

The People of God

by

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Concerning the subject of the People of God, there are two major views that are held by most believers of “modern Christianity”.

The first view holds to the belief that God has only one covenant people which is “the church”. It believes that the church has replaced Israel as the new people of God, the Spiritual Israel. The reason for the church replacing Israel is based upon the Jewish rejection of Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah (Christ). As a result, Israel has forfeited their position and inheritance. Also, all of the promises and blessings to Israel are spiritually realized or fulfilled through the church.

This view became prominent among the non Jewish believers of the 3rd century AD (CE) and became the official doctrinal position of “the church” in the 4th century AD (CE). It continues presently as a prominent doctrinal position among many ecclesiastical systems within the body of Messiah.

The second view holds that there are two people’s of God. Known as “national Israel” and “the church”. Each are distinctly separate and have different purposes relative to the plan of God throughout eternity. The church is composed of Jewish believers as well as non Jewish believers. Israel is composed of the Jewish people, the physical descendants of Abraham. Also, there are two new covenants, one for Israel, and one for the church. The new covenant with the church was made during the first advent of Messiah (Christ). The new covenant with Israel will be made after the second advent of Messiah (Christ) at the beginning of the millennial kingdom. “Israel lives by the law, the church lives by grace alone.”

This view appears to have been formulated in the 19th century AD (CE), and is prominent among believers that hold to a dispensational theology of the Scriptures.

While each perspective sheds light on the subject of the people of God, there is yet another perspective which helps to provide a clear and accurate picture of our subject. This particular view is that which was understood by the believers in Messiah (Christ) of the 1st century AD (CE). The believers of the 1st century, being composed of Hebrew/Jewish and non-Hebrew/Jewish people, had a larger Hebrew/Jewish constituency.

The view that the 1st century believers held can be described by the following general statements; God has only one people of God, that this people of God is “Israel” which received Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah (Christ) of Israel, and that “Israel” continues as being the people of God through the new covenant that was made by Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah (Christ). In contrast to

those Jewish people that rejected Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah (Christ), they considered themselves as the true Israel of God. Recognized as the “cultivated olive tree”, some natural branches were broken off and wild olive branches were grafted into the cultivated olive tree with the remaining natural branches. The broken branches represent those of the Jewish people that rejected Yeshua (Jesus), and the grafted branches represent the other nations that are made one with Israel, the household of God, the body of Messiah (Christ).

At this point, it is necessary to see the historical and scriptural evidence which validates the 1st century believers’ perspective of “the People of God” as being biblically accurate.

Historical records point out that the 1st century believers in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah (Christ) continued to regard themselves as “the House of Israel”. They were regarded as a sect in Judaism called “the Nazerenes”. They continued to observe Torah and “the appointed times” (feasts of the LORD) with the understanding that Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah (Christ) was the goal at which the Torah and the appointed times had been pointing to. Also, these believers made it top priority to bring their kinsman by blood to accept Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah (Christ) of Israel. There is historical record of more than 1 million Jewish believers in Yeshua (Jesus) during the 1st century. As the numbers increased, the Jewish religious leadership became threatened and brought persecution against “the Nazerenes”. Later the Nazerenes were excommunicated by the Jewish religious leadership from the framework of Judaism. While being ostracized by the unbelieving Jewish community as a result of excommunication, they still considered themselves as “the true Israel of God”.

The scriptural evidence which validates the biblical accuracy of the 1st century believers’ concept of “the People of God” shall be noted under the following points: 1) The permanence of Israel as the People of God; 2) The New Covenant established with Israel during Messiah’s first Advent; and 3) Israel composed of all ethnic people (Hebrews and non-Hebrews).

PERMANENCE OF ISRAEL AS THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The permanence of Israel as the People of God can be seen by a number of statements made by the LORD which reveals his intent to have Israel as his covenant people even though they had broken and made null the first covenant.

Look at the following statements made by the LORD.

“But Zion said, The LORD hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me” (Isaiah 55:14-16).

In Isaiah 55:14-16, God notes that Israel has not been forgotten, but engraved on his hands. This reveals that God’s dealings with Israel will be continuous.

"The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD. This is the covenant I will

make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:31-33 NIV).

The above statement confirms God’s intent to preserve Israel as his covenant people with the future promise of establishing a new covenant.

“Thus saith the LORD, which giveth the sun for a light by day, and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, which divideth the sea when the waves thereof roar; The LORD of hosts is his name: If those ordinances depart from before me, saith the LORD, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before me for ever. Thus saith the LORD; If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 31:35-37).

In the previous statement, the LORD ensures the permanence of Israel as a people before him as long as the existence of the sun, moon and stars.

Also, the writer of Hebrews establishes the permanence of Israel by showing that Israel continues as the house of God.

“Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast” (Hebrews 3:5-6 NIV).

In showing the superiority of Messiah (Christ) to Moses, the text reveals that God has only one house (covenant people). Moses was called a faithful servant in God’s house. Next, Messiah (Christ) is called a faithful son over God’s house. Lastly, the text states “we are his house”. This statement refers to believers in Messiah (Christ) and classifies them as God’s house. This shows that God’s people under the new covenant are part of a history that reaches back further than Messiah’s (Christ’s) first advent. Since Moses was a servant in the same house that Messiah (Christ) is presently lord over, there is a historical connection that bears witness to the fact that Israel continues as the house of God.

THE NEW COVENANT ESTABLISHED WITH ISRAEL DURING MESSIAH’S FIRST ADVENT

Of great importance is the acceptance that the New Covenant was established with Israel during the first coming of Messiah (Christ). Although some teach that the New Covenant will be made with Israel at the second coming of Messiah (Christ), there are a number of biblical evidences that clearly point the establishment of the New Covenant during the first advent of Messiah (Christ).

In Jeremiah 31:31, Jeremiah makes a clear prophetic statement about a new covenant made with Israel.

“The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jeremiah 31:31 NIV).

After Jeremiah declares that a new covenant would be made, the Prophet Malachi prophetically speaks about the messenger of the covenant.

“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the LORD Almighty” (Malachi 3:1-2 NIV).

In the above scripture, the messenger to “prepare the way” before the LORD prophetically refers to John the Baptist who prepared the way for the ministry of Messiah (Christ) Yeshua (Jesus). Also, “the LORD” who is called “the messenger of the covenant” prophetically refers to Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah (Christ). This prophecy of Malachi reveals that Yeshua’s (Jesus’) purpose was to establish the new covenant during his first coming. It was during Messiah’s (Christ’s) first coming that the way was prepared for him to be “the messenger of the covenant”.

At the time of the last Passover meal with his disciples, Yeshua (Jesus) took the cup of redemption and made the following statement relative to the new covenant:

“In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19-20 NIV).

Yeshua’s (Jesus’) statement reveals that the Passover celebration points to Yeshua (Jesus) as Pesach lamb whose blood was spilled to ratify the new covenant. According to the writer of Hebrews, Messiah’s (Christ’s) death and shed blood was necessary to ratify the new covenant just as the death and shed blood of animals were necessary to ratify the first or old covenant.

“For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance--now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” (Hebrews 9:15-24 NIV).

Based upon this text of Hebrews 9:15-24, the new covenant was ratified and put in force during Yeshua’s (Jesus’) first advent.

Another witness to the fact that the new covenant was made with Israel during Messiah’s (Christ’s) first advent is in the following statement of Paul the Apostle:

“He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6 NIV).

According to Paul's statement, Messiah (Christ) obviously established the new covenant during his first advent because Paul could not have been a minister of this new covenant unless it had first been established.

ISRAEL COMPOSED OF ALL ETHNIC PEOPLE: HEBREWS AND NONHEBREWS

The final point to be examined has to do with the ethnic composition of Israel. Many people view Israel as composed of one ethnicity. Those regarded as blood descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, the Scriptures reveal that Israel is the congregation of the LORD being composed of all ethnic people. It also reveals that God's intent was not to establish a holy nation composed only of Hebrews, but a covenant people that would walk in his ways, and be a light to the world.

When the 1st covenant was made at Mt. Sinai, the congregation of Israel was composed of Hebrews, Egyptians, Ethiopians and possibly other ethnic people that resided in Egypt prior to the Exodus. This was a result of the "many other people" that left out of Egypt with the Hebrews.

"The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them, as well as large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds" (Exodus 12:37-38 NIV).

The covenant was made with the entire congregation of Israel being both Hebrew and non-Hebrew people. The Scriptures note that provision was made by God for non-Hebrew people to become part of his covenant people and to have equal status along with the blood descendants of Jacob.

"No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD, even down to the tenth generation. . . . Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as an alien in his country. The third generation of children born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD (Deuteronomy 23:3, 7-8 NIV).

"Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, The LORD will surely exclude me from his people. And let not any eunuch complain, I am only a dry tree. For this is what the LORD says: To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant-- to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off. And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant-- these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (Isaiah 56:3-7 NIV)

"The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:34 NIV).

"The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a

lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you(Numbers 15:15-16 NIV).

There were a number of prominent individuals that were part of the congregation of Israel, but they were not blood descendants of Jacob.

There was Caleb who believed that God was able to cause Israel to come into possession of the promised land of Canaan. He was a Kenizzite.

“So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly” (Joshua 14:11 NIV).

There was Othniel the first Judge following the death of Joshua. He was the younger brother of Caleb.

