

ISRAEL IN GOD'S ECONOMY (4) – ISRAEL AND GOD'S ECONOMY IN THE PRESENT AGE

As believers in Christ who care for the working out of God's plan, we should understand the role of Israel relative to God's economy in the present age, the age of grace.

The age of grace began with the incarnation of Christ. Old Testament prophecies show that God would send His Son to enter into humanity through the Jewish race. This is clearly seen in two examples. First, according to 2 Samuel 7:12-14, the Son of God was to be brought forth through incarnation into humanity as the seed of David, meaning that he would be David's descendant. Romans 1:3 confirms this, saying that the gospel of God (v. 1) is "concerning His Son who came out of the seed of David according to the flesh." Romans 9:5 tells us, "Out of whom [the Israelites, v. 4], as regards what is according to flesh, is the Christ." Second, the book of Micah contains a prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (5:2; Matt. 2:4-6; John 7:42; Luke 2:4-6). A little over a century after Micah's prophecy, the children of Israel were carried away into captivity in Babylon. Seventy years after being taken captive some of the Jews began to return. It was through the descendants of the returned captives that Joseph and Mary were born. As Brother Lee has noted:

If the forefathers of Joseph and Mary had remained in Babylon and if Mary and Joseph themselves had been born there, how could Christ have been born of Mary in Bethlehem? If none of God's people had returned to the Holy Land, Christ would have had no way to come to the earth through incarnation. The remnant of returned captives was the instrument used by God to usher in the first coming of Christ. (*CWWL*, 1971, vol. 4, 476-477)

The Lord's earthly ministry was carried out entirely in the context of the land of Canaan and centered on the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Lord Jesus declared, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). When the Lord sent the disciples out to proclaim the kingdom of the heavens, He charged them, saying, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter into any city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6).

However, even in the gospels there are intimations that the Lord, who was rejected and ultimately crucified by His countrymen, would turn to the Gentiles (see footnote 1 in each of the following verses: Matt. 8:5; 9:18; 15:24; John 10:16). Even so, after His resurrection the gospel was first preached by those of the Jewish race. All of the twelve apostles as well as the apostle Paul were Jews. Brother Lee said:

Please remember that the gospel was firstly preached and propagated by Jews. For example, both Peter and Paul were Jews. For this reason, the Lord told the Samaritan woman that salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22). In other words, the gospel, the glad tidings, came out of the Jewish people. (*Life-study of Revelation*, 697)

Moreover, the gospel was first preached to the Jews. In Acts 2 Peter preached the gospel to Jews gathered for Pentecost (v. 5). Those who believed from the apostles' preaching in Jerusalem were Jews (v. 41; 4:4). Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, both to Jew first and to Greek." Commenting on this verse Brother Lee said:

For the gospel to be preached that man might be saved, there is a sequence. It is first to the Jews and then the Gentiles. (Greeks here refers to the Gentiles.) Although Paul was an apostle to the Gentiles, he did not deny that the gospel was first given to the Jews for their salvation and then given to the Gentiles to save them afterward. This is because the Jews were originally God's elect, and God's "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22). (*CWWL*, 1952, vol. 2, 186)

However, the nation of Israel as a whole, and particularly the Jewish religious leaders, rejected the Lord (Matt. 21:42-46). Thus, John 1:11 says, "He came to His own, yet those who were His own did not receive Him." Instead, they accused Him of blaspheming against God and having a demon (Matt. 9:3, 34; 12:14; Mark 14:63-65; John 8:48).

Consumed by religious blindness and jealousy, they sought and plotted to kill Him (Matt. 26:3-4; Luke 5:16, 18; John 10:31, 33; 11:53), and they ultimately did (Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10-11; 5:30).

The Jews' rejection of Christ did not end there. After many believed through the apostles' preaching of the good news of the Lord's resurrection, the Jews initiated a persecution against the church in Jerusalem (8:1). Before his conversion the apostle Paul zealously persecuted the church (v. 3; 22:19; 26:11; Gal. 1:13). Nevertheless, after his conversion, when Paul and those with him went out from Antioch to preach the gospel, they went first to the Jews (Acts 13:5, 14-15; 14:1-2; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:19; 19:8). While some Jews believed, many persecuted them, some going from city to city to foment opposition (13:45, 50; 14:19; 17:5, 13; 21:27; 23:27; 24:9; 25:7, 15), even repeatedly seeking to kill Paul (9:23; 20:3; 23:12). The Jews' rejection of the gospel caused the apostles to turn to the Gentiles (13:46; 18:6; 28:28). As Brother Lee explained:

In the beginning, even though the apostles preached the gospel to the Gentiles [for example, in Acts 10:34-43], they were still among the Jews; therefore, at the end of Acts 13 it says that they turned to the Gentiles (v. 46). This shows that even though they were in Gentile lands in Asia Minor, they were still preaching to the Jews. Beginning in chapter 13, the apostles shook off the dust of their feet (v. 51) as a formal sign that they were turning to the Gentiles in the Gentile land. (*CWWL, 1956, vol. 2, 262*)

However, in Romans 11:15-32 Paul used the illustrations of a lump of dough and an olive tree to show that God's turning away from the nation of Israel is only temporary. In verse 15 he says that Israel was "cast aside" (not "cast away," see v. 2) but will be "received back." Then in verse 16 he says, "Now if the dough offered as the firstfruits is holy, the lump is also; and if the root is holy, the branches are also." The firstfruits of the dough and the root of the olive tree (v. 17) both refer to the forefathers of the nation of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 28; see *Life-study of Romans, 283*). To be holy here means that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were separated to God from the nations. Paul's point is that since the forefathers as the firstfruits and the root were holy, so also Israel as the whole lump and the whole olive tree is holy. Paul explains that some of the branches of the olive tree—the unbelieving Israelites—were broken off so that the Gentiles—branches from the "wild olive tree" (vv. 17 and 24)—might be grafted in. However, in verses 25-27 he said:

For I do not want you, brothers, to be ignorant of this mystery (lest you be wise in yourselves), that hardness has come upon Israel in part, until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in; and thus all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come out of Zion; He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob. And this is the covenant from Me with them, when I take away their sins."

Here Paul quotes Isaiah 59:20, which is a prophecy concerning the Lord's return. The central thought of this prophecy is that when Christ returns at the end of this age, He will save the remnant of Israel. Given that Christ is the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) and that He was sent to the nation of Israel and brought forth into humanity through the Jewish race, it is altogether fitting and in accord with His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that at the end of this age He will turn the hearts of the remnant of Israel and save them at His return.

This does not mean that the door to salvation is closed to the Jews in this age or that they must wait for the Lord's return for salvation. Today there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles regarding the need for and availability of salvation in Christ. In Romans 10:12-13 Paul tells us, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all and rich to all who call upon Him; for 'whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (cf. Acts 2:21). Moreover, all those who believe in the Lord in this age will have the opportunity to participate in growing and maturing in the life of God's Son and in the building up of the Body of Christ and the preparation of Christ's bride for His return (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 4:15-16; Rev. 19:7). Therefore, as ambassadors of "our Savior God, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the full knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3b-4), we should announce the glad tidings of God's complete salvation—both judicial redemption and organic salvation—to Jews and Gentiles alike.