

“THE JEW FIRST”

by Given O. Blakely

“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.” (Verse 16, Romans 1:16-17)

The words “also the Greek” refer to the Greek-speaking world, and compared to the Jews, who spoke “Hebrew” – “the Jew’s language” (2 Kgs 18:26; Isa 36:13), or “Hebrews tongue” (Acts 26:11). “The Greek” equates to “Gentiles.”

There have arisen all manner of teachings in the modern church concerning the Jews. Many of them reflect an extremely distorted view of the Word of God. Remembering that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” this text is to be viewed as precise and without flaw – as contemporary and not obsolete. The tendency to conform Scripture to preconceived notions must be mortified, and our thoughts brought into harmony with Divine utterance. No person can afford to be in disagreement with something God has said, for God “will be justified in all of His sayings”(Rom 3:4).

THE JEW FIRST

First, if God has thoroughly repudiated the Jews, this statement could not be made. Not only is the Gospel God’s power unto salvation to the Jew, it is to the “Jew FIRST.” The Spirit does not say the Gospel WAS God’s power unto salvation to the Jew “first,” but that it IS – and this was written at least twenty-eight years after the inauguration of the New Covenant on the day of Pentecost. The word “first” means first in rank as well as in time.

Elsewhere, applicable to the era of the New Covenant, the Spirit identifies three distinct categories of people. They are “Jews,” “Gentiles,” and “the church of God” (1 Cor 10:32). The superior distinction is given to “the church of God,” to be sure, for that is the body of Christ (Col 1:18). In it, there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28). In Christ “Jew” and “Gentile” have been joined together, comprising “one new man” (Ephesians 2:11-16). However, that by no means indicates that the Jews are no longer recognized as a people by God.

MENTIONED ELSEWHERE

This is not the only place the phrase “Jew first” is used. The other places will confirm to our hearts both the nature and declaration of this text. “Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of THE JEW FIRST, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to THE JEW FIRST, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God” (Rom 2:9-11).

Thus we have three affirmations concerning the Jews being “first.” (1) In the experience of the power of the Gospel to those who are believing. (2) The punishment of every soul that does evil. (3) The gift of glory, honor, and peace to every soul who works good. None of these have any contemporary significance whatsoever if God now has no regard at all for the Jews. In such a

case, some of God's word would have passed away, and even the promises of Moses would now be obsolete (Deut 15:15,18; 30:6), as well as the promise given through Jacob (Gen 49:10).

The Spirit also refers to Jews and Gentiles in expounding the nature of salvation. "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles ALSO? Yes, of Gentiles ALSO, since indeed God who WILL JUSTIFY the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Rom 3:29-30). Notice, the Spirit does not refer to a past arrangement, but a present one: "IS." This text also places the Gentiles in second place: "Gentiles ALSO." The same identity is ascribed in Romans 9:24. "Even us, whom He hath called, not of the Jews only, but ALSO of the Gentiles?"

Rather than the Jews being summarily dismissed from Divine consideration, in Christ the Gentiles are made "fellowheirs (with the Jews), and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph 3:6). In Christ Jew and Gentile are made "one new man" (Eph 2:15) – a condition with no significance if the Jews no longer have a Divinely recognized identity. Gentile believers did NOT take the place of the Jews. Rather, they were joined together with the believing Jews who are also in Christ. They are also joined to the body of the Jews to whom the promises were made (Rom 9:4) – "grafted in among them" (Rom 11:17, NKJV).

GENTILE DISTINCTION RECOGNIZED

To further show the absurdity of the notion that the Jews have utterly ceased to be a people before the Lord, note that the Spirit continues to refer to "the Gentiles." It is the existence of the Jews that allows for the term "Gentiles," or "Greeks." The word "Gentiles" obtains no significance apart from the "Jews." Further, the Epistles refer to "the Gentiles" no less than 40 times. Outside of Christ, both Jew and Gentile still exist. Neither of them has ceased to be. In fact, the ONLY place those distinctions are removed is "in Christ" (Gal 3:28; 5:6; 1 Cor 12:13).

WHAT ABOUT JERUSALEM'S DESTRUCTION?

Some, inordinately eager to justify the position that the Jews have been summarily rejected, trace that hypothetical rejection back to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It was at that point, they affirm, that the Jews were finally written off and repudiated as a people.

