

LETTER SIX

Israel According to the Scriptures

Christ, Covenant, and the People of God

The question is not whether Israel matters. The question is how the New Testament teaches us to understand Israel in the light of Jesus Christ.

An Emotionally Charged Question

Few subjects in modern Christianity carry more emotion, political weight, financial commitment, and unquestioned loyalty than Israel. Recent conflict in the Middle East has intensified the conversation and exposed how closely many believers have joined biblical interpretation to modern geopolitics.

The subject is made even more difficult by the reality of antisemitism. Hatred, mistreatment, or suspicion of Jewish people is evil and must be rejected without qualification. Christians should remember that Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest believers were Jewish. We should oppose ethnic hatred wherever it appears and treat every person as one made in the image of God.

Yet opposing antisemitism does not require accepting every theological claim about Israel or granting unconditional approval to a modern government. Honest biblical examination is not hatred. Political criticism is not automatically antisemitism, just as support for Jewish neighbors does not require embracing Christian Zionism.

The question before us is therefore not political first, but biblical:

Have we understood Israel according to Scripture—or primarily according to a theological framework we inherited?

This question affects how we understand God's covenants, the identity of His people, the meaning of biblical promises, the mission of the Ecclesia, and the centrality of Christ.

The purpose of this letter is not to attack Jewish people, provoke offense, or encourage pride among Gentile believers. Paul explicitly warns Gentile Christians not to boast over Jewish branches (Romans 11:17–21). The purpose is to ask where the New Testament locates covenant identity and inheritance.

This is not a secondary issue. It is foundational.

The Vineyard and Its Fruit

In Matthew 21:33–44, Jesus tells a parable about a landowner who planted a vineyard and entrusted it to tenants. When harvest time came, the tenants beat, killed, and stoned the owner's servants. Finally, the owner sent his son, believing they would respect him. Instead, they killed the heir in an attempt to seize his inheritance.

Jesus then asked the chief priests and Pharisees what the owner would do. They answered that he would judge the wicked tenants and lease the vineyard to others who would give him its fruit.

Jesus applied their answer directly:

“Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” —Matthew 21:43

The immediate target of the parable is Israel's unfaithful leadership. These leaders had been entrusted with covenant stewardship, yet they rejected the prophets and were preparing to reject the Son. Jesus quoted Psalm 118: “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.”

The parable should not be turned into a declaration that God despises Jewish people or that Gentiles are inherently superior. The judgment falls upon unfaithful tenants, and the new stewardship is defined by relationship to the rejected Son and the fruit produced under His lordship.

The Kingdom is not destroyed. Its stewardship is entrusted to a people gathered around the cornerstone—Jesus Christ.

The decisive question is not ancestry, but what we do with the Son.

Outward Identity Is Not Enough

Paul develops this principle in Romans 2:28–29:

“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.”

Paul is confronting religious confidence based upon external identity and possession of the law. Physical circumcision, ancestry, and covenant history were genuine privileges, but they could not substitute for faithfulness of heart.

This passage has been interpreted in different ways. Some understand Paul to be redefining Jewish identity around the work of the Spirit; others understand him to be distinguishing faithful Jews from those who rely only upon outward markers. Either way, his essential point is unavoidable: outward descent and circumcision do not by themselves establish saving covenant faithfulness.

This is not a dismissal of Israel's history. It reveals what the law and prophets had already anticipated: God desired circumcised hearts, not external conformity alone (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4).

No one is reconciled to God through ancestry. All must receive the transforming work of God through faith.

The Promise Is Centered in the Seed

Galatians 3 brings the Abrahamic promise directly to Christ:

“The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.” — Galatians 3:16

Paul does not treat Christ as an addition to the promise. Christ is the promised Seed in whom the promise reaches its fulfillment. Covenant inheritance must therefore be understood through union with Him.

Paul continues:

“So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” —Galatians 3:26, 29

Natural distinctions do not cease to exist. Men and women remain embodied persons; Jewish and Gentile histories are not erased. But those distinctions no longer establish different levels of covenant standing before God. All who belong to Christ are received through the same faith, clothed with the same Christ, and made heirs of the same promise.

This is not Gentiles replacing Jews. Gentiles do not become a superior people, nor do they inherit by their own merit. Jews and Gentiles alike are brought into the promise only through Jesus Christ.

The promise is not inherited by ethnicity apart from Christ. It is inherited in Christ by all who belong to Him.

