

# **The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, Forever**

**Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2026: Romans 11:1-36**

## **Recommended Sources beyond Scripture:**

- *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* – O. Palmer Robertson
- *Israel: God's Servant* – David W. Torrance and George Taylor
- *Gracious Dialogue: A Guide to Listening and Speaking Well About Israel and Palestine* – Embrace the Middle East – <https://embraceme.org>

## **Introduction**

The Letter to the Galatians has taught us much about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what is available by faith in Him. It has required us to reflect upon the Law of Moses and the history of God's dealings with His people and the world. But it can raise questions about 'Israel' and the relationship of the Church to 'Israel'. We explored a few issues around this in today's service, whilst recognising there is diversity of opinion, and that no single sermon can cover all the questions we might have. This post-service paper seeks to give a bit more information, whilst still recognising that people have written lengthy books on the issues at hand and there is no uniform position amongst the worldwide Church, present or historical. What follows is my own understanding of some key texts, as things currently stand – as with all matters, there is always more that can be read and explored. My hope is that through the sermon and paper we may all feel a bit more equipped to discuss and/or pray into the issues, and approach this from a more biblically informed basis. We do have a range of opinions on these matters within our church family, and no one is being asked to agree with what follows. But maybe it can help us be aware of broader issues, beyond what we have picked up via the media or limited study of biblical material.

The pre-service handout had three questions at the bottom, which I attempted to give some brief material for us to consider in the sermon, and these again will be the basis of the following paper and explored in some greater depth below.

## **Has the Church replaced Israel as God's people?**

It's possible, I reckon, that a common perception amongst Christians is that the Church has replaced Israel as God's people. After all, the Church accepted the Messiah the Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament foretold about, and so it would be easy to accept or conclude that God judged Israel and went forward with the Church – a judgment Jesus Himself foretold (Matthew 21:43). Or, it's also possible that the idea (or acceptance of the idea) that the Church replaced Israel could develop out of familiar passages such as, 'There is neither Jew

nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Galatians 3:28) My own conclusions prior to this recent study would have been shaped by such limited understandings of the Scriptures, and I would have easily accepted the idea, or at least the language, of the Church replacing Israel as God’s people.

However, the teaching of Scripture would challenge this and bring a very different proposal to our attention. For, as Paul writes in Romans, ‘...as far as election is concerned, [Israel is] loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable’ (Romans 11:28-29). So, there is a lasting relationship between God and Israel, in some form at least.

What is more, Paul draws upon the metaphor of the ‘olive tree’ across Romans 11:17-24. This has a long biblical history, for the Lord spoke of Israel as an olive tree in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 8:8; Psalm 52:8; Psalm 128:3; Isaiah 17:6; Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 14:5–6; Micah 6:15) and Jesus also used the olive tree metaphor to speak about Israel too (Luke 13:6-7; Luke 21:29-33; Mark 11:12-14, 20-24; Mark 13:28-31). What is striking in Romans, however, is that Paul says Gentile believers are grafted into the ‘cultivated olive tree’ (v24) of Israel! This is why Paul argues that there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Jesus, for Jesus has one people, all of whom are Israel, and all of whom are the Church. As Torrance writes, ‘The Church reached back in time to Abraham and it embraced all who believed in the Lord and obeyed Him, whether Jew or Gentile’ (page 140). This is rooted in the writings in Romans and Galatians around Jewish and Gentile believers sharing Abraham as a spiritual ancestor:

‘What does Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’... So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them... It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.’ (Romans 4: 3, 11, 13)

‘So also Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.’ (Galatians 3:6-9)

In light of such Scriptures, we should not adopt such language of the Church “replacing” Israel or the Church being the “New Israel”, which has been used over the centuries. Nevertheless, Scripture also gives us some additional language to be aware of, even confused by.

Firstly, in the final week of Galatians we will soon read, ‘Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule – to the Israel of God.’ (Galatians 6:15-16) So, Israel is used in the New Testament to refer to the Church – which can be confusing! But Paul is still arguing the same

theme as from chapter 3 above, that the Israel of God is all who are right with God by faith, whether Jew or Gentile. As Palmer Robertson goes on to outline:

'The phrase "Israel of God" cannot refer to the Jewish people as a community distinct from the Gentile world. For Paul has just established the rule that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision identifies anyone as belonging to the people of God. If the phrase "Israel of God" is understood to refer to the Jewish people, then Paul has pronounced his apostolic "peace and mercy" over a people regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ. That would flatly contradict Paul's whole argument throughout the letter to the Galatians and violate the canon [rule] he has just established... Jesus Christ has only one body and only one bride, one people that he claims as his own, which is the true Israel of God. This one people is made up of Jews and Gentiles who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah.' (pages 42, 49)

Confusion is also likely to be readily experienced by Paul's writing in Romans 9-11 when he says, '...not all who are descended from Israel are Israel' (Romans 9:6) as well as, '...in this way all Israel will be saved' (Romans 11:26). But the confusion can dissipate when we understand some of the nuances of Paul's writing.

