

# ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

by GEORGE ELDON LADD

**D**R. LADD, who occupies the Chair of New Testament History and Biblical Theology in Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, is well known to readers of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY. This study of Israel and the Church is closely related to other subjects on which he has already written for us, and comes within the area of his special interests. If some readers do not care for his references to the Millennium in the fourth and fifth sections of this article, they may replace that word by the Pauline "ages to come" (Eph. 2: 7) in which God will perfect that cosmic reconciliation of which the Church is His present model.

**T**HE theological problem of the relationship of Israel to the church has received radically diverse answers. On the one hand is a type of covenantal theology which insists that the church is spiritual Israel in the most exhaustive sense of the word. Because Israel rejected her Messiah, God has rejected Israel. The Kingdom has been taken away from Israel and "given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (Matt. 21: 43). This "royal priesthood", this "holy nation", this "God's own people" is the Church (1 Pet. 2: 9). The Church is therefore the spiritual Israel, the true people of God. When the Jews in Rome rejected the gospel, Paul said, "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28: 28). Because Israel rejected her Messiah, "God's wrath has come upon them at last" (1 Thess. 2: 16). The Church is now the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6: 16). The spiritual Israel has taken the place of the literal Israel. The Old Testament promises to the literal Israel must be interpreted in terms of the spiritual blessings enjoyed by the Church. Therefore there is no need of a Millennial Kingdom. Israelites will be saved only as they believe on Christ and come into the Church.

At the opposite extreme is the dispensationalist interpretation which insists that Israel and the Church are two separate peoples which cannot be mingled and must not be confused. In fact, God has two different programmes which He is carrying out in history: one with Israel and one with the Church. God's theocratic programme with Israel was interrupted when Israel rejected Christ. God therefore turned away from Israel to accomplish His redemptive purpose in the Church. When this purpose has been fulfilled, God will resume His relations with Israel. The Millennium will see

the resumption of this theocratic purpose and Israel will be restored as a nation, in her land of Palestine, with a reconstituted monarchy, and will rule over the nations of the earth on behalf of her God. Her King will be the promised Davidic Messiah who will sit upon the literal throne of David and rule the world from Jerusalem. Israel's temple worship and priestly order of Old Testament times, including the sacrificial system, will be restored. All the promises of the Old Testament will be fulfilled in literal terms. The Millennium, in other words, will be a revival or renewal of the Old Testament order. The church age is a parenthesis in God's programme for Israel and must not be confused with it. To some dispensational theologians, one of the greatest dangers to sound Biblical interpretation is a "spiritualizing" hermeneutic which applies spiritually to the church promises which were made to Israel. In fact, a literalistic hermeneutic is sometimes made the test of orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, as is often the case, the Biblical solution to the problem lies between the two extremes. We would attempt to solve the problem by a series of five propositions.

## I

First, in some real sense, the Church has taken the place of Israel and must be called the "spiritual" Israel. This "spiritualizing" of Israel began in the Old Testament. Paul makes this clear. Not all who are descended from Abraham *physically* are sons of Abraham *spiritually*. "Not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants" (Rom. 9: 7). "It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants" (Rom. 9: 8). The physical seed is not the true seed. The literal Israel is not the spiritual Israel. The spiritual Israel, the spiritual seed, consists only of those within the physical seed who are children of promise. The Scripture limits the true spiritual seed of Abraham to one narrowing line within the physical descendants.

Not only is the spiritual seed of Abraham limited to a small group within the literal seed, it is also extended to the Church. Paul makes this clear in Romans 4: 16, 18. God had promised Abraham that his seed should be as innumerable as the stars; Paul applies this promise to the Church. This promise to Abraham's seed, says Paul, was given "not only to the adherents of the law

<sup>1</sup> See John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Durham Publishing Co., Findlay, Ohio, 1959), pp. 71 f., 124.

(the literal seed) but also to those who share the faith of Abraham" (the spiritual seed) (Rom. 4: 16). Therefore, "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3: 29). Thus Abraham is "the father of us all" who have the same justifying faith which Abraham had (Rom. 4: 16). Abraham has been made "the father of all who believe without being circumcised" (Rom. 4: 11). It is impossible for language to state more clearly that Abraham's spiritual seed, his true spiritual children, are the men of faith—believers in the Lord Jesus Christ—the Church. Thus the Church in a real sense *is* the spiritual Israel.

This is equally clear in Romans 2: 28-29: "For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal." The King James Version gives a different impression by rendering "in the spirit" and "in the letter". These two phrases have no reference to the Holy Spirit. Neither is "in the spirit" a parallel construction to "of the heart". They refer to two ways of interpreting the Old Testament teaching about circumcision, as RSV indicates. The Greek, literally translated, reads, "circumcision (is) of heart, in spirit not letter". "In letter" means a literal interpretation of circumcision. It is done by cutting off a piece of flesh from the body, as the Jews did under the Old Testament order, to become the literal people of God. "In spirit" means a spiritual interpretation of circumcision. It is done by the Holy Spirit making a change in the heart so that we become the spiritual people of God—the true seed—the true Israel. Let no one suggest that it is wrong to interpret the Old Testament "spiritually"; the New Testament does exactly that in reinterpreting circumcision in spiritual terms and applying it to Christian experience. Our first proposition is now established: Believers are the true sons of Abraham, the true seed, the spiritual circumcision—the spiritual Israel.

