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Volume 32
Issue 794

The Olive Tree and Israel's National Position

(Romans 11:11-32)

by — Charles H. Welch (1880-1967)

In the earlier verses of Romans 11, the apostle shows that the failure of the bulk of the nation of Israel in no way invalidates God's purpose or His faithfulness.

Looking on to the close of the chapter, we find that "all Israel" shall be saved, because "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." The words "all Israel," "Jacob" and "Zion," together with the prophecy alluded to, preclude our making any deduction from these verses but one: namely, that there will be a national restoration and blessing of Israel according to the terms of the New Covenant.

Quite a number of questions suggest themselves as we read this section, but it is evident that the apostle, when he wrote about the olive tree, had no intention of introducing a theological argument at this point. He had one and only one purpose before him – to seek to show, by the figure of the olive tree, how the Lord had used Gentile believers, in order, if it were possible, to "provoke" the nation of Israel "to emulation." This, and this only, is the reason for introducing the figure, and the recognition of this will save us from almost endless argument as to the ultimate destiny of the branches that remained.

It is evident that the apostle is speaking here of the *dispensational* aspect of truth, for no Gentile could be justified by being placed in the position forfeited by one of the natural branches of Israel's olive tree. Moreover, no believer, who is justified by faith, can



ever be separated from the love of God, or can be condemned (Romans 8), so that the threat of excision in Romans 11:22 must refer to the *dispensational* position which then obtained, and must not be misused to invalidate Romans 8:31-39.

THE OLIVE TREE EXPLAINED

In endeavoring to understand the various factors in this presentation of truth, let us first seek an answer to the question: What does the olive tree represent?

In attempting to answer this question we do not propose to quote the parable of Jotham given in Judges 9:1-15. Jotham's purpose in the parable is simple and evident, and it would seem to be a distortion of the context to make the olive, the fig and the vine in that parable stand for different aspects of Israel's privileges.

The Old Testament passages with which we are most concerned are to be found in Jeremiah. In chapter 11 we read,

The Lord called thy name, a green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit ... the branches of it are broken (Jeremiah 11:16).

Not only does Paul take the figure of the olive tree, and its broken branches, from Jeremiah, but he also refers to Jeremiah 31:31 in Romans 11:27, where the olive tree is once more complete.

There are some who have sought to show that the olive tree of Romans 11 is to be found in Christendom today, but such teaching is contrary to Jeremiah 11, 31 and Romans 11 alike. The Book of Jeremiah consists of fifty-one prophecies, each introduced by some phrase as, “*The word of the Lord came.*” The opening prophecy is indicative of all the rest:

*See, I have this day set thee over the **nations** and over the **kingdoms**, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant (Jeremiah 1:10).*

The subjects of this prophecy are clearly “*nations*” and “*kingdoms*,” not churches, either real or professing. Also, the prophecy is two-fold: first, judgment in the form of “*rooting out*,” and then restoration in the form of “*planting*.”

Moreover, in Jeremiah 31:36-37 Israel is assured that they shall not be cast off on account of their misdeeds – a passage which finds an echo in the words of Romans 11:29, “*For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.*”

If we examine the context of Romans we shall find that there, also, Israel is portrayed as an olive tree:

To Israel He saith, “All day long I have stretched forth My hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people” (10:21).

Blindness in part is happened to Israel ... and so all Israel shall be saved (11:25-26).

As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes (11:28).

There can be no misunderstanding these references that stand on either side of the passage which refers to the olive tree. It is not a church that is in view but Israel as a nation. The “*they*” that “*stumbled*” is Israel (11:11); “*my flesh*” (11:14) refers to Israel; those who were “*cast away*,” and who are yet to be “*received*,” is Israel (11:15).

We have next to consider the “*branches*” of the olive tree:

God hath not cast away His people which He foreknew (11:2).

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This free electronic publication is dedicated to:

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- the proclamation of the riches of God's abundant, exceeding grace (Romans 5:20; 11:6; Ephesians 1:7);
- the affirmation that God will save all through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
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- true freedom and liberty apart from law (Galatians 5:1);
- the organic nature of the Body of Christ (Ephesians 3:1-3);
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- the unprophesied, Celestial hope and calling of the Body of Christ (Colossians 3:4);
- the distinct message and ministry of Paul, the apostle to the nations (Ephesians 3:1-3);
- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
- the recovery of rich Biblical truth that has too long remained hidden under the veils of traditionalism, prejudice, misunderstanding and fear (Mark 7:7, 13);
- the completeness of the believer in Christ (Colossians 2:10), with:
 - total freedom from sins (Colossians 1:14);
 - union in His death, burial and resurrection and ascended seat-

ed position among the celestials (Romans 6; Ephesians 2:6);
– adult sonship position (Galatians 4).