Two Covenants and Two Jerusalems

In Galatians 4:21–31, Paul uses Hagar and Sarah as an allegory of two covenants. Hagar corresponds to Mount Sinai and “the present city of Jerusalem,” which Paul describes as being in slavery with her children. Sarah corresponds to the free woman and “the Jerusalem that is above,” whom he calls our mother.

Paul's contrast is not a license for ethnic hostility. He is contrasting covenant orders: slavery under the law and freedom through the promise. His argument is directed against reliance upon the Mosaic covenant as the basis of inheritance.

The conclusion is startling precisely because it refuses to locate inheritance in physical geography or natural descent. Paul tells believers in Christ, including Gentiles, “You...like Isaac, are children of promise.”

The defining question is therefore not merely, “Who claims descent from Abraham?” It is, “Through which covenant is the inheritance received?” Paul's answer is that the inheritance belongs to the children of promise through Christ.

The earthly city possessed immense historical importance. It was the location of the temple, priesthood, sacrifices, and covenant administration. But those realities pointed beyond themselves. They cannot become a parallel path to inheritance alongside the New Covenant mediated by Jesus.

The contrast is not Jew against Gentile. It is slavery against freedom, flesh against promise, and the old covenant against the inheritance received in Christ.

A New Creation

Ephesians 2 prevents us from turning covenant fulfillment into Gentile triumphalism. Paul reminds Gentile believers that they were once excluded from Israel's citizenship, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope, and without God in the world.

They did not rescue themselves. They were brought near by the blood of Christ.

Jesus broke down the dividing wall and created “one new nation – a holy nation” from Jew and Gentile, reconciling both to God through the cross (Ephesians 2:14–16). Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with God's people and members of His household.

Notice the direction of the argument. Paul does not establish two redeemed peoples with different means of covenant access. Nor does he exalt Gentiles above Jews. Christ creates one reconciled people from both.

The foundation is the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone. Together, believers are being built into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19–22).

The New Covenant does not create a Gentile people who displace a Jewish people. It creates one new creation, and new nation in Christ from Jews and Gentiles who believe.

“Not All Who Are Descended from Israel Are Israel”

Romans 9–11 is Paul's most sustained treatment of Israel, and it must be read as one continuous argument. Paul begins with anguish for his Jewish kinsmen, many of whom have rejected Christ. His grief makes clear that ethnic descent does not guarantee salvation.

He then says:

“For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children... It is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring.” — Romans 9:6–8

Paul distinguishes physical descent from participation in the promise. He is not denying the historical identity of the Jewish people. He is explaining why widespread Jewish unbelief does not mean God's Word has failed. God's saving purpose was never secured by natural descent alone.

Romans 9 does not permit Gentile pride. It should instead produce humility. Salvation depends upon God's mercy, and no people may turn grace into an ethnic possession.

The Same Lord for Jew and Gentile

Romans 10 centers salvation upon faith in Jesus:

“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” —Romans 10:12–13

Paul's Jewish contemporaries possessed zeal for God, but zeal without the knowledge of God's righteousness could not save. Seeking to establish righteousness through the law, they did not submit to the righteousness of God revealed in Christ (Romans 10:2–4).

The standard is the same for everyone. Jews are not excluded because they are Jews, and Gentiles are not included because they are Gentiles. Everyone who calls upon the Lord is saved.

This truth should guide Christian speech about modern Israel. Jewish people are not beyond the Gospel, nor do they possess salvation apart from Jesus. To say otherwise would deny both the urgency of Paul's grief and the universality of his Gospel.

There are not two saviors, two gospels, or two paths of reconciliation. There is one Lord, and everyone who calls upon Him will be saved.

One Olive Tree

Romans 11 describes God's covenant people through the image of an olive tree. Some natural branches were broken off because of unbelief, while believing Gentiles—wild branches—were grafted in.

Gentile believers are immediately warned: “Do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches.” They do not support the root; the root supports them. Their place is not grounded in ethnicity or achievement but in faith.

The same passage preserves real hope for Jewish people. God is able to graft the natural branches in again “if they do not persist in unbelief” (Romans 11:23). Jewish inclusion is neither impossible nor automatic. It occurs through the same mercy and faith by which Gentiles are included.

The image is not two separate trees with unrelated destinies. It is one cultivated olive tree into which people are included by faith and from which unbelief excludes.

Gentiles have no ground for boasting, and Jewish people are never beyond the reach of God's mercy. The root supports us all.