## II

Our second proposition is this: The New Testament takes promises which in the Old Testament were directed to literal Israel and applies them "spiritually" to the Church.

Let us use two proofs. The prophet Hosea foretells the rejection of literal Israel because of her sin. Hosea was directed by God to act out a parable to illustrate God's relationship to Israel. He was commanded to name one of his children "Lo-ruhamah", which means "not pitied". The reason for this follows: God said, "for I will no more have pity on the house of Israel" (1: 6). Another son Hosea was to name "Lo-ammi", which means "not my

people". The meaning of this is, "for you are not my people and I am not your God" (1: 9). By this acted parable, Hosea was to show Israel that God had rejected her. However, Hosea foresees a restoration of the literal Israel. God will make a new covenant with Israel (2: 18) and will betroth Israel to himself forever (2: 19). "And I will have pity on Not pitied, and I will say to Not my people, 'You are my people'" (2: 23). Literal Israel which has been rejected is to be restored.

The New Testament applies the prophecy to the spiritual Israel—the Church. Speaking of this new people who consist not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles, Paul says, "As indeed he says in Hosea, 'Those who were not my people I will call "my people", and her who was not beloved I will call "my beloved"'" (Rom. 9: 25). Again, referring to Hosea 1: 9, which we have quoted, Paul adds, "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people', they will be called 'sons of the living God'" (Rom. 9: 26). How can we avoid the conclusion that Paul here means to say that the promise of the restoration of literal Israel is fulfilled in the Church?

A second proof. Joel, like Hosea, foresees the restoration of literal Israel. "You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the Lord, am your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame" (Joel 2: 27). Then follows the wonderful prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh (2: 28-29). This is clearly a promise to literal Israel, for the prophecy continues, "For behold, in those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem. . . ." (3: 1).

However, on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was given to the Church, Peter, under inspiration, said, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2: 16). A promise given to literal Israel is fulfilled to spiritual Israel—the Church.

## III

Our third proposition is this: The Old Testament system of animal sacrifices has forever passed away because the reality—Christ—has come. This is taught in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The Old Covenant, made with literal Israel, included the bloody sacrifices of bulls and goats. These, however, could not take away sins (Heb. 10: 4). They were only types and shadows of the reality embodied in the death of Christ (Heb. 10: 1). However, now that the reality has come, the shadows have passed away (Heb. 10: 2). Christ has become the Mediator of a better covenant (Heb. 8: 6). The old Mosaic covenant, with its animal sacrifices,

was not adequate to accomplish God's redemptive purpose. If it had been, there would have been no need for a second covenant (8: 7). However, God promised through Jeremiah (31: 31-34) a new covenant when God would write His law within the heart, when He would effect a forgiveness of sins. This is the new covenant in Christ's blood, "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt. 26: 28). Because this new covenant has been established, the old covenant is displaced by the new covenant. "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8: 13). The Old Testament order with its system of animal sacrifices, even though it still existed when Hebrews was written, had been superseded by the new covenant in Christ; and the temple order actually did pass away shortly after the writing of Hebrews when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in A.D. 70. The message of the entire Epistle to the Hebrews is that all of these institutions and sacrifices which pertained to the age of types and shadows have passed away, because they have been fulfilled by the realities in Christ.

#### IV

Our fourth proposition is this: Although the Church is the spiritual Israel, the New Testament teaches that literal Israel is yet to be saved. Paul was greatly concerned about the fate of Israel and the apparent failure of the promises of God. However, the fact that Israel rejected her Messiah and failed to come to faith does not mean that the promises of God and the Word of God have failed (Rom. 9: 6). The promises of God are fulfilled in the true (spiritual) seed of Abraham (Rom. 9: 7 ff.). The true people of God, whose salvation was foretold in Hosea 2: 23 and 1: 10, consists not of literal Israel but of those "whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles" (Rom. 9: 24). Literal Israel has stumbled against the rock of offence (Rom. 9: 33). Christ has brought to its fulfilment the entire intent and purpose of the Law and thereby has ended the dispensation of Law, having introduced the dispensation of righteousness by faith (Rom. 10: 4). Israel has not entered into this faith, and in disobedience and stubbornness has refused to respond to God's gracious plea (Rom. 10: 21).

However, this does not mean that God has finally cast away His people (Rom. 11: 1). There is, first of all, a remnant of literal Israel who have believed in Christ (11: 5). The rest of Israel were blinded (11: 7). However, the purpose of their blindness is not their fall; because of their fall, salvation has come to the Gentiles

(11: 11). Then Paul makes a key statement: "Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!" (11: 12).