This destruction was foretold by the Lord Jesus. He even told WHY the judgment would come. It was because that "generation" rejected Him, not knowing the time of their "visitation" from on high. Our Lord wept over the prospect of that coming judgment (Luke 19:42-44). He also referred to this destruction when affirming the devastation of the temple (Matt 24:2; Mk 13:3). He associated this destruction with the "abomination of desolation" prophesied by Daniel. It would be so fierce that those with child would suffer, and running, or fleeing from the city would be required (Mk 13:14-20). The curse was NOT pronounced upon all Jews, but upon a certain "GENERATION" of them (Matt 12:41-42; 23:36; Lk 11:50-51; 17:25).

Did all of this mean a total rejection of the Jews, as some affirm? Indeed not. The Lord spoke most precisely on this matter. "But woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck, in those days! for there shall be great distress in the land, and wrath upon this people. And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem

shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, UNTIL THE TIMES OF THE GENTILES BE FULFILLED” (Lk 21:23-24). The word “until” speaks of limitation. Jesus left the door open, and we do well to consent to His word. Paul further elaborated on this matter delivering the following reasoning: “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness IN PART is happened to Israel, UNTIL the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness FROM JACOB: For this is MY COVENANT UNTO THEM, when I shall take away their sins. As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they ARE beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Rom 11:25-29). Further, it is affirmed that only “SOME of the branches be broken off” (Rom 11:17).

The church is never referred to as “Israel” or “Jacob.” I do realize that some say that Galatians 6:16 refers to the church as “Israel” – “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” The church is referenced in these words “as many as walk according to this rule.” “Israel” is not a redundant reference to the same people. The Gospel is still “the plower of God unto salvation TO THE JEW FIRST.”

What is more, the current status of the church strongly suggests that “the times of the Gentiles” is approaching an end (Lk 1:24), and “the full number of the Gentiles” (NLT) is approaching (Rom 11:25). That time will conclude the judgment upon Israel, and the exalted Christ will “turn away ungodliness from Jacob.”

CATEGORICAL STATEMENTS CONCERNING THE JEWS

There is so much said in the Scriptures on this subject. It is a marvel that the erroneous doctrine to which I have referred has risen – namely that the Jews have been written off, and the church has taken their place. Later in this Epistle, the Spirit will also refer to a time associated with the Gentiles. “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part UNTIL THE FULL NUMBER OF THE GENTILES HAS COME IN” [NIV] (Rom 11:25).

The third chapter of Romans affirms the Jews STILL have certain advantages. Such a statement is foolish if they are no longer a people. “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? GREAT IN EVERY RESPECT” (Rom 3:1, NASB). Compare their advantages with that of a flourishing Gentile church. There you might find a youth minister and youth program, a family life minister, a worship leader, an exercise facility . . . etc.

First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God” [NASB] (Rom 3:1-2). The advantages are detailed in the ninth chapter. “Israelites, to whom BELONGS the ADOPTION as sons, and THE GLORY and the covenants and the GIVING of the Law and the TEMPLE SERVICE and the PROMISES, whose are THE FATHERS, and FROM WHOM IS THE CHRIST according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen” (9:4-5, NASB). If a person imagines this is referring to the church, viewed as spiritual Israel, then the “giving of the Law and temple service” as well as the fleshly generation of Jesus, has come from the Gentiles – which thought is the epitome of ignorance.

The eleventh chapter of Romans develops this thought in a most extensive manner. From that chapter, I will only list the strong arguments presented concerning the Jews.