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For definitions of abbreviations/acronyms, see index after the order form.

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There is a remnant according to the election of grace (11:5).

Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (11:7).

The branches that were broken off were the unbelieving among Israel, the remaining branches constituting a “remnant.” Into the place from which the unbelieving of Israel had been broken off, the Gentile believer had been grafted, “contrary to nature.”

Why does the apostle use the expression “contrary to nature”? The root and fatness of the olive tree belonged to Israel, and if Israel had repented, and had been restored at that time, no Gentile would ever have shared it with them, even temporarily. It was something exceptional that was in view.

It is clear that Paul cannot be referring to the great promise of justification by faith. In the first place, he warns the believing Gentile that he might be “cut off” – a warning that cannot refer to justification by faith, for Romans 8 makes separation forever impossible.

“Contrary to nature” cannot, therefore, be used of the great doctrine of Romans 1-8, but can apply only to the dispensational teaching of Romans 9-11. Doctrinal truth remains, dispensational aspects change and pass away. We have now seen enough, we trust, to convince us that “Church” truth is not in view in Romans 11.

Before passing on to the great conclusion, however, we must examine more carefully the apostle's figure

of the olive tree, and discover why he speaks of the process of engrafting into the olive tree branches of the wild olive, “contrary to nature.”

TO PROVOKE UNTO JEALOUSY

In Romans 11 we see that the word “provoke” is given two times (:11, 14); while in :17-24, instead of stating the fact for the third time, we find that the apostle uses the figure of the olive tree.

It is the usual custom in grafting to take a slip of the choice variety – whether it be apple, or pear, or rose – and graft it into the stock of some stronger, though not so choice, a variety.

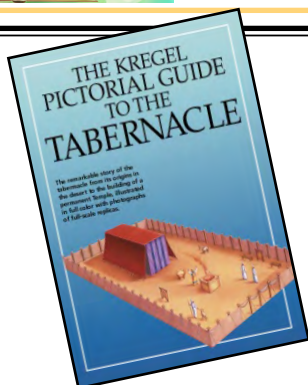
For example, in the case of the standard rose, the tall stem is the briar, and upon this is budded the more fragile flower. Paul appears to reverse all this, and there are many who bluntly say that he did not know anything about the culture of trees and must not be taken literally. This, however, cannot be. He hangs the whole argument of Romans 11 upon this figure, and if he is wrong in this, he may be wrong altogether.

Paul himself recognizes that the process is “contrary to nature,” but those who criticize and suggest that he is using a far-fetched illustration are themselves in error.

While the engrafting of a wild olive into the true was “contrary to nature,” it was by no means contrary to practice. Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, a Latin writer on agriculture, gardening and trees, deals with the cultivation of the olive tree and speaks of the very practice under consideration.



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It was found that, when an olive tree began to cease fruit-bearing, the insertion of a wild graft had the same effect upon the tree that Paul hoped the insertion of the Gentile would have had on Israel: it "provoked" the flagging olive tree to "emulation."

The fact that the Gentiles who believed had received "the blessing of Abraham" in the form of the promised "spirit" (Galatians 3:14), and that they possessed the gifts associated with Pentecost (I Corinthians 14:21), was intended to provoke Israel to wake up to the fact that their unique position was going away.

The whole point of the olive tree in Romans 11 lies in the purpose with which the wild olive was grafted in – namely, to provoke the weakening tree (Israel) to jealousy. Gentile nations are not in view in Romans 11; for such cannot be addressed as "brethren," neither do they stand "by faith."

If we teach that the olive tree position still continues after Acts 28, let us see what the apostle's words imply. Into that same olive tree from which some of the branches had been broken out, God assures us that He will graft them again. We shall see by the references yet to be adduced that when this takes place Israel as a nation will be restored. How is it possible for Israel to be restored as a nation by having any number of branches grafted into any existing Christian community? There is but one answer. Only while Israel existed as "a people" was it possible for believing Gentiles to be grafted in among the other believing branches, and so become linked with the blessing of Abraham, and partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree.