In this statement is embodied Paul's theology of the future salvation of Israel. If the fall of Israel has brought salvation to the Gentiles, in how much larger measure will salvation come to the Gentile world if the "fullness", i.e., full salvation of literal Israel, come in? Israel was God's chosen instrument to bring salvation to the world. This was the heart of the promise given to Abraham. He was to be the father of many nations, and in him would all families of the earth be blessed (Gen. 12: 1-3; 17: 6). Romans 4: 17-18 and Galatians 3: 8 prove that this promise is to be interpreted not only literally of Abraham's physical seed but that the deeper truth is found in the spiritual interpretation which applies it to believers in Christ—the Church. This is why Christ came into the world as an Israelite. Israel's rejection of her Messiah and her subsequent fall were no mere accident of history but the means used by God to bring salvation to the Gentiles. But this is not the last chapter of the story. The Church age as we know it is not the end. Two things must yet happen: The fullness of literal Israel must come in, and by her salvation greater riches be brought to the Gentile world.

Paul further develops this truth in the following verses. Literal Israel is still the chosen people. She is still the special object of God's care and will yet be the instrument of salvation. This is asserted in Romans 11: 15-16. The firstfruits of Israel (the patriarchs) were holy—i.e., the objects of God's election and care; and the entire lump (Israel as a people) is also holy. If the root of the tree is holy, so is the entire tree. The people Israel continues to be a "holy" people—a people whom God has designated for his redemptive purpose in the world. This future purpose is indicated in the following words: "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (v. 15).

Here is a twofold contrast: the present rejection of Israel because of unbelief is contrasted with a future receiving of Israel in belief. The other contrast is even more significant. The present rejection of unbelieving Israel means that the message of reconciliation has gone out to all the world; Israel's future restoration will mean much more than this—a state of blessedness which Paul describes by the phrase "life from the dead". The balanced structure of the sentence shows that this is a blessing which comes

upon the Gentile world. The balance of the sentence is the key to its interpretation, and the following diagram illustrates the balance.

- |                                  |                                 |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| I                                | II                              |
| a. Present rejection of Israel.  | a. Reconciliation of the world. |
| b. Future restoration of Israel. | b. Life from the dead.          |

Israel is the subject of the two members in Part I; and the Gentile world is the subject of the two members in Part II. "Life from the dead" (II b) is not a parallel member with "Israel" (I b) but with "the world" (II a). It stands in *contrast* with Israel (I b). "Life from the dead" does not refer to Israel's restoration but to the results of Israel's restoration in the Gentile world. Israel's future salvation will issue in a new order of blessedness and happiness for the Gentile world which is likened to the emergence of life from the dead. There remains in the future for the world an enjoyment of the reality of the life in Christ extending far beyond anything we have now experienced; and this will be accomplished through the instrumentality of Israel's conversion. Paul does not here tell us when or how this era of blessing will occur; but we believe it will take place during the Millennium.

Paul sums the entire matter up in verses 25-27. Israel is now hardened. The Gentiles are now being brought in. Finally "all Israel shall be saved". "Israel" here is literal Israel; and "all Israel" does not need to mean every single Israelite but the people as a whole. Paul does not add here the thought that through this salvation of the people Israel, a new wave of life will come to the whole world, for his concern at this point is only the destiny of Israel.

v

Our final proposition is this: This future salvation of Israel must take place on fundamentally the same terms as the salvation of the Gentiles, viz., through saving faith in Jesus Christ as her crucified Messiah. The New Testament nowhere elaborates upon how this is to take place. The words in Romans 11: 26, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob" do not necessarily refer to the Second Coming of Christ. This is a composite quotation from Isaiah 59: 20 and 27: 9, neither of which refers to the Messiah. So far as the passage in Romans 11 is concerned, the salvation of Israel could occur by a great evangelistic movement which would bring Israel into the Church.

However, the Old Testament constantly envisages the salvation of Israel as a distinct entity. Therefore, we can only suggest that the means of Israel's conversion may actually be the Second Com-

ing of Christ itself. God said through Zechariah: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a first-born" (12: 10). Apparently the appearance of the pierced Christ will convict Israel of her sinfulness.

This does not mean that Israel will be saved on any other ground than by faith in Christ. It does suggest that the means of salvation is unusual. Saul of Tarsus was brought to faith only by a special vision of the glorified Christ; yet he was saved by faith like any believer and was brought into the Christian Church. In a similar way, perhaps, it will be the appearance of the returning Christ which will be the means of convincing Israel that Jesus was actually her Messiah. If so, they will be saved by faith in Christ and in the largest sense of the word will become a part of the Church, yet as a distinct people. Perhaps during the Millennium, we shall see for the first time in human history *a truly Christian nation*—Israel converted and brought to faith in Jesus as her Messiah.

*Fuller Theological Seminary,  
Pasadena, California.*