

Israel and the Church

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An important component of the LaHaye/Jenkins manner of biblical interpretation [in the *Left Behind* series, authored by them] is their belief that God will reestablish an earthly kingdom with the nation of Israel. These authors believe that by crucifying Jesus the Jews rejected the earthly kingdom offered to them, but God did not reject the Jews.

Left Behind assumes that because this kingdom was offered to (and then refused by) the Jews, it will be offered again in the future. In what way? The Old Testament prophecies of the restoration of national Israel to the land in the last days will be fulfilled literally. The series of books is built upon the belief that the promise of returning to the land was fulfilled with Israel's re-birth as a nation in 1948. At that time the prophetic fuse was relit and now history is racing toward the end, and at an accelerated pace. For this reason the current events in the nation of Israel are of vital importance for followers of the Left Behind series.

So what about the church? According to Left Behind, as an alternate plan or as a parenthesis, Christ established the church because Gentiles believed what the Jews rejected. This is the "Church Age," or sixth dispensation, and it must end with the rapture before God can re-establish His primary work with the Jews and bring about the culmination of history — the seventh dispensation, Christ's reign on earth.

A biblically based response to the future of the Jews, however, is to join the apostle Paul in his earnest prayer for the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:1-3). There always has been and always will be a remnant of Jews who are saved (Rom 11:5). It is not as though the rejection of some of the Jews serves no purpose. On the contrary, because the Jews were broken off in unbelief, the Gospel has gone to the Gentiles, who through grace now partake of its blessings and join with Christian Jews to constitute the Israel of God, the church of Jesus Christ (Rom 11:11-16). In Romans 11 Paul defines this relationship between Jews and Christians when he distinguishes between natural branches (the seed of Abraham according to the flesh) and foreign branches (Gentiles) who have been engrafted into the same tree. There is certainly a difference in their respective histories and genealogies (not all are natural branches), but in Christ both Gentile and Jewish believers are now the seed of Abraham (Rom 11:17-24).

The Bible does not support the teaching that God has a special plan for bringing Jews to faith in Christ. This is because when it comes to God's plan of salvation there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, Israel and the church. Rather than teaching that these are two separate communities with two different futures, the Scriptures testify to a continuity between the old and new covenants and thus to a continuity between Israel and the church. Put another way, Old Testament Israel is a type and precursor for the church, for it is prophesied in the Old Testament that God's redemptive purpose includes Gentiles (e.g., Gen 12:3; 22:18; Is 49:6). Therefore, the church is not an interruption in the redemptive plan of God, but the fulfillment of His eternal purposes.

Perhaps the root of the Left Behind interpretation of the Bible is this misunderstanding concerning the relationship between Israel and the church.

The authors' confusion lies in their belief that the Old Testament promises given to Israel have not been fulfilled in the church. That is to say, LaHaye and Jenkins teach that God has two distinct plans, one for Israel and another for the church. In their view, each has a distinct identity and destiny, with Israel's on earth and the church's in heaven.

The Left Behind series embraces this belief because it understands the following terms as being synonymous: Israelite, Hebrew, Jew and Israeli. In their literature LaHaye and Jenkins make statements like this: "God promised the land to the Jews when they came out of Egypt." "Beginning with Abraham the Lord promises to bless the Israelis forever." However, biblically, theologically and historically these four terms – Israelite, Hebrew, Jew and Israeli – each have different definitions. Unpacking the terms, while a somewhat challenging and complex task, yields important insights.

First, an Israelite is an Old Testament believer in Yahweh, the God who revealed Himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and who in subsequent historical events confirmed His promise to send the Seed (Christ) who would crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15). Second, the term "Hebrew" is often used by Old Testament Israelites to identify themselves to non-Israelites. Joseph, for example, describes himself as a Hebrew to both Potiphar and Pharaoh and Jonah describes himself as a Hebrew to the sailors on the boat. To this extent, the terms "Israelite" and "Hebrew" are synonymous in the Old Testament. These believing Israelites (or Hebrews) are the spiritual forefathers of all who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Rom 4:12, 16).

The term "Jew," however, is more complex because the term has both racial and religious connotations. Hence, there are people who consider

themselves both Jewish by race and Christian by faith. These people often refer to themselves as Messianic Jews who embrace Jewish ethnicity along with faith in Jesus Christ (e.g., “Jews for Jesus,” or participants in “Apple of His Eye,” an LCMS ministry to and for Jews).

Whereas the term Jew can simply identify a person’s race or ethnicity, it may also define someone who is neither an Israelite nor a Hebrew, but rather a person who is an adherent of the religion called “Judaism” – which is distinct from the Christ-centered faith of the Old Testament. Adherents of Judaism profess allegiance to the Old Testament, but they also embrace, to some extent, the Mishnah, Talmud and other ancient rabbinic writings. Belief in these documents promotes an interpretation of the Old Testament that is not consistent with the Christ-centered, grace-based teaching of the New Testament. Modern-day Judaism varies widely in religious commitments and beliefs. Several of the more prominent branches of this religion include Hasidic, “orthodox,” “conservative,” and “reformed.”

Fourth, an Israeli is a citizen of the 1948 state of Israel who may or may not identify with the religion of Judaism. These people are sometimes referred to as “secular” Jews.

In view of these four definitions, it is accurate to speak of certain people who are alive today as Jews and Israelis. But it is inaccurate to say that there are any Israelites or Hebrews living today. Yet this inaccuracy pervades the theology of Left Behind, and by failing to make this distinction the authors identify modern-day Jews and Israelis as the Old Testament recipients of God’s promises. Yet the Bible teaches that the promises made to Israelites and Hebrews in the Old Testament find their fulfillment not with Jews or Israelis, but rather with Christ and his church.

Therefore, in contrast to the theology of Left Behind, in the present age God does not have two different plans, one for Jews and one for the church. Rather, the New Testament consistently speaks of there being one true vine or o n e foundation or o n e way or one olive tree. These are symbols portraying the unity within the one elect people of God made up of both Jews and Gentiles, who by faith are declared to be children of Abraham, who “is the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11).

Similarly, Paul uses expressions such as “one new man” (Eph 2:13–16), “heirs together with Israel,” and “members together of one body” (Eph 3:4–6) to emphasize that God has taken Jews and Gentiles and made them one in Christ. John the Baptist preached, “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these

stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Lk 3:8). From a New Testament perspective, the true descendants of Abraham are not present-day Jews or Israelis, but rather believers in Jesus. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). The promises of inheritance that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ, Abraham’s true Seed (Gal 3:16). All spiritual benefits are derived from Jesus, and apart from him there is no participation in the promises made to Abraham (Gal 3:26–29). Since Jesus is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, all who bless Him and His people will be blessed and all who curse Him and His people will be cursed (Gen 12:3; Gal 3:7–8). These promises are not directed toward any particular ethnic group. The church, and not Jews or Israelis, is the true Israel of God (Rom 2:28–29; Phil 3:3; Gal 6:16).

According to Scripture, salvation is neither earned nor deserved. Nor is it based upon ethnic descent or natural birth (Jn 1:13; Lk 3:8; Eph 2:8–9). Apart from Christ there is no special divine favor upon any member of any ethnic group (Rom 3:9–10; 22–23). In privileging ethnic Jews or modern Israelis with a distinct plan of salvation, Left Behind obscures this central teaching of the Bible.