“And So All Israel Will Be Saved”

Paul then speaks of a mystery:

“Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved.” —Romans 11:25–26

Faithful interpreters disagree about “all Israel.” Some understand the phrase as a future large-scale turning of ethnic Israel to Christ. Others understand it as the believing remnant of Israel across history. Still others understand “all Israel” as the completed covenant people of God—Jews and Gentiles united in Christ.

My understanding follows the last of these readings. Paul has already distinguished Israel according to the flesh from the children of promise, declared one means of salvation for Jew and Gentile, and described

one olive tree sustained by one covenant root. As the fullness of the Gentiles comes in and Jewish people are grafted back through faith, God gathers the complete people of His promise.

The words “in this way” are important. Paul is describing how salvation unfolds: through the proclamation of the Gospel, the inclusion of the nations, the provocation of Israel to jealousy, and the grafting in of all who believe.

This interpretation should be held with humility because sincere, Christ-centered believers read the passage differently. But none of the principal interpretations provides an ethnic path to salvation apart from Jesus. Whatever “all Israel” means, Paul’s covenant promise is fulfilled when the Deliverer removes sin.

The center of Romans 9–11 is not ethnicity without Christ, but the mercy of God revealed through Christ.

The Jerusalem Above

Hebrews 12 brings believers to a present covenant reality:

“You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven...to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.” —Hebrews 12:22–24

The language is not merely future: “You have come.” Through Jesus, New Covenant believers already belong to Mount Zion and the heavenly Jerusalem.

The writer contrasts two mountains. Sinai is associated with fear, distance, and the old covenant. Zion is associated with festal gathering, access to God, the assembly of the firstborn, and the mediating blood of Jesus.

This does not make the earthly Jerusalem historically meaningless or forbid Christians from caring about what happens there. It means earthly geography does not define access to God or covenant membership. Jesus does.

The center of God’s people is no longer an earthly temple, priesthood, or city. The people of God are joined to the heavenly Jerusalem, gathered around the mediator of the New Covenant, and built together as God’s dwelling by the Spirit.

The people of God are not waiting for access to Zion. In Christ, they have already come.

What This Means—and What It Does Not Mean

Because this subject is easily misunderstood, several distinctions are essential.

- It does not mean Jewish history or suffering is unimportant.
- It does not excuse antisemitism, contempt, collective blame, or indifference toward Jewish neighbors.
- It does not make Gentiles superior or permit the Ecclesia to boast.
- It does not require hostility toward the modern nation-state of Israel, than any other nation-state (we are called to love our enemies)
- It does not grant any modern state immunity from moral or political examination.
- It does mean that salvation and covenant inheritance are found only in Jesus Christ.
- It does mean that Jewish and Gentile believers belong to one reconciled people.
- It does mean that Christian allegiance must remain centered upon Christ rather than ethnicity, geography, government, or prophetic speculation.

This position is sometimes called replacement theology, as though the Ecclesia simply removed Israel and took its possessions. That description misses the argument. The New Testament presents fulfillment in Christ, not Gentile theft. Israel's Messiah fulfills the promises; Jewish believers remain part of the people of God; Gentile believers are included by grace; and together they become one new humanity.

The Ecclesia does not stand over Israel as a conquering replacement. It stands only in Christ, supported by a root it did not create and warned never to boast.

Review and Summary

The New Testament consistently brings covenant identity and inheritance to their center in Jesus Christ.

The rejected stone becomes the cornerstone of a fruitful people. Outward identity cannot replace inward transformation by the Spirit. The promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ, the promised Seed, and all who belong to Christ are heirs. The two covenants cannot serve as parallel paths of inheritance. Jew and Gentile are reconciled into one new humanity. Physical descent does not guarantee participation in the promise. There is one Lord and one means of salvation. There is one olive tree, and every branch stands by faith.

Romans 11 preserves both warning and hope: Gentiles must not boast, and Jewish people may be grafted in through faith. My understanding is that “all Israel” describes the completed covenant people God

gathers through the Gospel, though believers who expect a future widespread Jewish conversion still affirm that it must occur through Jesus Christ.

The heavenly Jerusalem, not earthly geography, defines the believer's covenant home. We have come to Mount Zion through Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant.

Therefore, our allegiance must be Christ-centered, our Gospel must be offered without distinction, our theology must never encourage ethnic pride, and our treatment of Jewish people must reflect truth, humility, love, and the mercy we ourselves have received.

Israel according to the Scriptures can be understood only through Israel's Messiah. The promises find their fulfillment in Christ, and the people of promise are all who belong to Him.



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