



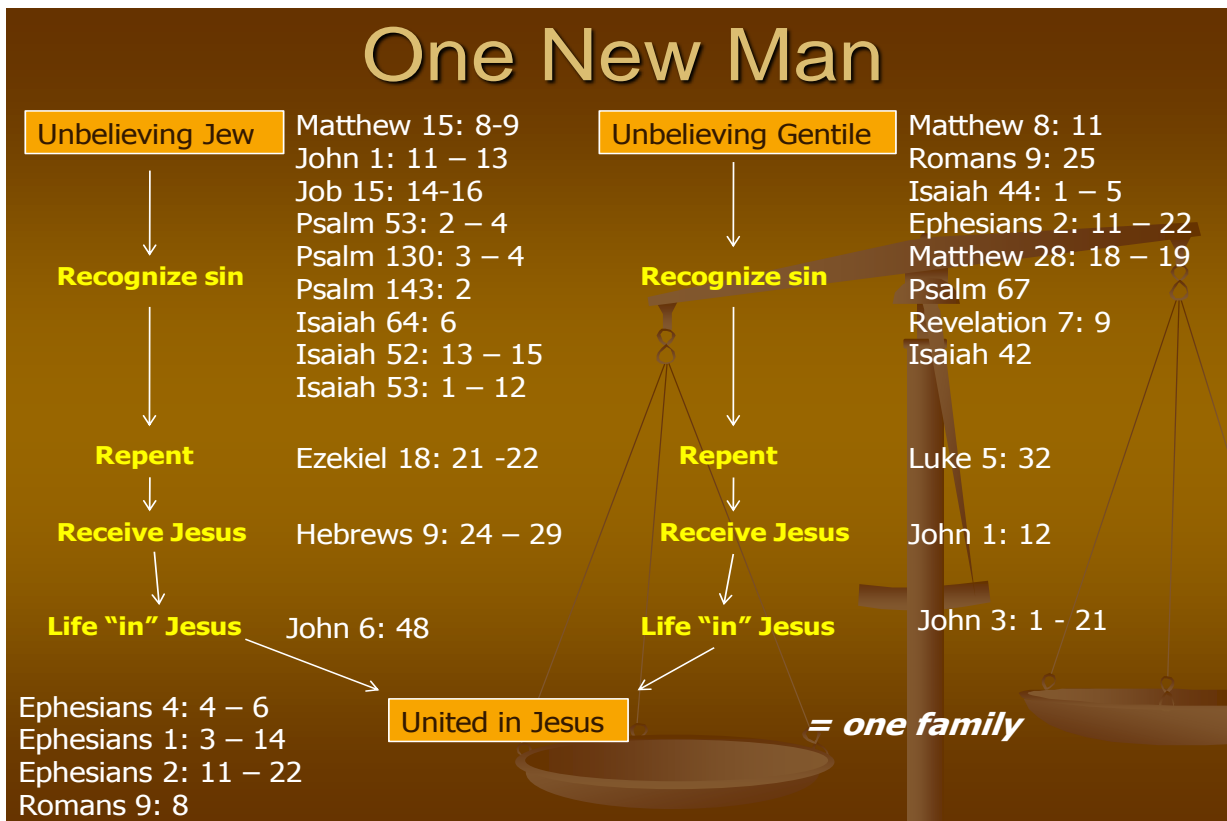
BABY AND BATHWATER

A Chosen People

For those of us who rejoice in the rediscovery of those things which we collectively call Hebraic, and with our growing sense – indeed growing assurance – that God is doing something fresh in our own day as regards Israel and the reestablishment of an understanding of the Messianic dynamic which is found throughout the Scriptures, so there may be a temptation to say *everything must now be renewed*. But **must** *everything* be renewed? Before we answer this question let us consider briefly just what it is that we call *Hebraic*. The immediately below section is borrowed, with permission, from “The Bible Student – 50 Key Themes Explored Through the Holy Bible” (Glory to Glory Publications, 2012).

