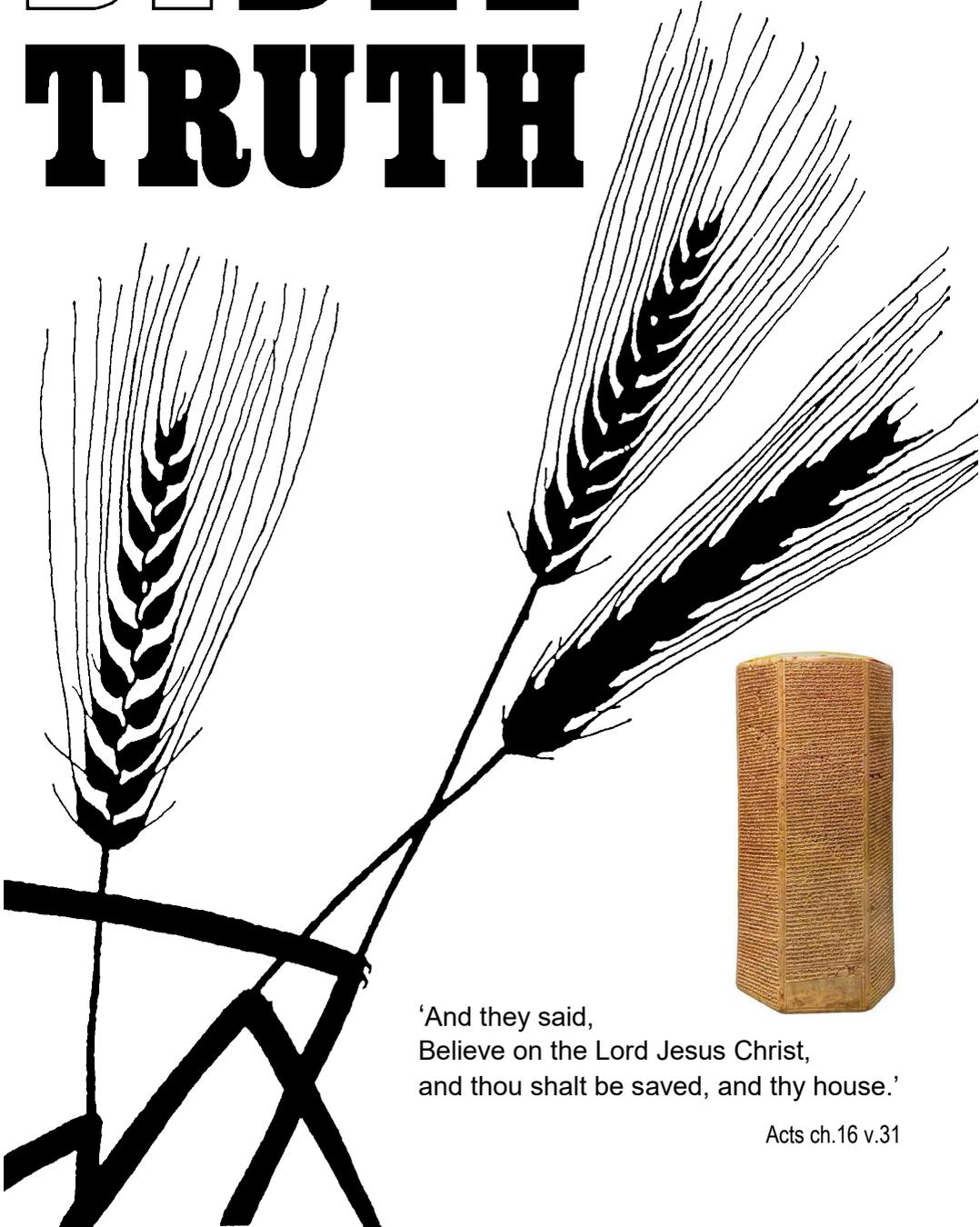


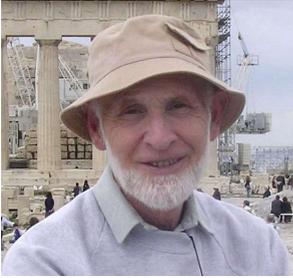
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'And they said,
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,
and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.'

