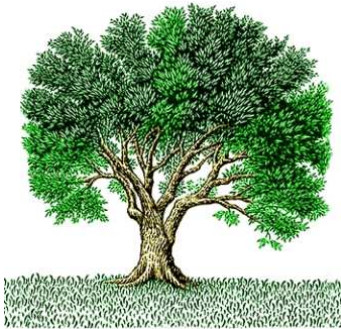


"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)

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It's Not Over Until God Says It's Over

The message of the Olive Tree of Israel

by Galen Peterson

One of the recurring themes of the Bible is the way that God takes seemingly hopeless situations and turns them around for His purposes. This is especially true for persons who previously failed in some way. Moses, for example, killed an Egyptian, then acted in a guilty manner and fled to the land of Midian. But in time God called Him to be the one to lead Israel out of bondage, the one who would receive the Torah and who would serve as the intercessor between the people and the Lord.

David had a fling with Bathsheba and then arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed. Yet David was later called "a man after God's heart" (Acts 13:22). Peter denied his relationship with Jesus, but later became a primary voice of testimony for the Lord. In their lives, God never said it was over for them.

The Bible also goes into great detail on the failures and restoration of Israel as a nation. Repeatedly we read about God's warnings for national disobedience

and their subsequent failures. But they are always accompanied by God's promises of restoration to their land. The Prophet Jeremiah affirmed one of these promises:

'I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.' (Jer. 29:14)

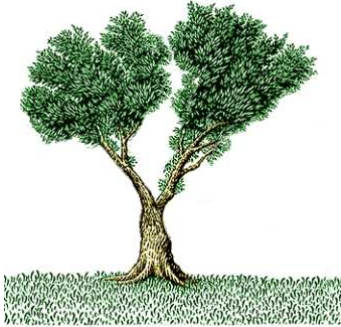
Ezekiel added the vision of the dry bones, which depicts a dead nation coming back to life (Ezek. 37:1-14). The establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is the fulfillment of the first part of Ezekiel's vision. What remains to take place is the spiritual rebirth that is the culmination of the prophecy (v. 14).

There is a notable similarity between Israel's loss and restoration to the land with the loss and restoration of the Jewish way

of worship. Without question, a significant change has taken place in the way believers worship since the earliest days of the church.

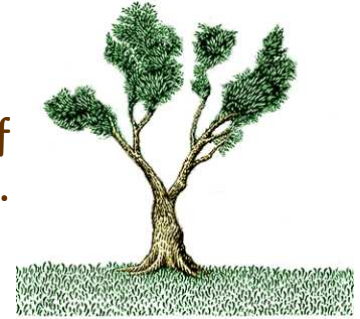
Tragically, there was a pronounced anti-Judaic movement within the early church. Consider the changes made under the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire. He induced the church bishops at the council of Nicea in 325 A.D. to separate the annual commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus from the date of the Jewish Passover as had been observed previously by Christians. Thereafter, there was a pervasive effort to repudiate every vestige of Jewish culture. The church of Constantinople mandated acceptance of this profession:

"I renounce all customs, rites, legalisms, unleavened breads and feasts of lambs of the Hebrews, sacrifices, prayers, aspersions, purifications, sanctifications and propitiations, and fasts, and new moons, and Sabbaths, and



Israel is like an olive tree.

Some “branches” were broken off because of disbelief.



superstitions, and hymns and chants and observances and synagogues, and the food and drink of the Hebrews; in one word, I renounce absolutely everything Jewish, every law, rite and custom...”

This was a great loss. There is much spiritual understanding that can be conveyed in the cultural elements of worship used in biblical times and still associated with today’s Jewish culture.

The feasts, for example, are filled with symbolism revealing God’s plan for humanity. Passover enables us to understand in greater depth the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. First Fruits teaches us about the power and hope of the Resurrection. Pentecost/Weeks reveals to us the relationship between the Word and the Spirit of God. The Feast of Trumpets points us to the return of Messiah. The Day of Atonement warns us about the importance of having our sins covered by faith in Messiah. The Feast of Tabernacles assures us about our promise of eternally dwelling with God when we have received His gift of salvation.