The understanding of ‘a chosen people’ is rooted in the Biblical teaching of God’s election (calling) of Israel. Moses sings of Israel as ‘the apple of God’s eye’ (Deuteronomy 32v10) and Israel is declared time and time again in the Bible to have a special/chosen relationship with God (Exodus 4v22, Jeremiah 31v9 Hosea 11v1, Psalm 105v6). The term Israel (often interchangeable with the term Jew) was given to Jacob after he wrestled/strived with “God” (Genesis 32v22-32). Later Jacob’s descendants became known as *bene Yisrael* (*sons of Israel*). However, the blessing of Israel predates Jacob and is initially linked to God’s call of Abraham and His faithful covenantal promises to Abraham (Genesis 12). These promises are renewed and enlarged in the subsequent biblical covenants with Moses, David and the New covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31v31-34 and Hebrews 8).

The understanding of election and covenantal faithfulness is central to God's purposes and promises. Paul carefully explores this understanding in Romans 9 through 11 and affirms that the gifts and calling of God to Israel are irrevocable (Romans 11:29) and looks forward to the day when all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26). Paul understands that the promises to Israel have been confirmed and not revoked in the ministry of Messiah Jesus (Romans 15:8, 2 Corinthians 1:20). In the New Testament there is a clear teaching that Gentiles through faith in Jesus also become part of the elect of God (Ephesians 1:4, Ephesians 2:11-22, 1 Peter 1:1). It is, incidentally, this central truth that the recent **One New Man Bible** (ONMB) makes its key theme. It is from Ephesians 2:15 that the phrase *one new man* emerges (at least in the more accurate translations!), which expresses in three simple words the amazing truth that those two that are traditionally opposed (Jew and Gentile) can yet become ONE through Jesus. This diagram helpfully fleshes out the idea:



Israel

It is also worth reminding ourselves that in the New Testament the term Israel is used in three main ways. It can refer (A) to ethnic Israel (Jacob's decedents) or (B) to the faithful remnant within Israel (Romans 9 v 6 and Romans 11v 2-5) or (C) to the church (the community of Jews and Gentiles who love and serve Jesus Christ as Lord). The church is both the called out (ecclesia) community – called out from the sin and unbelief of the world to witness and serve God's purposes – and the grafted-in community. Grafted-in to the faithfulness of Israel (see the olive tree teaching in Romans 11) and to be built into a **spiritual people** and to serve as a **holy priesthood** (1 Peter 2v4).

Sadly ideas about election and those of “a chosen people” have been misused. It is important to stress that God's election of Israel is primarily a gift for service and witness. Israel is to serve God as a distinctive (holy) community (see Deuteronomy 7 v 6 and Joel 3 v 16). This very point is made powerfully by the Prophet Isaiah who states; *“It is too small a thing for you to my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and to bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth”* (Isaiah 49 v 6). As we reflect upon and explore God's faithful love for Israel and His purposes for the whole of His creation we should be moved to echo Paul's own sense of mystery, awe and joy as expressed in Romans 11v33 and v36. *“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out..... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*

Misunderstood

For many faithful Christians the Hebraic remains a little understood resource. A debate has emerged where some will argue that the teaching in Romans 11 (the olive tree metaphor) refers to our being grafted-in to Jesus, not to Israel. Now of course the Lord did express that we are to be living *in* Him as a branch lives in a vine plant. See John 15: 8 (or better, John 15: 1 – 17). Many a sermon has been

preached on this so we will just remark that, of course, any Christian “life” outside of Jesus is a “life” that ultimately will disappoint and fail. We MUST remain in Jesus. But Jesus never told us we were to be “grafted-in” to Him. Rather, as true believers, we will be born-again to a new life in Jesus and will automatically “grow” in Jesus, unless we choose not to “remain” in Him. That would seem to be some conscious choice to go our own way – note how Jesus used the word “if” in John 15 v 5. We have choices to make!

Jesus was emphatic that we are to place our faith and trust in Him, and that He has fulfilled Tanakh (Old Testament) promises. It was the apostle Paul that brought to us the idea of the Church being *the body of Messiah*. This idea is explored in several passages in the Bible, including Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 3:6 and 5:23, Colossians 1:18 and Colossians 1:24. Messiah Jesus is seen as the “head” of the body, which is the church, while the “members” of the body are seen as the individual members of the Church. It is disingenuous to extend this idea beyond what Scripture plainly sets out.