Acts ch.16 v.31



Identifying Israel in the 21st Century

By Paul Boyd-Lee

INTRODUCTION

The title *Identifying Israel in the 21st century* suggests that they were identified differently in previous centuries. Indeed they were. We are living in an age when for some people words are used that have little connection, if any, with what they have meant in previous centuries. Words such as, 'wicked', 'gay', 'marriage', 'sex', 'gender', 'cool', 'evil', and so on are now all used in a different sense to what dictionaries once gave them. The word Israel is no exception to this change and its metamorphosis has had a long life span, 1800 years or so, its greatest change perhaps being in the last century.

Not only that, but the word Israel itself is specially contentious these days. The Israeli State is abhorred by many church people and seen as the oppressors of the Palestinians, even to the extent that with the new Church of England Psalter, it has been said,

'The name Israel has been purged as far as possible from the text ... so as to avoid offending Arabs! Instead, great offence has been caused to Jews'.

Dr R. Beckwith, Oxford Scholar

Unfortunately people's, definitions & understanding of words more often than not are based on their personal misconceptions rather than fact. In respect of the word 'Israel' names such as 'Jew', 'Judah', 'Jacob' and sometimes 'Abram' as well, can frequently get muddled up particularly chronologically. It is not unusual in some people's minds that all these get lumped together under the one name 'Jew' when talking about the Old Testament but when considering the New Testament age the Christian Church claims the word 'Israel' for itself. This latter claim can cause deep offence to some Jews who also see themselves as Israel. To compound the insult it is not unknown for some Christians to claim inheritance of the blessings given to Israel whilst inferring all the curses relate to the Jews.

How did things get to where they are?

With this controversial subject where the word Israel came from and how it developed over the years, are both questions to be addressed. A good start point is to refer back to when God called certain people to a specific purpose such as the calling of Abram from Ur of the Chaldees which is an acknowledged fact amongst the three monotheistic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Meaning of biblical names of people

Abram = High Father (**Abraham** = Father of a multitude) - Genesis ch.17 v.5.

Jacob = Supplanter, 'One that takes by heel' - Genesis ch.25 v.26.

Israel = Prevailing, 'power with God' - Genesis ch.32 v.28.

Judah = Praise (the Lord) - Genesis ch.29 v.35.

Jew = Descendant of or 'little Judah'- Esther ch.2 v.5.