In his chapter on "Israel and the Kingdom of God", Palmer Robertson details (page 115):

*'Israel* may refer to a place (the Land) or a person (who was first called Jacob in the Old Testament). But, in addition, the term may refer to a community of people viewed from a variety of perspectives:

- All ethnic descendants of Abraham, together with converting Gentiles, could be called Israel.
- The few within this broad people group who have faith might also be called Israel, distinct from the rest of the nation (Rom. 11:5).
- From a new covenant perspective, "the Israel of God" could be the body of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Gal. 6:16).
- In contemporary conversation, the Jewish state is called Israel.'

As you can see, language is key here and also likely to lead to a lot of confusion. Robertson also identifies here the meaning of Paul's words in Romans 9:6 – 'not all who are descended from Israel [ethnically] are Israel [the remnant who are right with God by faith]'. Both Robertson and Torrance agree on this teaching of Scripture, that within the wider nation of Israel there is a 'remnant' (Romans 11:5) who are right with God because of faith, not because of being ethnic descendants or abiding by certain customs.

Palmer Robertson finally reaches this conclusion of Romans 11:26, where Paul says, '...in this way all Israel will be saved', showing that 'all Israel' is not referring to all who are ethnic Israel at the time of Jesus' return:

'According to Paul, hardness has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come into Israel, and in this manner [that some will believe as they respond in faith by God's grace] all Israel shall be saved [i.e. the Israel of God]. The

full number that are the product of God's [powerful] grace, coming from both the Jewish and the Gentile communities, will constitute the final Israel of God. "All Israel," then, consists of the entire body of God's [people] from among both Jews and Gentiles. This is the group whom Paul calls "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16, where he insists that Christians must walk according to the rule that no distinction is to be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people.' (pages 188-189)

So, up until Christ returns there is the opportunity for Jew or Gentile to turn in faith to Jesus and experience the mercy of God (Romans 11:30-32) and in this way people from either background will then be truly part of Israel. As such, the Church has not replaced Israel, for together we are the 'Israel of God'; instead Israel, the olive tree of God's people reaching back to Abraham, is expanded as both believing Jews and Gentiles trust in Jesus.

### **Has God rejected Israel as a people and nation?**

Paul asks this very question at the opening of chapter 11:

'I ask then: did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.' (Romans 11:1-2)

Palmer Robertson has a really striking summary of why people might conclude this nevertheless:

'Ethnic Israel had rejected their Messiah. They had crucified the Christ. Would it not therefore be quite logical to conclude that God would reject ethnic Israel? If a Gentile rejects Christ, he is lost. Israel as a nation rejected Christ; so should not the nation be lost? Why should God continue to act savingly among the Jews? They received all the special favours of the Lord (Rom. 9:4-5) and yet rejected his Christ. Why should they not be cast off completely?' (Page 172)

Indeed, it is likely this kind of thinking has led to Christian antisemitism over the centuries, though Robertson is not advocating such attitudes or justifying them either. However, Paul makes it clear in Romans 3:3 and Romans 11:1 that God has not rejected ethnic Israel as His people. Here Torrance has a number of Scriptures that are striking. For example:

'I will plant Israel in their own land,  
never again to be uprooted  
from the land I have given them,'  
says the Lord your God. (Amos 9:15)

Torrance argues this cannot refer to the exiles from Babylon, as God did remove Israel from the Land after their rejection of Jesus, when Rome destroyed Jerusalem (c.AD70). Has God been untrue to His Word in Amos? Not if this promise referred to a later exile, i.e. the one brought about by Rome.

Additionally, he highlights:

‘Only if these decrees vanish from my sight,’  
declares the Lord,  
‘will Israel ever cease  
being a nation before me.’ (Jeremiah 31:36)

Is it possible to understand this as a pledge by God that Israel, as a nation, will continue until the end of the world? I believe a fair reading could suggest so.

Or what do we make of the prophecy in Isaiah 11:10-11 about a return from exile a ‘second time’, when only one return happened from Babylon? Or when God says the land is given as an ‘everlasting possession’ (Genesis 17:7), does this simply mean “a very long time” until God reveals more of His plan? As Torrance asks, would we be comfortable with interpreting Jesus’ promise of ‘everlasting life’ in a similar manner?