We are preserved from any attempt at spiritualizing the expression "all Israel shall be saved" by the fact that the apostle quotes Isaiah 59:20, where the Deliverer Who comes out of Zion shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob. We have never met anyone who would teach that "Jacob" can mean anything but the literal people of Israel.

Moreover, all of this is in fulfillment of the New Covenant:

For this is My Covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins (Romans 11:27).

Under the terms of the New Covenant, the forgiveness of sins leads to the restoration of the Nation (Jeremiah 31:31-37), and in :37 we read,

"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.

With the knowledge of this promise under the New Covenant, the apostle writes,

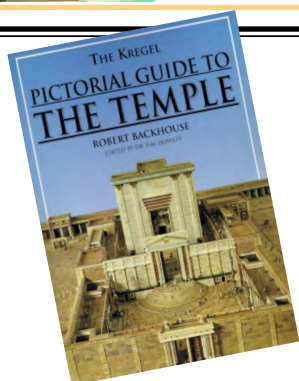
As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance (Romans 11:28-29).

Before the quotation of Isaiah 6:9 in Matthew 13, we have a series of events leading up to this critical point:

1. The failure of Israel to repent, even though the mighty works done in Chorazin and Bethsaida



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and Capernaum would have brought about the repentance of notorious cities of the Gentiles like Tyre and Sidon (Matthew 11:20-24).

2. The threefold rejection of the Lord Jesus in His three offices, as Priest, Prophet and King. “*In this place is one greater than the Temple*” (Priest); “*A greater than Jonah is here*” (Prophet); “*A greater than Solomon is here*” (King) (Matthew 12:6, 41-42).
3. Consequent upon this rejection and non-repentance come the “*mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven*” and the citation of Isaiah 6:9 (Matthew 13:11, 14).

At the close of Acts we find a repetition of this crisis, but it's on a larger scale. This time Israel is set aside, but no command is given to make a fresh proclamation, as in Acts 1. The quotation of Isaiah 6:9 is followed by the Dispensation of the Mystery, in which the olive tree and its branches, as such, have no place.

Between Matthew 13 and Acts 28 there were several excisions of the branches because of unbelief, of which two may be noted, at Antioch and Corinth. That neither of these was final, or intended to set aside the nation, Paul's own action towards Israel makes clear. After Antioch he still preached in the synagogues, and after Corinth he still gave Israel and Israel's hope first place (Acts 28:17, 20).

It is a difficulty with some students that the apostle does not actually speak of the cutting down of the olive tree in Romans 11, but only of “*some of the branches*” having been broken off. The answer is that

the epistle to the Romans was written before Acts 28, and still expressed the hope that, even at the eleventh hour, Israel would be provoked unto emulation, and be saved.

We have only to turn to Romans 15:12-13, to see that Paul was still expecting the fulfillment of Isaiah 11 as well as Jeremiah 31. The “*Hope of Israel*” was still the one hope before them all. It suffices for the apostle in Romans 11 that “*some of the branches*” had been broken off, and, to provoke the olive tree to emulation, some wild branches had been grafted in.

What would happen to the olive tree if that effort failed is not revealed in Romans 11, and in the nature of things could not be. Now that we have the light of all Scripture, we know that Israel was to be “*plucked up*” and “*scattered*,” and to enter into a “*Lo-ammi*” condition while a new dispensation was introduced – but though all this is true, it was not revealed in Romans.

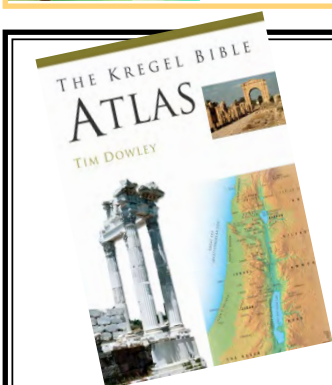
NATIONAL RESTORATION

If the olive tree survived the crisis of Acts 28, where is it? It cannot be the scattered nation of Israel, for they are manifestly “*Lo-ammi*.” It cannot be any of the denominations of Christendom, for if this were true it would follow that the denomination concerned would eventually receive back the broken-off branches of Israel, and resolve itself into the restored nation of Israel – which is quite impossible, for the restored Israel will be made up of the very nation that is now scattered.

