

Paul, Israel, and the Gentiles

Key Passages

Romans 3:22 and 10:12

Romans 1:16-17; 2:9-10

Romans 11:1, 11, 17-26

Romans 15:8-9

Galatians 3:28

I Corinthians 12:13

According to Paul's own words, the summit meeting in Jerusalem between himself, Titus and the leading apostles recognized his sphere of work as being to lead the mission to the Gentiles, just as Peter was recognized as leading a mission to the circumcised. In this agreement, there is a clear distinction between two missions along ethnic lines. This might seem to be in conflict with some of Paul's other assertions to the effect that there is 'no distinction' between Jew and Gentile (Rom. 3:22; 10:12). However, it is clear that what Paul is opposing is not the recognition of differences between male and female or Jew and Greek, but discrimination on ethnic or any other grounds within the communities of those who believe in Christ, since they are all one in him (Gal. 3:28). Discrimination is ruled out, not the abiding differences of ethnic origin or gender.

The significance of this perspective becomes clear in Galatians where Paul is fundamentally opposed to Gentile believers being compelled to accept circumcision and to keep the Jewish law. This is because they have been called as Gentiles, not as potential Jews; if the latter had been the case, there would have been no promise of salvation for Gentiles as Gentiles. Paul's call and his entire life and work are based on the fact that, in the messianic age now dawned, the door of salvation has been opened to Gentiles as Gentiles, and not merely as adherents to Judaism. Thus, basic to Paul's conception of the world is a recognition of the difference between Jews and Gentiles, whilst insisting that both are equal before God.

Paul's recognition of difference originates from and assists his particular understanding of the role of Israel in the purposes of God. Paul is sure that God chose Israel to be his servant to the nations of the world. He is equally sure that God is faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs that, in and through Israel, God would bless the entire world. What is to some people most surprising is that

Paul retained his certainty concerning Israel's place in God's plan, even despite her failure to recognize Jesus and those, such as Paul, who proclaimed him. This is because Paul believes that God made a covenant with Israel and that God remains completely faithful to this covenant, even though Israel does not. Paul could never accept a view of God as one who gives up on Israel, effectively displacing her and turning to Gentiles instead. For Paul such a God could not be reliable. If one covenant fails, why not another? If God fails with one people, then why not again with another?

Paul's view of Israel is based on the narrative of God's dealings with Israel as outlined in her scriptures. On reading these, Paul was able to see that God was free to bring about a selection within the people of Israel in order to achieve his purposes, and this despite his people's failings. He was also able to see that sometimes God worked through a faithful remnant, who became the nucleus of a restored people at a later time when Israel's sin had been judged by subjection to other nations because of wickedness. What was significant for Paul was that God never failed to keep his promises to Israel. He was both able and willing to work through this wayward people. In Paul's opinion God would never desert the people through whom he had chosen to work his purposes for the world.

So Paul expects that Israel will eventually find salvation. Even though Gentiles in larger numbers are turning to the gospel and Israel is not, Paul refuses the suggestion that God has 'rejected his people whom he foreknew' (Rom. 11:1-2). God's promises were made to Israel, and Paul is clear that they must be inherited by Israel in order for God's faithfulness to be demonstrated and safeguarded. But are Gentile believers not part of Israel since they believe in Christ?

The analogy that may be cited here is that of the olive tree. In Romans 11:13-14 Paul compares Gentiles to branches grafted on to the tree or root of Abraham. However, he never suggests that they are or that they may become the stem of Abraham. In the analogy, they are only branches which may in fact be removed again from the tree if they do not live by faith; branches of themselves do not constitute a tree. Thus for Paul, Gentile believers remain dependent on the root or stem of Abraham because God gave his promise that, in and through Abraham and his seed, God would bless the world.

On the other hand, Paul does not suggest that Gentiles are or should become Jews. He expressly forbids this because this would mean that God's promises

would be for Jews only and not 'to the Jew first and also to the Gentile', which was the core of his gospel. In Romans 4 Paul sees the promise as encompassing two peoples: 'those who adhere to the law' and 'those of the faith of Abraham'. The context makes clear that the two peoples that Paul refers to are Jews and Gentiles respectively. In Paul's view the promises and the gospel are 'to the Jew first and also to the Gentile' (Rom. 1:16-17).

Only when Israel accepts her promised heritage can God's promises for the world begin to be realized. This was already happening in Paul's lifetime. However, he is not content that some Jews have accepted the gospel message. In his view God has by no means given up on Israel but will keep his covenant with her still. This demonstrates that, in Paul's understanding, the covenant with Israel has not been broken, but only extended to include Gentiles as well. If this covenant fails for Israel, it will also necessarily fail for Gentiles.

It is a mistake, therefore, to read too much into Paul's designation as 'apostle to the Gentiles'. This designation did not mean that he was hostile to Jews and Judaism, or that he believed that a mission to Jews was no longer an option. It was simply that Paul saw God working in differing ways with Jews and Gentiles through the gospel proclaimed alike by Peter and himself.

It seems likely that there was already current in Rome, when Paul wrote to the believers there, an image of himself and of his mission which was partisan and pro-Gentile, as if Paul favoured Gentiles over Jews. Paul thoroughly rejects such a one-sided image and stresses instead that God has not rejected his people Israel, that God's purposes include both Jew and Greek, and that Christ came as a servant to the circumcised to confirm the promises concerning Israel that was made to the patriarchs, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy (Rom. 15:8-9). So, according to Paul, there is no separate salvation for Gentiles apart from Israel, but there is only salvation to Gentiles as Gentiles and not as converts to Judaism.