

GOD'S ONE TREE – Romans 11:13-26a (Transformational Theology)

Some trees are very old. In 2008 the root system of a Norway spruce, discovered in Sweden, was estimated to be 9,550 years old—but it has just a small actual tree sprouting from it. The oldest real trees are the bristlecone pines in the White Mountains, in the California-Nevada border. One called Methuselah is said to be 4,844 years old. Others are perhaps over 5,000 years old.

Around 4,000 years ago, God planted a tree that is still growing today. Today it is called the church. It didn't start out as the church, but that is what it has developed into. It actually started with ONE MAN, whose physical descendants became the root system and a gigantic trunk that sprouted twelve huge branches and millions of smaller branches. After about 2,000 years this tree underwent a radical mutation, not by natural causes but by divine design and divine intervention. What changed was the population of smaller branches. It is now in effect a hybrid. Its native branches have been radically pruned, and for the last 2,000 years millions of compatible branches from wild-growing trees have been grafted onto that original tree, which is still going strong.

The one man, of course, was Abraham. The root-and-trunk system was the nation of Israel, and the original branches were individual Israelites. The mutation was sparked by the appearance of the Messiah, Jesus. The branches that were broken off were the Israelites who rejected Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The wild branches grafted in were and are Gentiles (non-Jews) who turn to Jesus for their salvation. This gigantic tree, now composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, is called the CHURCH.

The focus of this study is the place of the Jews in God's eternal plan and program. What role have the Jews played? Does the nation of Israel still have a place in God's plan? Has the church replaced Israel as "God's people"? Is Bible prophecy being fulfilled by modern-day Israel? Will there be a mass conversion of all Jews sometime in the future, foreshadowing the second coming of Christ? These questions can be answered by looking at what Paul says about GOD'S ONE TREE here in Romans 11.

I. The ROOT of God's One Tree is Old Testament (Physical) Israel.

The church that began at Pentecost was not without prior preparation. In Romans 11:16-18 Paul refers several times to the *root* part of the tree. Without any warning that he is about to talk about a tree, he says in v. 16, "If the root is holy, the branches are too." In verse 17 he refers to "the rich root of the olive tree." Speaking specifically to Gentile Christians, Paul says in verse 18, "It is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you." That preparation,

that foundation or root, was the Jewish nation of the Old Testament. You Gentiles are just branches reaping the benefits provided by that original root-and-trunk system.

This means that the church itself began as a full-grown tree with roots already established. God planted the tree about 2,000 years earlier in his dealings with Abraham, beginning with Genesis 12:1ff. Through nearly 2,000 years of Old Testament history, God nurtured and tended this tree.

During this period, many prophecies and promises about Israel were *made and fulfilled*. For example, as early as Abraham, God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's future family as their very own possession. "The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land'" (Genesis 12:7). In Genesis 13:14-15, 17 God speaks again to Abraham with this promise: "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward;¹⁵ for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever....¹⁷ Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." See also Genesis 15:18-19; 17:8; 26:3; 28:13.

Often overlooked is the fact that this promise was fulfilled during Old Testament history. In Deuteronomy 1:8 God says to His people as they are about to cross over into this "promised land," "See, I have placed the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to them and their descendants after them." After the Israelites had taken possession of the land, as it is recorded in Joshua 21:43,45: "⁴³ So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it.... ⁴⁵ Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass." See also Joshua 23:14; 24:28; 1 Kings 4:21-25; Nehemiah 9:7-8. (Some trip over the words "forever" in Genesis 13:15 and "everlasting" in 17:8. This is the Hebrew word *'olam*, which often means "age-lasting" or "until the end of the age"—not "eternal." See my book, *The Faith Once for All*, pp. 465-466.)

Another set of prophecies about Old Testament Israel is that they would become disobedient to God and delivered into captivity as a nation. See Deuteronomy 28:15-68; 29:22-29; Joshua 23:15-16. These prophecies were fulfilled in Old Testament history; see 2 Kings 24:10 – 25:21, and also the Book of Lamentations.

A final set of prophecies about this nation predicts their return from captivity to their homeland, and their rebuilding of the temple, which had been destroyed by their captors. These blessings are prophesied in Deuteronomy 30:1-5; Isaiah 2:2-5; Jeremiah 29:14; 30:18; Ezekiel 20:41; 34:11-14.

The record of their fulfillment appears in Ezra 1:1-11; 6:14-18; and the Book of Haggai.