There are many more aspects of worship in the Jewish cultural context that are very meaningful, such as a high reverence for God and even His name and His written word. And so on. But after their purge in the fourth century, these

ways have become considered to be unwelcome and foreign. For centuries this has been the mode of the Church, leading most Christians to conclude that these cultural elements were never part of the means of worship among believers.

We may wonder what could have been if the Church had embraced its heritage and truly loved the Jewish people instead of persecuting them. Would there have been an Inquisition? Would there have been a Holocaust? One could argue the case that they would not have occurred because the world would have been a different place.

Yet, the reality of our world is a history marked by rejection, hatred and persecution, as well as much ignorance.

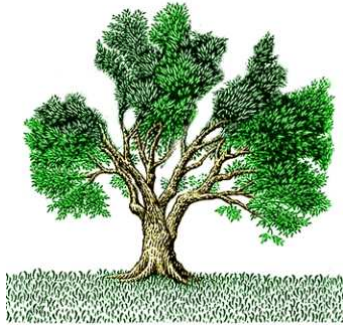
There is great symbolic significance in the timing of events on our modern calendars. Each year *Yom Hashoah*—Holocaust Remembrance Day comes just 12 days after Passover. The events of these two commemorations are linked together. While the loss of 6,000,000 Jewish lives cannot be placed exclusively on the shoulders of the church leaders in ancient times who rejected the Passover and everything culturally Jewish, there is a connection. The Nazis used the rejection by church leaders to justify their destruction of the Jews. And we would be wise to recognize that fact.

But this is also not the end of the story. There is another date on the modern calendar in this same season. *Yom Ha’Atzmaut*—Israel Independence Day takes place just eight days after Holocaust Remembrance Day. This timing echoes the rebirth of the nation of Israel in modern times out of the ashes of the Holocaust.

In the months following the end of World War II, most leaders of our world saw the need for the Jewish people to have their own homeland. So in 1948 Israel was granted legitimacy as a nation. And in so doing, Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones came to pass.

But back in the time when the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D. and the Jewish people were scattered among the nations, the day when Israel would be a nation again must have seemed impossible. However the Lord is not just the God of restoration, He makes the impossible possible. He proved that it was not over.

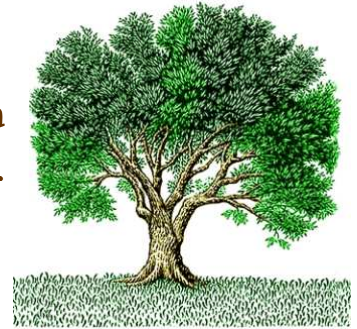
There is one more thought about the historical aspect. The rebirth of Israel, whether it is recognized or not, *is* changing the Church. For nearly 2000 years Christianity showed no interest in its Jewish roots. But since Israel became a nation again, there is a renewed interest in such things, like Passover Seder dinners. Messianic congregations (culturally Jewish churches) did not exist virtually anywhere in the world prior to 1948. Now they



Gentile “branches” were grafted in.

Jews will be grafted back in again
and all Israel will be saved.

From the book of Romans, chapter 11



can be found on every continent and in every state in the U.S.

Could it be that we are witnessing a comeback in terms of the place of Jewish elements of worship within the Church? The question is why? Why would God be stirring the hearts of people around the world to have a heart for Israel and the Jewish elements of worship?

It gets back to the promises made by God.

- He has promised in Jeremiah 31 to preserve Israel as a nation as long as the universe exists as we know it.
- He has promised in Zech. 12:10 that in the End Days:

“I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.”

- And He has promised in Rom. 11:26 that “all Israel will be saved.”

If God has spoken, surely these things will come to pass, because with God nothing is over until He says it’s over. But that is not the whole story. There is significance in the sequence of

events leading to the point of national salvation for Israel, as depicted by the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans using the metaphor of the olive tree.

Initially, the body of believers was predominantly comprised of Jewish people. Paul describes how this changed with the coming of Jesus. He writes:

“But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17).