1. God has NOT cast away His people (11:1a).
2. The conversion of Paul himself, an Israelite according to the flesh, confirms this did not occur (11:1b).
3. Just as surely as there was a remnant in Elijah's day, so there is a remnant among this people today (11:2-5).
4. Israel has NOT stumbled so as to fall, or be beyond recovery (11:11a).
5. Salvation has come to the Gentiles TO PROVOKE the Jews to jealousy (11:11b).
6. If their fall brought riches to the Gentiles, much more will blessing be brought BY THEIR RECOVERY (11:12).
7. Paul's Apostleship to the Gentiles was IN ORDER TO provoke the Jews to jealousy, saving some of them (11:13-14).
8. If casting them away meant the reconciling of the world, the RECEIVING OF THEM will be life from the dead (11:15).
9. The "firstfruit" and the "root" are all "holy." That is why the larger mass and the branches are "holy" (11:16).
10. Only "SOME of the branches" of the natural Jewish tree were broken off (11:17a).
11. Some of the Gentiles, from a wild olive tree, have been GRAFTED IN "among" the Jews (11:17b).
12. Gentile believers are partaking of the nourishing sap of the OLIVE ROOT OF ISRAEL (11:17c) – which "root" does not exist if the Jews have been summarily cut off.
13. The Jewish branches were NOT broken off so that the Gentiles might be grafted in. Salvation is NOT a replacement program (11:18-21).
14. God is able to graft the Jews in AGAIN (11:23).
15. It is REASONABLE for them to be grafted into their own tree once again (11:24).
16. Blindness "IN PART" has happened unto Israel (11:25a).
17. The blindness of the Jews is only UNTIL the full number of the Gentiles are come in (11:15b).
18. The Deliverer WILL TURN AWAY ungodliness from Jacob (a name never applied to the church, 11:26).
19. God's covenant to TAKE AWAY their sin is still in place (11:27).
20. Although presently they are "enemies" for the sake of the Gentiles, they ARE STILL "beloved for the fathers' (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) sake" (11:28).
21. The gifts and calling of God are WITHOUT REPENTANCE (11:29).
22. Just as we Gentiles have obtained mercy because of their unbelief, so through the mercy extended to the Gentiles, the Jews will also OBTAIN MERCY (11:30-31).
23. All of this is a remarkable display of the arresting WISDOM OF GOD. It confirms His judgments are unsearchable and His ways past finding out (11:33-36).

It is exceedingly difficult for me to imagine how a case for "the Jew first" could be established with any more certainty! I unhesitatingly and confidently reject the erroneous postulate that the Jews have been totally cut off, and the Gentile church has taken their place. That hypothesis is a glaring display of ignorance and unbelief.

GOD HAS NOT FORGOTTEN THE JEWS

“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.” (Verse 16, Romans 1:16-17)

God has not forgotten the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Nor, indeed, has He blotted from His recollection the covenant He made with Israel – the promised New Covenant we presently enjoy, and over which Jesus is now presiding (Jer 31:31-34).

One final word from Jeremiah will confirm the reason for the Gospel being the power of God unto salvation “TO THE JEW FIRST.” I will give this marvelous prophecy from the New Revised Standard Version. Hebrews 8:8-13 and 10:16-17 confirm that this is the New Covenant we are now enjoying, and which Jesus is presently mediating (Heb 8:6).

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:31-34).

All who are acquainted with the New Covenant know that it is the framework in which our salvation is being accomplished. Outside of Christ, not one syllable of this covenant finds fulfillment.

The Lord did not end this promise through Jeremiah with these words. With solemnity and determination He added the following words, which He is never represented as withdrawing. “Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar – the LORD of hosts is His name: If this fixed order were ever to cease from My presence, says the LORD, then also the offspring of Israel would cease to be a nation before Me forever. Thus says the LORD: If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will reject all the offspring of Israel because of all they have done, says the LORD” (Jer 31:35-37).

Again, the Almighty God promised Israel: “Fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith the LORD : for I am with thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee: but I WILL NOT make a full end of thee, but correct thee in measure; yet will I not leave thee wholly unpunished” (Jer 46:28). Hear the Lord speak to Israel: “For the LORD hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid My face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer. For this is as the waters of Noah unto Me: for as I

have sworn that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth; so have I sworn that I would not be wroth with thee, nor rebuke thee. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but My kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of My peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee” (Isa 54:6-10).

Thus, those who say God is finished with Israel must give an account of themselves to God. They have not told the truth, whether inadvertently or in stubbornness. They must also explain to us why the sun is still shining, and why the moon and the stars can be seen at night. They are obliged to account for how the “fixed order” of nature could remain while Israel has been repudiated. Let them stand before us and give their measurement of the heavens, and tell how they have explored the foundations of the earth. If they can present such evidence, then we will acknowledge that God did “reject all the offspring of Israel because of all they have done, says the LORD” – which would necessarily mean that God lied to Israel.

But if they must acknowledge the continuance of the sun, moon, and stars – and if they cannot measure the heavens or explore the foundations of the earth – then let them throw away their despicable doctrine, for it cannot be true! In their doctrine they have reproached God and contradicted His promise! Their teaching reveals the presence of unbelief and brings dishonor the God of Israel.

The Gospel IS the power of God unto salvation “TO THE JEW FIRST.” Let none doubt it, or allow their hearts to entertain some imagination concerning the total rejection of the ancient people. Let us acknowledge the truth of our Savior’s own words: “salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22).

– Given O. Blakely, June 2016