Jesus Christ’s new ‘congregation’ (church) who are the new nation (Matthew 21.43; 1 Peter 2.9). But if we mean as ‘converted and becoming part of believing Israel’ then the answer is that God in His mercy will surely yet have a purpose for them by winning many of them to Christ in the end days. As Paul informed us any member of old Israel can become a part of the olive tree by being grafted in again (Romans 11.23). And there is a welcome to the whole of Israel if they will all believe in Christ and become a part of Christ’s new nation. Nor can there be any future for them as being used in the purposes of God until they believe in Christ. And then if they do they will become a part of the whole, not superior to others, or inferior to others, but brought in on equal terms as Christians and members of ‘the congregation’ of Jesus Christ. It may well be that God has brought Israel back into the land precisely because He intends a second outpouring of the Spirit like the one at Pentecost (and Joel 2.28-29). But if so it is in order that they might become Christians. It is in order that they might become a part of the new Israel, the ‘congregation (church) of Jesus Christ’. For God may be working on old Israel doing His separating work in exactly the same ways as He constantly works on old Gentiles, moving them from one place to another in order to bring many of them to Christ. It is not for us to tell Him how He should fulfil His purposes. But nor must we give old Israel privileges that God has not given them.

<p> But what then is the consequence of what we have discussed? Why is it so important? The answer is that it is important because if it is the fact that true Christians today are the only true people of God that means that all the Old Testament promises relate to them, not by being ‘spiritualised’, but by them being interpreted in terms of a new situation. Much of the Old Testament has to be seen in the light of new situations. It is doubtful if today anyone

really thinks that swords and spears will be turned into ploughshares and pruninghooks. However we see it that idea has to be modernised. (Tanks being turned into tractors?). In the same way therefore we have to 'modernise' in terms of the New Testament many of the Old Testament promises. Jerusalem must become the Jerusalem that is above. The sacrifices must become the spiritual sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. And so on. But Israel continues on in the true church (congregation) of Christ, being composed of all who have truly submitted to the Messiah.

<p> Note. Literal sacrifices in the Old Testament could not possibly be repeated in the future in any sense that is genuine. The so-called memorial sacrifices of some expositors are a totally new invention. They are certainly not what the prophets intended. So it is no less 'spiritualising' to call them memorial sacrifices than it is to speak of spiritual sacrifices. And can anyone really believe, if they open their eyes, that in a world where the lion lies down with the lamb, and the wolves and the sheep are mates, only man is vile enough to kill animals? It does not bear thinking about. It goes against all the principles that lie behind the idea. Whereas when we recognise that that is an idealised picture of the heavenly Kingdom where all is peace and death is no more then it all fits together.