If we will but distinguish between the *doctrinal* position of Romans 1 to 8 that has no reference to the olive tree, and the *dispensational* position of Romans 9



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to 11, we shall see that it is quite in harmony with the teaching of Scripture for justification by faith to be enjoyed, whether Israel remained as a nation or not.

The fact that the believing branches are called “*firstfruits*” no more argues for the unbroken perpetuation of the olive tree up to the present time than the fact that Christ is said to be the “*firstfruits of them that slept*” proves that, ever since, in unbroken sequence, they who have fallen asleep in Christ have passed straight into glory.

THE BELIEVING REMNANT

A very real difficulty that some feel in connection with this passage is the fate of the believing. If the whole tree is cut down by the roots at the end of Acts, then believer and unbeliever are treated alike.

Yet the believing remnant constitutes a “*firstfruit*,” and are “*holy*.” We must be very certain of all of our terms here. If the olive tree represents the nation and its *national standing*, then whatever the problem may be, it is clear that, as Israel as a nation before God does not exist, the olive tree has been cut down.

The believing branches, therefore, must have some other ground of blessing. If we change the figure from the olive tree to that of a divorced wife, as in Jeremiah 3:1 and 11:15-16, we may perhaps see more clearly that the believing remnant lost nothing when the *national position* of Israel was altered at Acts 28.

Israel as a restored nation is represented as a divorced wife received back by the Lord (Jeremiah 3:1), but

the believing remnant is spoken of as the “*bride of the Lamb*” (Revelation 21:9). The “*divorced wife*” is restored to the land, but the “*bride*” is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem.

There is, therefore, a great difference between the destinies of the believing and the unbelieving branches. In some cases the change was even greater. Paul himself lost his *national* association with Israel when the nation was set aside, but he entered into a sphere of blessing so great as to enable him to count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ.

Others would find their sphere of blessing set forth in John 14 to 17, and learn that though they were no longer branches in the olive tree of Israel, they were branches in Christ as the True Vine, and so had lost nothing.

If we recognize that *dispensational* standing may change to our advantage, as it manifestly did in the case of Paul, our difficulty about the believing branches of the olive tree will be resolved.

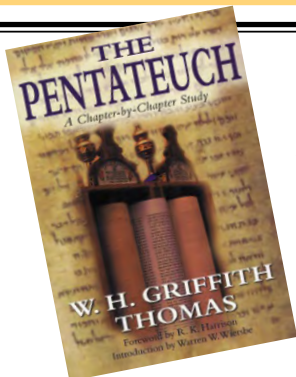
Doctrinal standing is not in view in Romans 11. The grafting in of the unbelieving branches into their own olive tree at the end represents the restoration of Israel’s *national* position “*in that day*.”

The olive tree can’t be discovered in Paul’s epistles of the Mystery. The New Covenant, and the Hope of Israel, are in abeyance, and not until God’s good time will they be put into operation.

Hosea, speaking of the day of Israel’s restoration, uses the same figures as we have been considering: the restoration of the separated wife (Hosea 3:3-5), and the spreading branches of the olive tree (Hosea 14:6).



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FULLNESS

We have seen that the grafting in of the wild olive was with the intention of provoking the weakening tree to new fruitfulness. The salvation and blessing of the Gentiles during the Acts, before the nation of Israel was saved and ready for their great mission to the families of the Earth, were “*contrary to nature*,” and intended to “*provoke Israel to jealousy*.”

We must now return to the opening verses of this section to give a little closer attention to the blessings that accrued to the Gentiles as a result of Israel's lapse. The apostle here uses an argument which may be described as a *minori ad majus* (from the smaller to the greater):

If their fall has brought about so much, what must we not expect as a result of their restoration? (Romans 11:12).

The failure of Israel is expressed in the following terms:

- fall (*paraptoma*, :11);
- diminishing (*hettema*, :12);
- casting away (*apobole*, :15);
- broken off (*ekklao*, :17);
- spared not (*pheidomai*, :21);
- blindness (*porosis*, :25);
- enemies (*echthros*, :28); and
- concluded in unbelief (*sugkleio*, :32).

In these eight terms we behold the “*severity*” of God (:22).