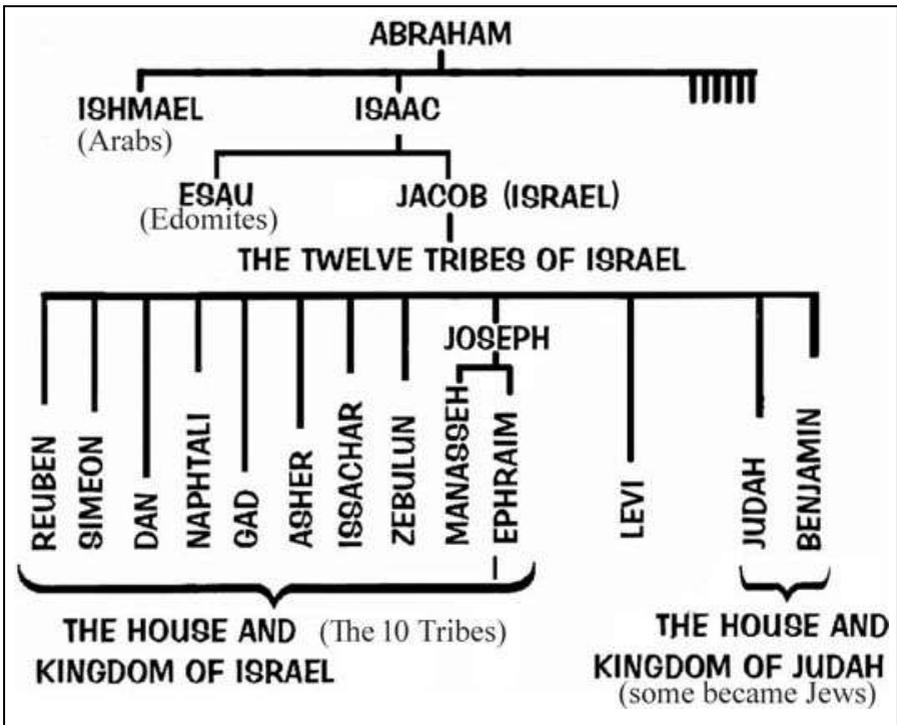


Chart showing the patriarchs and the tribes that descended from them

WHAT ABOUT THE WORD 'JEW'?

The first point to note is that though the word originally described their national grouping, not their religion, in today's world all these patriarchs are often erroneously called 'Jews'. Is it correct to do that? Technically No, since they lived before the word was even coined, prior to the 7th c. BC that is.

Is that important? Yes, because in 691 BC the Assyrian King Sennacherib besieged the Northern Kingdom of Israel's city called Lachish and afterwards he inscribed his annals on a clay prism (the Taylor) amongst which was the line,

'As for Hezekiah the Jew, who did not submit to my yoke ...'

Here Sennacherib is referring to King Hezekiah of Judah in a derogatory sense using the word Jew to mean 'little' Judah, that is 'subservient to him'. Not only that, but it is the first known occurrence of the word as well.



Taylor Prism

Some centuries later, during the time of Queen Esther, Judaism became the religion of the 123 provinces of the mixed race Medo-Persian empire. So being a Jew was no longer necessarily derived from their birthright. Thus the name caught on, with the word 'Judaism' creeping in to describe a religion rather than a race. By the time of Christ, Judaism was established as a religion in its own right with people of several races, other than Israelites, as adherents. Notably on many an occasion Jesus was swift to criticise Judaism.

Judaism & Israel at the time of Christ

Certainly in those early New Testament times there were Jews of many races but also some Jews of the literal descendants of the tribes were present in the Holy Land as well as thousands from other countries surrounding the Mediterranean. For them, going to Jerusalem was an attraction so thus they were gathered on the day of Pentecost and heard the Apostle Peter address them as follows.

'Ye men of Israel, hear these words ...'

Acts ch.2 v.22

Also, the Apostle Paul clearly saw himself foremost as an Israelite not a Jew when questioned about his identity.

‘... I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.’

Romans ch.11 v.1

In the early Christian era then, many people spread throughout the Mediterranean area and very likely far beyond saw themselves as Israelites, rather than simply Jews.

Even these days Chief Rabbis have consistently said,

‘The Jews of today do not represent the whole of the twelve tribes ... Modern Jewry is considered as being descended from the ancient tribe of Judah and, to a lesser extent, the tribe of Benjamin ... We look forward to the gathering of all the tribes at some future day. (See Isaiah ch 27 vv 11-12, Ezekiel ch.37 vv 15-28)’.

London Chief Rabbi’s Office, 1918, reiterated in 1950 & 2005

According to Jewish sources of our day then, the tribes of Israel still exist and for the most part are to be found outside of Jewry.

BUT DOES THE CHURCH AS A WHOLE NOT TAKE
A DIFFERENT VIEW ON THE WORDS JEW & ISRAEL

Replacement Theology & the word Israel

‘The Jewish People by reason of their unfaithfulness to God, & especially in having caused the crucifixion of Jesus, were finally rejected by God as His special people, and have been replaced as the People of God by the Church, which is seen as the New Israel.’

Latimer Comment 42

The Concise English Dictionary of the Church says,

‘The NT as a whole teaches that the Church as an organic body was established by Christ as the New Israel and endowed by Him with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost;’

1977 edition under ‘Church’ p.108

The reference says the timing was 'at Pentecost'. That Christ established His Church is not in doubt, and the Epistle writers rejoiced at that. But they also seemed to make clear the importance of the existence of the literal descendants of Israel in order to fulfil prophecy concerning them as well.