It was through such arguments that I came to appreciate Torrance’s point of view, that whilst ‘not all Israel is Israel’ and the ‘Israel of God’ is the Church from Abraham onwards, made of both Jew and Gentile, nonetheless, could God still have a purpose for ethnic Israel and this people and nation? Torrance argues for this line of thinking, and he, like Robertson, argues for remembering that Israel’s rejection of Jesus was no accident and indeed was part of God’s plan and doing, for He ‘hardened’ hearts in accordance with their will (Romans 11:8-10; Acts 2:23). Indeed, Romans goes on in chapter 11 to show that God purposed ethnic Israel’s rejection of Jesus so that the gospel would go out to the nations (11:11).

Yet, whilst that purpose within the outworking of God’s plan has been completed, Torrance would further build upon this, especially in light of God’s promises above around nationhood and return; that Israel can, and does, have an ongoing role to play as God’s witness even today. Drawing upon the writings of Karl Barth and TF Torrance, he outlines how Israel as a nation can have a complimentary role to the Israel of God (i.e. the Church), in that one ‘came out the resurrection side of the Cross to witness to joy and the mercy of God’ and the other ‘came out of the shadow side of the Cross to witness to God’s judgment’ (pages 127 and 141). Additionally, Torrance argues that Israel, ‘no matter [what her] response to the Lord was, whether it was obedient or disobedient, willing or unwilling, [she] bore witness to God among the nations’ (page 136). This includes witnessing to such issues as: the authority of the Old Testament; the Lord is the living and true God keeps His Word; and the historic nature of divine revelation (to name a few; pages 88 and 115). As such, Torrance claims ‘Israel’s witness in unbelief to God’s power and glory is different from, and complimentary to, the witness of the Church’ (page 155).

Clearly, in light of such Scriptures and theological conclusions Torrance is one who sees God’s sovereign hand upon the return of Israel to the land of the Middle East, and in his concluding propositions Palmer Robertson more tentatively affirms the possibility of this too, even though he also states that ‘the modern Jewish state is not a part of the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ’ (page 194) – after all, not all Israel is Israel. Furthermore, it should be noted that Torrance does not conclude, as some people online seem to do, that by God

sovereignly returning Israel to the Land that thereafter we must conclude “Israel can do no wrong”. Clearly, the Old and New Testaments show Israel doing exactly the opposite even after return from exile!

So, I find myself seeking to hold a number of propositions in tension: God has not rejected His people, and possibly neither has He rejected national Israel within His purposes, even today. Yet, this does not necessarily force us to have to be “pro” Israel, or avoid criticism of Israel. Indeed, reading the historic documentation around the political decisions made by the British Government to support Israel’s return to the Land, it is striking that The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 stated that ‘the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’ were to be safeguarded, and I wonder if God was inviting Israel to return under different parameters than what had been, and to be His witness again in that region but in a posture of humility, openness, justice and mercy; we may never truly know.

Nevertheless, Torrance is clearly right to say that ‘only by coming to faith in Jesus Christ will the Jewish people present the [fullest] witness to the world God intends’ (page 159) and only then will they enjoy the fullness of God’s blessings too (page 49). For as Palmer Robertson bluntly reminds us, ‘It must not be assumed that those who live in Jerusalem today without faith in Jesus have been chosen by God for salvation. Apart from repentance and faith, the inhabitants of Jerusalem...are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). To suggest anything else is to slight Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross, while at the same time imperilling the souls of many by encouraging false presumption.’ (Page 30) Yet as the number of Jewish believers increase, we may then one day know the full meaning of what Paul wrote when he said that ‘greater riches’ (Romans 11:12) will come as the Israel of God reaches its fullness, with the inclusion of Jewish believers grafted into the olive tree of the final Israel, ahead of Christ’s return.

### **How should we respond to Israel in light of Scripture?**

I hope the above has begun to give some form of framework to shape our theological understanding of Israel, across its range of meanings, including even of modern-day Israel. There are a vast number of issues as well as biblical and theological material that I have not broached, and clearly I am steering away from much of the politics. Nevertheless, before we get onto some specific responses, let me note a few red lines, or contested issues, I’d like us to steer clear of and/or encourage others to avoid, if it comes up in discussion:

- Trying to interpret modern events to fit with “end times” passages, especially in relation to the State of Israel; another book had an excellent overview of the history of Church theology as it relates to Zionism and the various claims made across the centuries by Christians about one event or another – it truly boggles the mind how badly we got it wrong as we attempted to peer into things that are only for the Father to know!
- Dispensationalist theologies: pre-, post-, amillennial, etc...I’m not sure it’s going to benefit us very much. Some even get into very questionable theology about Jewish worship practices/priesthood being renewed in the future messianic kingdom, or that

Jewish believers will have an exalted status to Gentile believers – this is all false interpretations and should be avoided.