The whole context of John chapter 15 is Jesus’ preparation of His disciples (and that is us!) for life in a hostile world, where remaining *in* Him is vital to survival. Loss of faith and loss of salvation is a real possibility, Jesus would not have warned us if it were not. The whole context of Romans 11, by contrast, (indeed Romans chapters 9 through 11) is to explore the ongoing promises of God to Israel. Since the *olive tree* is in any case throughout scripture a metaphor for Israel, Paul’s teaching in Romans could not be clearer! Those outside the elect family are brought in and grafted in, finding life and sustenance and salvation through the nutrients provided through that literal root. It is literal in the sense that there have always been Jewish believers in Jesus and these remain, literally, the “first fruits” of the Kingdom. God has a *nation of priests*, which is all those who place their faith and trust in Jesus – and these are collectively “Israel” whether Jew or Gentile. In the shape of Gentiles we can say that those hitherto outside the covenant family are now members of this family! Let us just put this one to bed, finally! If Romans 11: 11-16 is about Israel (and it is!) and if Romans 11: 25 – 32 is about Israel, then we need to make a very big leap in our thinking, not to say, to question all the normal rules of exegesis, to assume that verses 17 –

24 are suddenly about Jesus! No, it is clear that non-Jewish believers become members of the elect family by adoption, and that those of faith are grafted in to the holy root stock (verse 16), and that root is the olive tree. Of course in that sense Christians can claim to be a part of true Israel.

The Baby, the water and the bath!

Whilst hopefully most readers will appreciate the narrow point being made above, what does this mean in terms of our ongoing praxis as Christians? What needs to change? A subsidiary question might be (and we say this with due reverence), was God in some way taken by surprise when the early post-apostolic church absorbed and co-opted Greek philosophical norms, and made these a part of its Gospel credentials? Plainly it was not God's purpose that these things should have happened. But we can have assurance that God foresaw that this would happen – and that He graciously used even this *severance from the root* (the inevitable consequence of the “Greecing” of the institutional church) to further His end-purposes. The heathen, non Jewish world impressed a heathen, non-Jewish slant on the good news (Greek philosophy) but the Holy Spirit continued His work even in this new (and extreme) paradigm. God's purposes are not defeated!

Plainly God did not build a “church” to stand in stark opposition to His primary custodians of the gospel (the Jews) or to self-determine what nutrients it would draw through a non-olive tree root. But God graciously and lovingly used even the wordly excesses of the institutional church to further His glorious purposes. We can be certain, however, that the introduction of Greek thinking was not God's primary purpose nor His primary mechanism. (Note author Steve Maltz has explored some of the implications of this at the popular theology level in his useful book ***How the Church Lost the Truth*** (available 2016-17).

God knew that the Hebrews as a nation would fail in their primary mission – to live single-mindedly as God's covenant people. Just like the rest of us they, too, had double minds! A *New Covenant* was always part of God's plan (Jeremiah 31: 31). But this was a

wonderfully gracious and expansive plan. The plan was not to celebrate or to 'mark' or to advertise the failure of the Hebrew nation. Rather it was always in God's declared plan to garner for Himself a larger family adopted from every tribe and tongue (Revelation 7: 9).

Hebraic.Church, as an initiative, is certainly rejoicing in the ever more glorious certainty in God's present purposes:

- to call out to Jewish people everywhere to recognize (and to mourn for) Him Whom they had pierced (Zechariah 12: 10 and John 19: 37)
- to create One New Man out of the two that were, hitherto, at permanent loggerheads (Ephesians 2: 16)
- to create a church (a true church) much more comfortable with, and at ease with, its Hebraic root and heritage (Romans 12)
- to continue to call out to all Mankind right up to the time that Jesus returns; to have people streaming into his Kingdom from all points of the compass (Rev 21: 26)

But

In spite of the absence of these glorious realities during much of the last 1,900 years, the Holy Spirit has not been disengaged – and again we must say this with due reverence. Much good has been done and achieved through the (largely) Gentile church. We cannot simply ignore, or belittle, this truth in our joyous refreshment of strong nutrients through THE root.

