

## Jewish Identity Part One: Flesh or Spirit?

*“For Thou hast established for Thyself Thy people Israel as Thine own people forever, and Thou, O LORD, hast become their God.” (2 Samuel 7:24 KJV)*

*“And not for the nation only, but that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.” (John 11:52 KJV)*

There are two distinct Israels, the flesh (or the ethnic) and the Spiritual. Sometimes ethnic Jews, like Jesus and His Disciples, are also Jews in the Spirit – but not always.

The New Testament does commonly use the word Jew to describe an ethnic Israelite. (e.g. John 13:3) But using “Jew” as an ethnic term is only one meaning, for as Paul says, “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel...but: 'through Isaac your descendants will be named.’” (Romans 9:6,8) Paul is here saying two things: that not all ethnic Jews are true Israel, and that Israel does include people born again who are not ethnically Jewish.

The existence of the merely ethnic Jew, who is not a child of promise, is evidenced in the Old Testament prophets. In Isaiah especially, the idea of a purge of Israel is clear. (Isaiah 1:24-28,31) Isaiah 6:9,10, speaks of a portion of Israel lost, who are made blind and deaf. There is eternal punishment in Isaiah's final verse.

Here is a riddle. God planted the “choicest vine”. (Isaiah 5:2 NKJ) “Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes?” (Isaiah 5:4 NKJ) This is because He chose ethnic Israel to be His own people, yet they are not all Spiritual Israel. For of Spiritual Israel, we read,

“In the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult.” (Isaiah 45:25 NIV)

But of ethnic Israel on the whole, which died in Sinai, we read,

“Even from long ago your ear has not been open, because I knew that you would deal very treacherously; and you have been called a rebel from birth.” (Isaiah 48:8 NAS)

There is no way to reconcile God’s declarations for Israel without saying that some are not going to inherit His promises. The process of being disinherited occurs in the law by being “cut off”, but we will examine that in another article.

Isaiah teaches that the world will all gather to Israel. He says, “open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith.” (Isaiah 26:2) And is Israel the righteous nation? Not yet, not until Jacob turns from his sin. (Romans 11:26,27; Isaiah 59:20,21; Isaiah 27:9) Instead, Isaiah was the one to write,

“Therefore, as a tongue of fire consumes stubble, and dry grass collapses into the flame, so their root will become like rot and their

blossom blow away as dust; for they have rejected the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel. On this account the anger of the LORD has burned against His people, and He has stretched out His hand against them and struck them down, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses lay like refuse in the middle of the streets. For all this His anger is not spent, but His hand is still stretched out.” (Isaiah 5:24-25 NAS)

Yet, again, he has said, “open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith,” for this Israel is not one, but two. (Isaiah 26:2 NIV) We see moreover, that Spiritual Israel includes righteous people who are Gentiles.

“Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants—everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast My covenant—even them I will bring to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on My altar; for My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations.’ The Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, says, ‘Yet I will gather to him Others besides those who are gathered to him.’” (Isaiah 56:6-8 NKJ)

Some may use this passage to say, on the contrary, Gentiles cannot be Israel, because the passage refers to “foreigners”, “besides” His own. (vv.6,8) But look only a few verses prior.

“Neither let the foreigner, that hath joined himself to the LORD, speak, saying, the LORD will surely separate me from his people;” (Isaiah 56:3 ASV)

These foreigners are actually not separate from the people. And Isaiah says something similar in chapter 14, verse 1.

“[The LORD] will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the sojourner shall join himself with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob.” (ASV)

And Jesus describes a complete unity in the flock, for how else would the Lord lead us?

“Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear my voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.” (John 10:16 NKJ)

Though Paul at the beginning of Romans 3, writes that ethnic Jewishness is of much value, he also clearly describes how a person can be a Jew without the physical descent.

“For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” (Romans 2:25-29 NAS)

Therefore Jesus is not the end of Jewish identity, but rather election broadens “Israel” to all those who cling to Jesus under that banner, the “Holy One of Israel”. Paul has written in the excerpt above that circumcision is by the Spirit. Also Paul says,

“Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.” (Philippians 3:2,3 KJV)

Therefore it is clear that according to the New Testament a Christian is always a Jew, and in the ultimate sense, only faithful people can be considered Jews. Therefore Jesus says in Revelation 2:9, “I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (KJV)

We have one God, one savior, who was born a Hebrew and remains a Hebrew. We know from Romans 11:16, if we need a verse for this, that Jesus is a Jew. It calls Christ the root and first fruits. But He is one with the Father. Would His Son belong to a different religion than He Himself? After all, the law of the Jews, of Moses, and all the Judaism of the Old Testament is a religion which God created and is sacred to Him. His revelation and His Spirit fills the people. The Father is a Jew and this is very honorable and the best wine. Then how could God not bring all the members of His body into this one family?

Some people try to snuff the power of the Spirit here and say, “Oh, well, a Christian can be spiritually Jewish, but a Gentile is a Gentile and a Jew is still really a Jew.” But Jesus said, “it is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.” (John 6:63 KJV) What one is in the Spirit is the all-important and vital thing. The distinction in the flock between Jew and Gentile has been removed. There will be no two tiers in Heaven with one group making up the VIPs.

So far we have cited scripture showing Israel is a multi-ethnic faith, but why is a person adopted in Israel by faith? It all comes to the nature of the promises of God. Belonging to God must be a matter of promise whether in terms of election unto salvation, or inheriting the promises of Abraham, and the reason for this is to inherit a guarantee through grace, something that man could never secure for himself.

“Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.” (Romans 9:6-8 KJV)

(Paul here establishes the term Israel in the “flesh” to mean ethnic Israel.) He asks whether the word of God has taken effect. Just as Moses pleaded to God to spare Israel after the sin of the golden calf, Paul desires that by the Lord’s mercy, He will be glorified in Israel. Yet the Chosen Nation has killed their own Messiah and cast the Son out of the Vineyard. Paul's response is to point out that the gifts and blessings showered on Israel, and listed in verses 4 and 5 preceding, have not been scattered to the wrong people and lost, but rather God has invested them in a select group within the larger ethnic people. The election has been to the Israel of promise.

And so in Galatians, Paul teaches the election must always be to the Israel of promise, to those who just as much as he himself are children of Abraham. He writes, “now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.” (Galatians 4:28 NIV)

In that epistle Paul makes an argument about grace, salvation, and promise. He writes, “the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.” (Galatians 3:22 NIV) The promise is the origin and the ultimate end of our faith. Because God's Word never changes and He is always true, promise is the dynamic power of our religion. Accepting God's promise that the Son of God died on the cross to free us from sin, we through grace inherit Christ's righteousness and follow the call without condemnation. If we lean on Christ in His promise of goodness we can follow Him, but if we act independently of Him then we can be assured we have no source of life in ourselves.

Beginning with Abraham, and just as much to all his children, His gift comes by a promise. But why? He made us insufficient to enjoy His provision and worship Him in His gracious love. For we need Him for every good deed. (John 15:4) If He will say, “well done, good and faithful servant,” this is His mercy. (Matthew 25:21 NKJ) He commits grace to us by His nature as the positive core of all Goodness in the universe. In Paul's figure, we are all nourished by the same root.

Thus grace, for a reason deep in the architecture of logic and scripture, accomplishes more through promise than man's best efforts ever could. That is why we must be born into the Spirit, and have an inheritance not possible as creatures born in flesh.

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12,13 NKJ)