

Chosen in Christ to Salvation and to Participation in His Work

Steven Paas

No replacement

Christians sometimes struggle with the question whether their faith in Christ can only be truly Biblical if it is experienced within the framework of special expectations for and from 'Israel'. Often, this struggle is somehow connected to their fear of being accused by fellow Christians of 'replacement' thinking or even of antisemitism. Apparently, among Christians there are conflicting insights about the relationship between the Church and Israel. Elsewhere, I have discussed what I consider to be the theological main cause of this problem.¹ It concerns the place of Christ in God's plan of salvation.² This article is about an important aspect of that, God's election in and through Christ.

God's revelation through the history of ethnic Israel in the Old Testament is of great significance to mankind and to the Church of Christ. However, the Church is not a replacement for Israel. In this regard, the opponents of replacement theology are right. But are they also right when they suggest that ethnic Israel in the Old Testament is the first stage of its permanent continuation? Does Israel or the Jewish people possess in Christ a separate status and future in the era before the Second Coming or/and in the time after it? These questions are important for genuinely understanding of the Bible. Consequently, we have to distinguish carefully between the Church and Israel.

The Election of the Church

The Church is the collective of all true believers of all times and places. This reality is based on God's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. The plan of salvation extends from Paradise through Jesus' redemptive work on earth to the Second Coming. It contains God's gracious offer of salvation to all nations and people. That offer culminates in the mission of Jesus Christ and is intended for everyone, Jews and Gentiles, indiscriminately. God the Father 'granted Him authority over all people'. God promises forgiveness of sins and a renewed eternal life to all those He has given to Christ and believe in Him (*John* 6: 35-59; 17:1-3). It is everyone's responsibility to accept God's offer in true faith. Unfortunately, there is the mystery that many do not (want to) accept the offer of salvation. It is not

given to us to determine who they are. But when they continue to (willingly) despise Christ, they remain in their lost state.

However, the true believers have been given to Christ by the Father. They have embraced Christ as their Saviour, for the glory of God and for their salvation. They are assured of their being saved because they safely hide in Christ, who is the Father's Chosen One (Lk. 9:35; 23:35). Through faith in Christ, they are reconciled with God. Through the mission of Christ, they are gathered from all nations. When on earth, Christ began His work among the Jewish people. Now that He is in heaven, He not only continues to do so, but He also continues to work among all nations. Christ's atoning work brings people to Himself and to one another (2 Cor. 5:19, 20; 1 John 2:2). They are 'one flock' under 'one Shepherd' (John 10:16) and they are intended to be the 'communion of saints' (*Credo*, art. 9; 1 John 1:3) as 'the one holy catholic [= general] and apostolic Church'. As such, they are members of the Body of which Christ is the Head (1 Cor. 12:12, 13). Those who believe in Christ are the people of God who are saved, 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Pet. 2:9).

Israel's election

Old Testament Israel was an ethnic people, consisting of believers and non-believers. It was chosen by God, to be *the people of God* in an exceptional sense. Election in the first place means: being called to repentance and conversion. This is also the true for the New Testament, where God uses the Church to call everyone to repentance and conversion. Old Testament Israel was chosen to serve in a temporary function or task in God's plan of salvation. It functioned as a metaphor, example, or demonstration of God's actions toward the world. As such, in His acts with Israel God already showed His wonderful loving grace to the whole world. Namely, by offering salvation to humanity, which was lost in sin and guilt. In the same Old Testament, through His dealings with Israel, He also showed to the world His punishments and judgments when He was disobeyed by Israel. Thus, Old Testament Israel, metaphorically served in a missionary function, focused on all nations. In that way, Israel was the unique *people of God*. All nations were called to follow Israel's exclusive example and to submit to God's rule in obedience. But the people of Israel have not been able to fulfill that missionary task. It has fallen into disobedience itself.