The “*fall*” of Israel is likened to the “*offence*” of Adam, the word *paraptoma* being translated “*offence*” in Romans 5:15-16, 18, 20. The word literally means “to fall aside.” Israel follows very much in the steps of Adam. Both fail of their high purpose and are set aside, and both will realize their destiny only when “in Christ.”

Just as in Romans 5:20 the abounding “*offence*” was overruled by God unto much more abounding grace, so in Romans 11:12, 15 we discover something of the same argument – an argument which, approached from the wrong angle, has been resolutely set aside in Romans 3:7 – for no amount of overruling grace can minimize the positive wickedness of individual sin, however much good may result by the intervention of grace.

In Deuteronomy 27-28 Moses gives the people the solemn words that were to be pronounced from Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. Among the blessings we find,

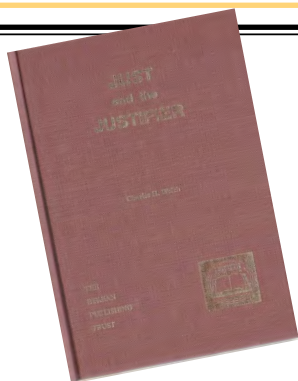
And the Lord shall make thee the head, and not the tail; and thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath (Deuteronomy 28:13).

This high position Israel forfeited because of unbelief, but a day is coming when the Redeemer shall come to Zion (Isaiah 59:20), and Israel shall be restored, and enter into their high glory:

The nation and kingdom that will not serve thee shall perish; yea, those nations shall be utterly wasted ... But ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord: men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles (Isaiah 60:12; 61:6).



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With this high destiny in mind, coupled with Israel's terrible fall, the apostle uses the word "diminish." The primary meaning of *hettaomai* is to be overcome as in battle or in a law-suit (II Peter 2:19-20), and so to be inferior (II Corinthians 12:13). Israel, by their unbelief and failure to repent, were losing their high prerogatives, set out so fully in Romans 9:4-5. This high position, now in danger of being forfeited, was not, of course, given to them on account of any intrinsic worth in themselves, but rather because of their place in the scheme of blessing. So, when they fail, the apostle speaks of them as being "cast away" – as the blind man is said to have cast away his garment that, apparently, encumbered him, or as the ship that was wrecked was "a loss" (Acts 27:22). Israel had made shipwreck of their calling; they had fallen aside; they were becoming inferior; they were "a loss," and so through all of the terms used by the apostle to explain their condition.

RICHES

The failure of Israel has been overruled by God to the blessing of the Gentiles, and has resulted in their "riches." These "riches" find an exposition in the epistle to the Romans itself, as well as in the other epistles of the period.

For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon Him (Romans 10:12).

The apostle was not commissioned on the day of Pentecost. Israel had the opportunity of hearing the Word, with signs following, for a considerable period before the apostle to the Gentiles received his commission. Immediately after Acts 9 and the commission of Paul comes Acts 10 and the indication to Peter

that the unique and separate position of the Jew was passing. In Acts 13-14 the door of faith opens to the Gentiles, and Israel is warned lest that "come upon them, that was spoken by the prophets" (Acts 13:40-41).

The very call of Israel was associated historically with the failure and apostasy of the Gentile world, for Abraham's call in Genesis 12 follows the failure at Babel in Genesis 11. From the call of Abraham up to the time of the Acts of the Apostles, God had concentrated His attention upon that one people:

You only have I known of all the families of the Earth (Amos 3:2).

The apostle speaks of this period of Israel's ascendancy, and the corresponding Gentile darkness, when addressing the philosophers on Mars Hill, but he also indicates that a change had come:

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30).

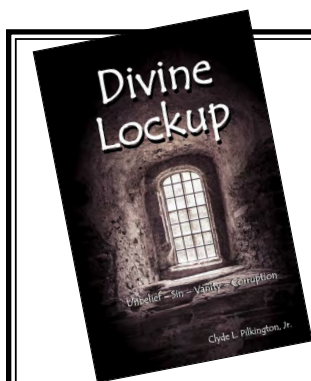
Israel lost their high position of favor, and the far-off Gentiles, through the instrumentality of the apostle's ministry, are brought in:

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office (Romans 11:13). BSN

— *Alphabetical Analysis*
(abridged & edited)

TOPICS:

Major: Israel, Its Present State; Olive Tree; Romans 11
Minor: Remnant



Divine Lockup

by — Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

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