In the 18th century the 7th day Adventist Leroy Edwin Froom wrote,

'Old Testament prophecies regarding spiritual Israel were claimed for the established church, and the New Jerusalem was believed to have come, ...' The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers

The New Covenant

To support the idea that the Church is the New Israel, people cite the following concept.

'The New Covenant, is built upon those which God gave to Israel. It's newness lies in the fact that it is the same but "internalised" by the Spirit'.

That is, the Bible is no longer taken to be literally true but it becomes what you feel in your heart and mind; it is simply metaphorical, symbolical, an allegory. So the important point is where does the Bible mention this 'New Israel'? Surprising for some people maybe, the answer is, nowhere! What is mentioned though is a 'New Covenant'. Let us look at that.

'For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: ... For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.'

Hebrews ch.8 v 8 & 10

When this text is examined closely unfortunately the idea, that the New Covenant applies specifically to the Church, runs into some real problems.

- The text is actually a direct repeat of Jeremiah ch.31 v.31 where at the time it was written, the prophet is specifically writing about Old Testament Israel's descendants, not a church of the future.

- The text above from Hebrews clearly states the 'house of Israel' & 'the house of Judah'. As an Hebrew might expect, it accurately describes the two sections of the Hebrew peoples. But the Church is defined as being of one mind and body not divided into two. The 'coming together' is the wonderful hope and fulfilment of God's word for the scattered Israel peoples. Human beings making up the Church sadly have their human divisions but surely it does injustice to the Christian faith to suggest they are divided towards Christ in the way that those of the Israel tribes forsook God.
- The prophecy describes God writing His law into Israel's hearts whether they are willing or not. People of the Christian Church however, personally decide to receive Jesus into their hearts. After all, that is the calling of the Gospel - See John ch.3 v.16.

How & when did the idea of Israel's promises being taken over by the Christian Church arise?

The story goes back a long way to the time of the 2nd c Bishop Irenaeus (AD 105-22), of Gaul who taught the complete replacement of Israel by Christian believers - 'the spiritual seed of Abraham'. It became known as 'Replacement Theology' and saw God as finished with Old Testament physical Israel.

The concept might well have been influenced by the Jew's persecution of the early Christian Church with some suffering martyrdom as a result. From those incidents it is argued that God withdrew his promises from what were considered a decadent people and transferred them to the Church instead? The downside of this view is that it suggests that God's original plan was forestalled, His foreknowledge was imperfect, His mind has been changed, and so on; all of which casts doubt on the omniscience of God.

IS IT HELPFUL TO SIMPLY REPLACE ISRAEL
WITH THE CHURCH?

Though some so-called theologians have taken this view, there are also eminent scholars that clearly say no, or at least it is to oversimplify the situation.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali* writes this.

* One time Bishop of Rochester, currently President of the Oxford Centre for Training, Research, Advocacy and Dialogue (OXTRAD).

'from the Gospels it seems clear that the mission of Jesus was focused on the renewal of Israel on the fuller working out of the implications of returning from exile in Babylon and on the restoration of an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty.'

The Unique & Universal Christ (p.25)

Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible

This tells us that the Greek word 'Ecclesia' is translated as 'Church' in our Bibles & derives from the Hebrew 'Mahal' which 'signified the nation of Israel as assembled before God'. It then goes on to say this.

'By removing Israel as a nation there is no Kingdom for Jesus to rule;' (see the following)

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

Luke ch.1 vv 32-33

'Consequently by removing this prophecy in the Gospels there is nothing for Christians to be "fellow heirs" over.'

'With regard to a "New Israel", in reality the Church was no "new thing" because, the Church always was because the "ecclesia" simply means "called out ones". This concept has happened since ancient times, not just in the Church age.'

'The "New Thing", was that the Messiah had come & brethren were to be told.'

So although some churchgoers see their church as the New Israel, *Hastings* intimates that scripture does not support the idea.