The election has been fulfilled in Christ

What Israel was unable and unwilling to do, God himself did. Ultimately, He Himself fulfilled the universal function of Israel. In the Person of the Jew Jesus Christ, the mission of Israel or (later) the Jewish people, has been fulfilled and led to its essential meaning and conclusion. This means that now all — Jews and

Gentiles alike — have been called to follow Jesus and trust in Him. Christ ‘has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility’ between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14). In the mission of Jesus in which His followers participate, all people of all nations, including those of today’s ethnic Israel or the Jewish people, are called to obedience to Him. Biblical Israel foreshadowed that mission. Just as in the Old Testament, when all nations had to obey the unique example God gave them in Israel, in the same way in and after the time of the New Testament all nations and all mankind are called to repent and convert to Christ and thus be *the people of God*. In Christ, the extraordinary place of ethnic Israel has been widened to all nations and all people, indiscriminately. All nations, not (!) excluding Israel, are God’s property to whom He addresses the promise of His covenant of grace. They must behave like peoples of God. Because, they unfortunately remain (partly) disobedient, God gathers from them the Church, through the working of His electing grace in Christ. The nations of the earth will be judged by God because of their disobedience. The position and future of ethnic Israel or the Jewish people is no different from that of any other people in that respect. God’s Church is the apple of His eye. She will not be affected by judgment, but she will be absorbed in the new earth and the new heaven.

The ‘Israel of God’

The Church is not a *replacement* for Israel. Because the Church was present in Israel too. This refers to the part of Israel that remained faithful to God. It expanded the Church, as did the many Jews who subsequently became Christians. The Church respectfully remembers that fact, and with shame the ‘Gentile’ part of the Church admits that it often dealt badly with Jewish people in the past. The historical path of proclaiming God’s grace to the world after *Genesis* 1-11 continued through Israel, through the Old Testament saints. Thus, the Church is deeply connected to the history of Israel. Therefore, the Church is sometimes called ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:12), ‘the spiritual Israel’ or ‘the true Israel’ (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:18; Rom. 9:6). These terms acknowledge the fact that part of Old Testament ethnic Israel belonged to the true believers. So, those designations refer to all true believers in general. They are not about the whole of ethnic Israel. We must, therefore, guard against the misunderstanding that the use of such terms as ‘spiritual Israel’ for the Church implies that ethnic Israel has been replaced by the Church or, on the other hand, that ethnic Israel permanently occupies an exceptional place in God’s plan of salvation as the specific *people of God* in His plan. That wasn’t the case then, and it isn’t now. In these respects, the place of Israel or the Jewish people is not more irreplaceable or extraordinary than the position of any other people under God’s providential rule. Saying this does not mean though that one should not hope and pray – with Paul – that (also!) as large a part of the ethnic people of Israel as possible may still come to recognize Jesus as Messiah and Saviour.

The election of a Christian

In the life of each individual Christian, those two different aspects of election come together. In Christ, he or she is chosen for salvation *and* chosen for the task or function of participation in His work. In both respects, every Christian has become heir to all God's promises of grace in Christ (Gal. 3:29; 2 Cor. 1:20). In the bond of faith with Christ, he or she is part of His body, the Church, a saved person and basically a renewed child of God. This new identity extends to the entire existence of a believer, beyond death and grave, into eternity. The function or task of a Christian is also a consequence of that bond of faith with Christ. After all, as the Fulfiller of the missionary task of ethnic Israel of the past, Christ was sent into the world. He is 'the Saviour of the world' (John 4:42). Christians are part of His mission. They participate in it. The metaphor of the missionary identity of Old Testament Israel is an enduring source of inspiration for every Christian. Not because they have anything extraordinary to expect from today's ethnic Israel or the Jewish people. But because they expect everything from Christ.

Dr. Steven Paas (1942) published on the phenomenon of 'Israelism' in the interpretation of Biblical prophecies, on European and African church history and mission, and on the lexicography of Chichewa, a widely spoken language in Central Africa.

¹ Steven Paas, 'Idolizing Israel is Harmful to Jews and to Christians', <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/idolizing-israel-harmful-jews-christians-steven-paas/?published=t>; Idem, 'The Message of the Bible: Wasp or Funnel?', <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/message-bible-wasp-funnel-steven-paas/?published=t&trackingId=YWBP410okXicpfrKmKo6YA%3D%3D>

² Cf. Steven Paas (Ed.), *Israelism and the Place of Christ: Christocentric Interpretation of Biblical Prophecy*, LIT Verlag, Berlin, Munster, Vienna, Zurich, London, January 2018. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/israelism-place-christ-steven-paas-1e/>