It is significant that in Paul's metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11, the nation of Israel, throughout all of these significant events, is still just the *root* of the tree. And we should note that a tree's root is not an *end in itself*, but it is a *means to an end*. The root serves a particular purpose. In the case of Israel, what was God's purpose for her existence?

II. The PURPOSE and TURNING POINT for God's Tree, resulting in its radical mutation: the FIRST COMING OF JESUS THE MESSIAH.

Scripture makes it very clear that the whole point and purpose for Israel's election and existence as a special nation, assumed up in one word, was PREPARATION. I.e., they existed as the preparation for Christ's first coming. As Paul preached in Acts 13:32-33, his message was "the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus." In Acts 28:20 he refers to Jesus as "the hope of Israel," i.e., that for which they had been hoping all along. In Romans 9:5 he refers to the fulfillment of this hope, in that the Jews are the ones "from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."

What this means is that once Christ came, there was no more reason for Israel to exist in a special role in God's plan. Thus God *brought to an end* Israel's special role. This was symbolized by the tearing of the temple veil at the time of Christ's death (Matthew 27:51). This was not a disaster or a tragedy, because it was part of the plan from the beginning. It would have happened even if most Israelites had been fully cooperative and had accepted Jesus as their Messiah. The end of Israel's role as God's special people was in a way equivalent to an "honorable discharge" from service, or to the retiring of the number of a great sports figure.

It was not altogether honorable for Israel, though. Unfortunately, because of their general unbelief, the WAY Israel's role came to an end was a *judgment* upon the nation for their general rejection of Jesus as their Messiah. See especially the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Nevertheless, Israel's service to God's plan is remembered by the fact that in Paul's metaphor of the olive tree, the nation of Israel is still in the picture as the root (and trunk) of that tree. However, in reference to this mighty Tree of God, the first coming of Jesus (by design) changed the whole character of the tree. Jesus's coming did not do away with the tree, but *transformed* it.

Now that Christ has come, God has fulfilled His eternal purpose by doing away with the distinction between Jews and Gentiles. As Ephesians 2 – 3 show, this was His plan from the beginning, though He kept it a mystery until this New Covenant age. This is the major promise

of God from the beginning of the Old Covenant as it began with Abraham. In Genesis 12:3 God promised Abraham that in him and his family, ALL the families of the earth—the Gentiles-- would be blessed. Under the New Covenant Jews and Gentiles are combined into “one body,” into “one new man” (Ephesians 2:15-16; see vv. 11-16). Now “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” (Romans 10:12). “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

This was the mystery kept under wraps in Old Testament times and revealed now in the New Age (post-Pentecost). The gospel of Jesus Christ now includes “the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and ... has been made known to all the nations” (Romans 16:25-26). (The Greek word for “nations” is the same word that is translated “Gentiles.”) The key to being God’s special people now is faith in Jesus Christ, who is “Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him, for “**whoever** will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:12-13). The emphasis here is on the “whoever”—whether it be Jew or Gentile. *Whoever* puts faith in Jesus as the Messiah is a part of the transformed tree of God! See Ephesians 1:9-11; 3:1-11; Colossians 1:24-27.

Paul explains in Romans 11:17-21 how this transforms God’s One Tree. He refers to the Jews as the “natural” branches of the tree, while calling converted Gentiles who are added to the tree the “wild” branches. The transformation of the tree happens in two stages. The first stage of the transformation is the breaking off of some of the natural branches, specifically, all Jews who rejected Jesus. The Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah remained on the tree, partaking both of their Jewish heritage and of the full blessings of the Messianic era.

The second stage of the transformation is the grafting in of wild branches, i.e., those Gentiles who accept Jesus through their obedience to the gospel. This presence of the Gentiles in the new people of God is a distinguishing mark of the church. In this way, Jesus Christ, and *faith* in Jesus Christ, have transformed the tree (which started out as the Jewish nation) into the CHURCH—in which a distinction between Jews and Gentiles no longer exists.

III. The PRESENT FORM of God’s Tree is THE CHURCH.

The Church (believing Jews plus believing Gentiles in one body) is God’s NEW “Israel,” referred to by Paul as “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16). Old (physical, national) Israel is but the *root* of this tree—though a glorious one (see Romans 9:1-5.) The church, though, is now God’s “Israel.” The reason I put this in quotation marks is that the church is not just the new “Israel,” but a *new kind* of Israel. The church as the people of God in this era is not a physical nation, but a *spiritual family*; and it has been formed on the spiritual basis of faith in Jesus and a new (spiritual) birth—John 1:12-13. See Galatians 3:7, 29; 6:16; Philippians 3:2-

3; Romans 2:28-29. See especially Romans 9:6, where even in Old Testament times there was a different *kind* of Israel within the main body.