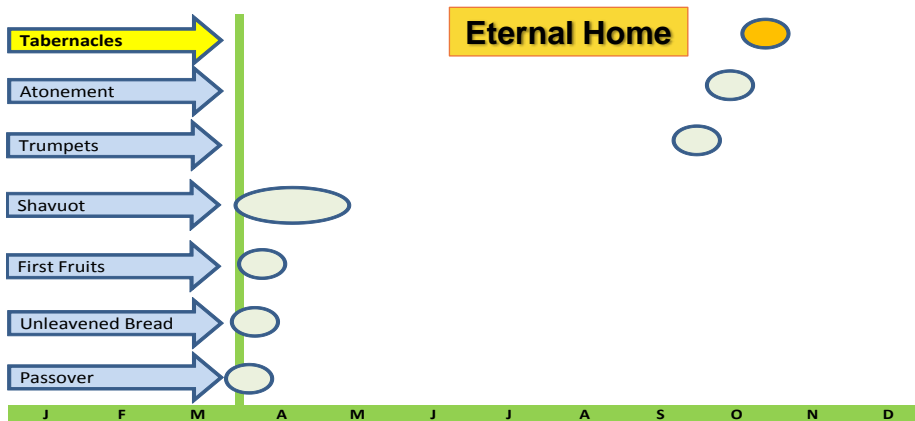
Whilst the institutional church's ecclesiastical year certainly was not commanded (anywhere!) by God – in the same way that the Hebraic calendar was so commanded (see separate materials on the seven Moedim) some elements of the ecclesiastical calendar are Godly and should not be 'lost' in our joyful rediscovery of ancient treasures!

I am now expressing a personal opinion, although I know it is shared widely, that the pagan "Easter" festival should give way to the Feast that Jesus celebrated – Passover. "Christmas" remains problematic – having been sacrificed on the altar of secularism and commercialism,

it remains a living connection – however tenuous, with our Christian past. Should we try to pump life into this dead (probably Pagan / Mithras) celebration? Most serious commentators who hold a high view of scripture today accept without difficulty the likelihood that the Lord Jesus was born at the Tabernacles festival, which occurs in our (Gregorian calendar) October-November period. This illustration helps to place some visual cues around the ideas of the seven Moedim and when the Lord was born, but readers may have to do a little more digging to fully understand this:



Tabernacles



Whilst, in the pictorial above, we have focused solely on Tabernacles, it should be clearly understood that each of the seven Moedim speak powerfully of the life, death, ministry and end-time purpose of Jesus.

Where “Easter” and “Christmas”, as pagan-based festivals, seem to have outlived their value in terms of mission statements for the Christian church – and would be better served by a conscious marking of Passover and Tabernacles respectively, I would suggest that Lent, as a preparation for Passover, retains a genuine value for believers. So a season of Lent, as a spiritual preparation for that most important single event of the calendar (Passover, the crucifixion,

death and resurrection of Jesus, being Passover + Unleavened Bread + First Fruits respectively) retains real value.

Pentecost, of course, has grown out of the Hebrew feast of Latter First Fruits. In spite of the fact that Latter First Fruits has its own Christological message, I believe that we can – and should – graft-in the traditional additional dual celebrations wrapped-up in the Pentecost season:

- the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- the “birth” of the “church”

Of course the “church” that was truly born was not the *institutional church* with all its theological self-justification and baggage! We do well to remember that the “church” that was born as the Holy Spirit was first poured out in God’s unrestrained generosity (Acts chapter 2) was, as far as we can tell, an exclusively Jewish church – today we would call it a Messianic Congregation. So, as Apostle Paul has it, there is no room for Gentile boasting (Romans 11: 18), even in that fist “Pentecostal” outpouring.

Let us rejoice in everything that Hebraic.Church is rediscovering and contributing to the body of Messiah in these days! But let us not lose sight of our Christian heritage. God’s plan always entailed something new and exciting in taking the gospel across this Planet, to people of all tribes and tongues. Whilst we rightly “deselect” from our thinking and praxis those things that are plainly pagan and obscuritan, let us hold on to those things that point towards the activity of the Holy Spirit and the reality of a covenant that is renewed (the meaning of the New Covenant).

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see the second essay – “Best Wine Served Last!” which concludes these thoughts