But what about our own response to Israel, in particular modern-day Israel and the Jewish people as an ethnic group and nation?

Here Torrance has a helpful line: ‘Paul did not accept that Israel’s exile and rejection were final...the Church ought to have that same deep concern and pray, encourage, witness to Christ, so that Israel comes to welcome Jesus as Messiah’ (page 150). Now, Torrance is working within a framework of expecting a ‘mass conversion of Jewish people’, which I am unconvinced can be properly argued from Scripture, since Romans 11 speaks of only a remnant being saved (and see the material above about Romans 11:26). Yet, his other points seem fair and biblical: have a deep concern for Israel, pray, encourage and witness to Christ. But at the same time, just as God sent Israelite prophets to their own people to call them ‘to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly’ with God (Micah 6:8) so too can we, as part of the Israel of God, the Church of Jesus Christ, speak out against the injustice we see and call national Israel to the high standards of the Old Testament Scriptures it holds so dearly.

Nevertheless, it can be all too easy to only see one side of injustices done, and to be blinkered by Western media. I’m unsure if any of us will ever comprehend what it feels like to be surrounded by nations who wish our extinction, or at least our dispersion, poverty and misery. I’m not mentioning this to explain, nor excuse, those actions of Israel we might struggle with. But let us keep in mind what Israel also faces, for as Torrance writes, ‘Israel is preoccupied with survival, instead of with its mission to the world’ (page 31).

So, how do we respond in our day? I have no comprehensive answer but clearly, we are to love our neighbour, and that includes modern-day Israel as well as all the peoples of the Middle East. Yet we are also to speak the truth in love, and perfect love does not rejoice in unjust actions, whoever might have committed them. Somewhere amidst all these tensions, as with the tensions and ambiguities of the biblical references we have explored above, there will be a way forward to help us invite, encourage and enable people to follow Jesus Christ, and that also includes those of the Jewish faith and of all faiths, near and far. For ‘many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 8:11) as they come in faith to Jesus Christ.

In a few weeks’ time we will welcome *Embrace the Middle East* to an extra evening service. They are a Christian organisation working with all communities across the Middle East. In their study guide, *Gracious Dialogue*, they share these statements at the end, which appear to me to be helpful ideas to hold onto and put into practice:

- There are different understandings and perspectives on the place of the modern state of Israel, both in the arc of salvation history and in our contemporary world.
- While we may find ourselves holding different interpretations, historical narratives and political convictions, we must acknowledge that our primary calling is as followers of

Jesus. This first priority is the undergirding message of Paul's letter to the church in Rome and it gives us a foundation for moving forward in unity, not uniformity.

- Paul reminds us that we are all under the mercy of God (Romans 11:32). We begin from a place of shared need, and our salvation is a gift from God. Paul reminds us in chapter 3 of Romans, "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". All of us are capable of carrying violence and hatred in our hearts. We are all in need of God's loving forgiveness.
- We serve a God whose love knows no bounds. Paul's distress for his people shown in Romans 9 is met with God's plan to extend mercy to all - Jew and Gentile alike (Romans 11). We may disagree on the mechanics of how God does this, but we can agree on its beautiful outcome: a multi-ethnic family created by grace through faith. Our prayers must reflect God's heart for all the people who call Israel and Palestine home. Each person is an equally beloved image-bearer (Genesis 1).
- We are called to weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15); we are not called to be remote or neutral. Instead, we are called to enter into the grief of all who suffer. This is the challenge of graciousness. It means creating space in our hearts and prayers to lament the trauma of the Jewish people and the horrors of antisemitism, just as we lament the displacement, occupation and loss of life experienced by the Palestinian people. We pray for the grace to hold these griefs together before God.
- We are called to respond to evil with good (Romans 12:21). The cycles of violence, retribution and hatred are the outworking of the evil we are called to overcome. Our united prayer is a powerful light that shines in the darkness.

I am well aware the above will disappoint some, for not taking a particular position or not articulating more strongly for/against certain parties, actions or interpretations. But I tentatively offer this paper as a starting point for our discussions and responses, and especially for our prayers.

Yours,  
Scott