Many Old Testament prophecies about ISRAEL (Jerusalem, Zion, the temple) have been and are being fulfilled in the *new* Israel, the *new* Jerusalem (see Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22), the *new* (spiritual) temple (1 Peter 1:5). Jeremiah 31:31-34 prophesied that God would one day make a new covenant with His people. Our New Covenant Scriptures bear witness that this covenant was established through Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection. See Matthew 26:26-28; Hebrews 8:8-13; 10:15-18. The new temple was prophesied in Zechariah 6:12-15, which says “a man whose name is Branch ... will build the temple of the LORD,” and “He will be a priest on His throne.” And significantly, “Those who are far off will come and build the temple of the LORD” (v. 15). “Those who are far off” are the Gentiles! All who belong to the church today are “living stones” who “are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).

What about ethnic Jews today? Modern-day physical Israel—individually, collectively, and/or geographically—is NOT God’s tree. Individual converted Jews are part of the transformed tree, the church. Unbelieving ethnic Jews are in no sense a special people of God; they are the broken-off branches in Romans 11.

Does God have a place and a purpose for physical Israel today, or in the future? NO, not as a nation, not as a separate “tree.” Israel’s role in God’s plan was completed when Christ first came into the world. God’s covenant with Israel was thus fulfilled. But YES, as individual branches. God desires all Jews to “rejoin” their original tree, to be “grafted in again” (Romans 11:23-24). See Romans 11:1-2. How does this happen? By their not continuing in their unbelief in Jesus (v. 23), i.e., by their acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord. The key word is *houtōs* in v. 26: “thus, so, in this way.” I.e., “in this way”—by becoming a part of God’s One Tree, the Church—all true Israelites (Romans 9:6) will be saved. There is no other way.

God does have a special *interest* in the Jews because of their unique role in Old Testament times, but He has no special *role* for them now. He wants them to be saved, to believe in Christ, to be back in their own (transformed) tree.

IV. Implications from the Transformed Tree.

What does all of this mean? One implication relates to those who have taught and are teaching that God’s original purpose was to make Israel His special people forever, beginning with Christ’s first coming. However, they say He had to alter His plan when the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah at His first coming. According to this view, the church has no connection with Israel but was merely a temporary stop-gap between

Christ's first coming and His second coming, at which time God will resume and complete His eternal plan for Israel. This view, called Dispensationalism, is exposed as false by Romans 11.

Second, the related idea that there will be a mass conversion of Jews at the second coming of Jesus is also exposed as fiction by a right understanding of Romans 11. The Jews (Israel) will not have a special role in the end times. This is opposed to most premillennial views, especially dispensational premillennialism. The statement in Romans 11:26, "And so all Israel will be saved," must be understood thus: "And **thus, in this way**, all true Israelites will be saved, i.e., by becoming a part of God's One Tree, the church." (See my commentary on Romans for this explanation.)

Third, the idea that the church today is under the same covenant that God made with Abraham is also fiction. The Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled with the first coming of Christ, and thus God's purpose for Israel as a separate nation came to an end. This is opposed to covenant theology, which is popular within Reformed circles and which is often used to justify the false view of infant baptism.

Fourth, the idea that God established the church on Pentecost simply as a replacement for Israel as His special people is true in a sense but is not totally accurate. It overlooks the continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church that is obvious from the analogy of the olive tree in Romans 11. The Church does not *replace* Israel, but *transforms* Israel. Thus instead of "replacement theology," we should speak of "transformation theology."

Fifth and last, some are teaching that Christ fulfilled the covenant between God and Israel by coming to do what Israel herself was supposed to do in order to keep her part of that covenant, but had failed to do. This is completely false. Israel's purpose and role were not to save the world, but to bring the Savior into the world—which is what Israel did. God's mission and purpose for Jesus are in no sense just a continuation of Israel's purpose they were completely unique. This is opposed to a modernist trend in Biblical interpretation, e.g., in Clark Pinnock, Rob Bell, and N.T. Wright.

Conclusion. Ephesians 4:4 says there is just ONE HOPE. That one hope, whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, is to be a part of the ONE TREE, the CHURCH.