Like branches being broken off a tree, many Jewish people in that day did not believe in Jesus as Messiah and were “broken” off from the community of faith. Only a minority believed and, in keeping with this metaphor, remained on the tree (Paul calls them in v. 5 the “remnant”). But many Gentiles did believe in Jesus, and as “wild olive branches” were thus grafted in, or added to the community of faith (v. 24)

The reason for the breaking off or the grafting in is a simple matter of faith: “They were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith” (v. 20). It’s all a matter of belief in God’s plan of redemption through the Messiah.

Historically we know that most Jews have not believed in

Jesus as the Messiah and Redeemer. But again the story isn’t over. There is more to the timeline. Paul declares that “God is able to graft them in again” (v. 23) and that only “a partial hardening has happened to Israel” (v. 25). Not total, just some hardening against the Gospel. Many Jewish people are believing in Jesus and are being grafted back in to the community of faith. Today it is one branch at a time.

This, then, is the prelude to the final point on the timeline—all Israel being saved. When that will be, we cannot know. But it will happen with certainty because God will bring it to pass.

It is also important to note how Israel is described as being *natural* olive branches and Gentiles as being *wild* olive branches. It is a picture of two peoples united together in one tree with both similarities and differences. Like the commonality between different varieties of olive trees, the basic nature of Jews and Gentiles is the same. We are all sinners. We are all saved by grace through faith in Messiah. We all produce the same spiritual fruit. But like the differences between various olive trees, we look somewhat different and our fruit tastes just a bit different.

In other words, based on this figurative language, there is room for a variety of cultural expressions among believers in our one community of faith. But

within the Church as a whole, there is still some resistance when it comes to the way that believing Jews should be allowed to worship.

Yet do we expect Polynesian people to wear a suit and tie to attend a church with a steeple and hymns written by Fanny Crosby? Do we expect Norwegian Christians to sit in an African style open air shelter playing drums instead of a pipe organ? Should it be any different for Jews?

If we are to “move the Jewish people to jealousy” like Paul says in Rom. 11:14, that means there has to be something appealing to them. Jealousy means seeing someone else having something so good and wonderful that you want to have it for yourself.

Yes, we must share in common our core theological principles. But the way in which we worship should be able to include those cultural elements that are familiar to us, as long as they are under the authority of God’s Word.

We are witnessing that very thing today among the Jewish people. God has blessed us with the ability to give them not only the message of redemption, but the means to communicate it in their familiar cultural context. In spite of the dysfunctional past between

the Church and the Jewish people, this relationship is definitely not over.

We also ought to note the warning that goes along with the principle of the olive tree. Paul warns “you who are Gentiles...do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you” (Rom. 11:13,18). And again, “Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either.” (vv. 20-21).

In spite of this warning, we see a history of arrogance within the Church.

What transpired centuries ago at the Council of Nicea and during the early generations of the Church, was arrogant. The so-called Bible scholars who crafted a theology replacing and rejecting Israel were arrogant. Those persons who called themselves Christians yet persecuted the Jewish people down through the centuries were arrogant. All of these not only missed out on many blessings, but they will have to stand before God in light of their actions:

*“I will gather all the nations
And bring them down to the
valley of Jehoshaphat. Then I
will enter into judgment with*

*them there On behalf of My
people and My inheritance,
Israel” (Joel 3:2).*

The same is true for today. We are arrogant if we deny the Jewish cultural heritage of the Church. And we are arrogant if we deny the Jewish people the right to worship as Jews. So we face the same prospect of standing before God in light of our treatment of Israel and the Jewish people.

We live in a wonderful day. The Spirit of God is mightily at work in our world, raising up Jewish and Gentile believers alike, and drawing us ever closer to the day when the ultimate victory will be won when the true champion Jesus will return.

Then, and only then, God will finally say it is over. May we all be faithful until that day.

A.R.M. is dedicated to communicating the Good News in a Jewish cultural way.

Our *Brit Hadasha* (New Covenant) Fellowship is a place of testimony in a setting based on Jewish cultural themes. Both Jews and Gentiles are welcome to take part in our gatherings centered around worship, learning from God’s Word, fellowshiping with one another and becoming equipped as witnesses.

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