Light to the Gentiles & Restoration for Israel

It is notable that at the very time when Old Testament Israelites turned away from their God, that this same God speaks through His prophet Isaiah concerning light to be brought to the Gentiles as well as the restoration of Israel in future days (the Last Days).

'And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.'

Isaiah ch.49 vv 6-8

Many people in the Christian Church today see themselves as Gentiles. But this text and others elsewhere raises difficulties for them when seeing themselves as the 'New Israel' if the above text is carefully read. The fact that God spake this at the time when Israel was decadent, raises the pertinent question why did He do so if He was to replace ethnic Israel by another people at a later date? No, the text reveals that the Gentiles will be enlightened, whilst Israel is restored. The *Interpreter's One Volume Commentary* puts it this way.

'The forming of the servant was to ensure there would be a people gathered to God, a people honoured and strong in God. But this is not enough. The moment of exile, the experience of failure which seems to suggest the frustration of Gods purpose in fact ushers in a still greater hope. The nations are to be given the light (c.f. Isaiah ch. 42 v.6), and this leads to the fullest statement of reassurance ... where it is promised that the Redeemer will bring the rulers of the nations to acknowledge Israel because of God's own choice of her.'

Pastor David Hathaway, a current leading evangelist , asks this.

'When the Jews crucified Christ did God give their inheritance to the Church?'

He answers,

'God has not changed His promises concerning Israel despite their rejection of the Messiah?'

There are two points to note here.

1. It was not Israel that rejected the Messiah but some Jews of His time. In fact, it was the Israel nations that proclaimed the Messiah, (e.g. 19th c. Great missionary movements) whereas the Jews still await His first coming.
2. The Jews never had an inheritance to give; the inheritance was for the 12 tribes of Israel (which included Judah). It was not given specifically to people of the Jewish religion.

But remember that Jesus also said,

‘... I am not sent **but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**’

Matthew ch.15 v.24

Similarly, with regard to the Disciples, they were instructed thus.

‘These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But **go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**’

Matthew ch.10 vv 5-6

So, at the time of Jesus the message going out from Jerusalem was directed to the Israelites, with the Church receiving it later.

In summary then, Hathaway has it right when he writes that, ‘God has not changed His promises concerning Israel ...’.

Jesus is asked which is the greatest of all the Commandments

‘... The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:’

Mark ch.12 v.29 from Deuteronomy ch.6 v.4

If you are familiar with this verse and cannot think where it comes from, it is often said to begin a Service of Holy Communion. Of course originally Jesus said it long before the Christian church came into being showing that the Israelites clearly had a key role in Jesus’ thinking, just as the Gentiles and Church did in a different way.

CAN GOD’S ‘CHOSEN PEOPLE’ (ISRAEL) COEXIST WITH THE ‘PEOPLE THAT CHOOSE GOD’ (THE CHURCH)?

Both the Church and the tribes of Israel have a mission, and that is to care for people, though one looks after their souls & the other, their bodies. That does not mean that their two callings are identical or separate, but rather in God’s plan they should be integrated.

The blessings & duties of the Church

The Church has a single & crucial commission, namely to preach the Gospel, that is, to call for repentance of individuals & to teach that the Kingdom of God is at hand; the Messiah has come.

The blessings & duties of Israel

Israel, on the other hand, has a multitask calling, in serving God on a national basis. That is by teaching good agricultural principles, health, education, defence, and so on, all of which and more beside, have scriptural guidelines, and it is their task to practice them.

When God formed the Israel peoples, they were tasked with witnessing that God is very God, by showing it in their lifestyle, not so much by being a slave to law for its own sake, though that has its place, but by living out the things that the Almighty showed them.

'Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour.'

Isaiah ch.43 vv 10-11

Israel is set apart for this mission

The Bible goes on to describe what Israel has been separated for, namely Service to God. Sadly, rarely have they done this willingly. On the contrary, disobedience to God was so frequent that they were exiled for certain periods of time. But restoration was promised to them and this was clearly on the minds of the disciples'.

'When they [the disciples] therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?

And he [Jesus] said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, ... and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.'