“The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him. So the land had peace for forty years, until Othniel son of Kenaz died” (Joshua 3:8-11 NIV).

Also, there was Ruth the Moabitess who was the great-grandmother of King David.

“But Ruth replied, Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. . . .So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning” (Ruth 1:16-18, 22 NIV).

During the ministry of Yeshua (Jesus) Messiah (Christ), reference was made of non-Hebrews as “other sheep” to be brought to the fold of true Israel (John 10:16). True Israel being the sheep that belonged to Messiah (Christ) and which followed him (John 10:1-14, 27). Since Yeshua (Jesus) said that he was sent only to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24), then those people that he called “my sheep” were blood born Israelites. This fact provides evidence to justify the previous statement that the reference made about the “other sheep” referred to non-Hebrews to be brought into the fold of true Israel. Listen to the words of Messiah (Christ):

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16 NIV).

After the new covenant was enacted, Yeshua (Jesus) commissioned his disciples to make

disciples of people from all ethnic people groups. In his commission, Yeshua (Jesus) also commanded that these non-Hebrew disciples observe the same commands as the Hebrew disciples were commanded to observe.

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you... (Matthew 28:19-20a NIV).

Messiah (Christ) made it clear that non-Hebrew people were to be included in the covenant family of God and that the same commands applied to both Hebrew and non-Hebrew of the fold of true Israel. Messiah (Christ) did not make provision for a two tiered system among those that belong to him.

A number of statements were made by Paul the Apostle concerning non-Hebrews being made part of true Israel, God's covenant people.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says that non-Hebrews are “grafted in”.

“If some branches have been broken off (unbelieving Israelites), and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others (believing Israelites) and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you” (Romans 11:17-18 NIV).

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said that in Messiah (Christ) all are Abraham's seed.

“If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29 NIV).

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said that non-Hebrews were no longer foreigners but fellow citizens with God's covenant people.

“Therefore remember formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision (that done in the body by the hands of men) - remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:11-13, 19-20).

It must be realized that God's purpose for the development of the House of Israel as His covenant people was not to create a Jewish nation, rather, it was to develop a covenant people out of all ethnic people groups. A summarization of how the covenant people were developed helps one to see the impartiality of God.

It is evident that God was not concerned about ethnicity when he developed the covenant people.

He began by calling an idol worshiper named Abram who was a Chaldean (Genesis 11:31 & Acts 7:2-4). As a result of Abram's response to God through faith and obedience, God made a covenant with him and changed his name to "Abraham". Also, God made special promises to Abraham. Pertaining to the covenant people, the most significant point of the covenant made to Abraham was noted in the following statement:

"... and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3b KJV).

This statement reveals the purpose of God to use Abraham's descendants as the vehicle through which lost humanity may be reconciled to God. This statement was of such great importance that God made a restatement of it when He confirmed the Abrahamic covenant with Isaac and Jacob (see Genesis 26:4 & 28:14).

Abraham was the first to be called a Hebrew. Although Abraham was a Chaldean by ethnicity, the term Hebrew was attached to him because he was "one who crossed over". The term "Hebrew" means "to cross over". Abraham not only crossed over from "Ur of the Chaldees" to "Canaan" in response to God by faith, he also crossed over from idolatry to the way of God. This reveals that the term "Hebrew" was given to Abraham as a result of his faith, and is of spiritual significance relative to the purpose of God.

After the covenant was confirmed with Jacob, God changed his name to "Israel". This divine name change was very significant because it set forth the destiny and purpose of the covenant people. The name "Israel" means "he will rule as God" or "him given authority by God to rule". The destiny of the covenant people is to rule and reign with Messiah (Christ) (Revelation 5:10, 20:6 & 22:3-5). "Israel" was the name by which the twelve tribes of Jacob were called that came out of Egyptian captivity. Also, "Israel" was the name of the whole assembly that officially became God's covenant people at Mount Sinai. This congregation of Israel, also called the congregation of the LORD (Numbers 27:17), was composed of Hebrews and "many other people" that came out of Egypt.

Considering the way in which God chose to establish a people for himself, it can be concluded that God was not partial to ethnic origin. Rather, he receives all people that are willing to accept his covenant and "walk in his ways".

In conclusion, this perspective held by the 1st century believers is becoming more widely accepted as believers develop a greater knowledge about the roots of their faith in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah (Christ). It is my prayer that by the Holy Spirit this information has been helpful to provide a clearer understanding of who we are. We are the One Flock (John 10:16), the Olive Tree (Romans 11:17-18), the Assembly (*ekklesia*) of God (Acts 20:28), God's House (Hebrews 3:5-6), Abraham's Seed (Galatians 3:29) and the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). We are God's covenant people in Messiah (Christ).