Acts ch.1 vv 6-8

Note the disciples do not say Jews but Israel, and Jesus does not correct their question. He merely points them to what they should be doing before the restoration and this was in accordance with the original task given to Israelites, that is, witnessing.

But Israel, as inheritors of the Abrahamic Covenant, were also to be a blessing.

'And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.'

Genesis ch.12 vv 2-3

This now begins to answer the question posed in the title of this article, *Identifying Israel in the 21st century*. Ask yourself therefore, what nation or nations in the world during the last century for example, have been fulfilling that calling of witnessing and blessing?

Another aspect which is rather thrilling in a darkening world is to note that scripture tells us the blessings of Israel to other nations continue into the future, when the other nations turn to God.

'And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and **ye shall be a blessing**: ...'

Zechariah ch.8 v.13 - prophesied during Medo-Persian Empire.

The timing of this prophecy has importance. It was not uttered when the Israelites entered the Promised Land, nor when the united kingdom was initiated under King David, but long after they had rebelled and turned away from Almighty God. In fact Zechariah was born some half a century after the last of the Israelites (part of the House of Judah) went into captivity. Hence it is difficult to argue that promises of Israel's future blessings find fulfilment in the New Testament Church when Zechariah clearly directs his prophecy to the Tribes (the House of Judah and House of Israel).

CAN THE CHURCH & ISRAEL BE WOVEN TOGETHER (CO-EXIST) ?

The Apostle Paul sets the scene for solving this enigma. It is notable that his discourse partly to Gentiles it seems, follows on from his rhetorical question, 'I say then, Hath God cast away his people?' (Romans ch.11 v.1). Emphatically he answers, 'God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew' (v.2). He then proceeds to explain by using symbols the current relationship between Gentiles and Israelites.

'For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?

For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; **Boast not against the branches**. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.'

Romans ch.11 vv 13-18

This means that both Church & State - Christians & Israelites, have their own calling to follow. It does not mean seeing one as more important than the other but they are to walk together in partnership. That is, give credence that ethnic Israel still exists whilst not boasting that the Christian Church has replaced Israel, nor on the other hand that the Church's task is insignificant.

So then, why is this subject such a mystery to many people?

People, once they reach adulthood, can naturally be resistant to change and that includes opposition to new ideas. It is an effort, there is worry of losing existing friends and so on. These fears can often be expressed in these sort of reasons when they hear of new ideas.

- 'It all gets too complicated to bother with.'
- 'It does not seem to sit comfortably with what I thought I knew.'
- 'It could get in the way of spreading the Gospel.'

It is worth pondering this last trepidation for a moment. What is the Gospel? The word derives from the Greek word *ευαγγελιον* (euangelion) and simply means Good News. Of course the headline news is that Christ has risen, but let us not neglect the faithfulness of God in His promises to 'literal', rather than those whom some might call 'spiritual' Israel. That will also be something to rejoice over when it comes to fruition.

So these bullet points are all valid reasons, but at the end of the day, perhaps it is unnecessary for all people to know all things. The idea is not so far fetched and entirely biblical when one looks into it.

'And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.'

Matthew ch.13 vv 10-11, Mark ch.4 vv 9-11, Luke ch.8 vv 9-10

It intimates then, that just as there are several parts to one body so there are separate depths of knowledge. In general, our task is to 'Proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom' in the way that the Holy Spirit leads us. That could be with a light touch at times or an in depth explanation of Scripture at others. It all depends on the skills we are gifted with on one hand and the ability of the listener on the other. Nonetheless which ever it is, it needs to be done in an informative, honest, and gracious way.

The Question we now arrive at

Whatever revelation God has given us, be it deep knowledge or strong faith without it, the Lord said,

‘Ye are my witnesses, ... and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: ...’

Isaiah ch.43 v.10

So the question is, are we witnessing? With the rise of secularism in many parts of the world, will we be able to witness much longer anyway? If we believe that we are Israel, either as the Church or as natural descendants of Jacob it matters neither way, then do we not need to pose the further question, Why are we not witnessing? Because that is what God has called us to do!
