

Israel and the Nations

by John F. Walvoord

The selection of Abraham as the progenitor of a new division of humanity was a dramatic milestone in the history of mankind, marking the beginning of God's redemptive purpose in the world.

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Redemption Plan"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the significant selection of Abraham as the progenitor of a new division of humanity, likening it to pivotal moments in history like the creation of Adam and Eve and the new beginning with Noah. The sovereign choice of Abraham marked a crucial development in God's unfolding purpose. The sermon explores the divine purpose in redemption, emphasizing God's plan to provide redemption in Christ through Abraham's posterity. It also discusses the divine purpose in revelation, highlighting how God revealed Himself through Abraham's descendants, prophets, and ultimately in Jesus Christ. Additionally, the sermon touches on the divine purpose in the history of Israel, showcasing how Israel's relationship with the nations reveals God's dealings with mankind and the spiritual principles at play.

Transcript

The selection of Abraham as the progenitor of a new division of humanity was a dramatic milestone in the history of mankind. It may be compared to the creation of Adam and Eve following the prehistoric fall of some of the holy angels led by Satan, and was similar to the new beginning with Noah after the destruction of the rest of humanity by the flood. The sovereign choice of Abraham marked a new and significant development in the progressive unfolding of God's purpose in the world.

The fact that Genesis itself devotes only eleven chapters to the whole history of the universe up to Abraham and then uses the remainder of almost forty chapters to trace the life of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in itself demonstrates the tremendous significance of this new development. From Genesis 11:10, where the genealogy of Abraham is given, to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, the seed of Abraham is constantly in the foreground, and the Gentiles are introduced only as they are related to the history of Israel. No approach to a proper understanding of Scripture can ignore this obvious divine emphasis upon the numerically small people who descended from Jacob. The explanation is not in any peculiarity of the people of Israel, but rather in the sovereign choice of God in selecting them to fulfill His purpose. Three major areas tell the story of the relation of Israel to the nations.

The Divine Purpose In Redemption

Unquestionably one of the principal reasons for the selection of Abraham and his posterity was the divine purpose to fulfill the promise given to Adam and Eve that the seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). The divine intention to fulfill this through Abraham's posterity is embodied in the promise, "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The primary importance of Israel rests in the fact that through them God would fulfill His purpose to reveal His grace and provide redemption in Christ. Through this provision not only would God redeem the nation of Israel, but also those in all of the nations who would turn to God and Christ in faith. The spiritual seed of Abraham according to Galatians 3:7 are all those who like Abraham trust in God.

No philosophy of history is complete unless it includes recognition of God's redemptive plan from the standpoint of eternity. The important factor in every life as well as in every nation is the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose to save those by grace who believe. Life becomes meaningless except as it is related to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and as it is related to eternity by receiving eternal life in time. If it were not for God's redemptive purpose, life as well as history would be a hopeless puzzle without motivation and objective, and God and His purposes would be an unsolvable enigma.

The Divine Purpose In Revelation

Important as is the divine purpose in salvation, however, this is only one aspect, although a major aspect, to be found in God's selection of Abraham and his posterity. If the major reason for God creating the universe and man is to use the world as a means of declaring His own ineffable glory, then the selection of Abraham also assumes major importance because through Abraham's seed God purposed to reveal Himself. This revelation came first through prophets, such as Abraham himself, through whom God spoke. Most important were the writers of Scripture such as Moses and those who succeeded him. Most if not all of the Bible was written by those who were physical descendants of Abraham. It was through Abraham that not only Christ came, but also the prophets. Although God on occasion spoke through Gentiles, as in the dreams of Nebuchadnezzar, these were incidental rather than central in God's usual method of revealing Himself through history.

The final and climactic revelation was of course in the person of Jesus Christ who in the incarnation not only became man, but revealed God through human flesh. Christ was not only the way of salvation, but He was also the way of revelation. All of this was included in the purpose of God in divine revelation in selecting Abraham and his descendants. The choice of Abraham as the channel through which both redemption and divine revelation should come introduces another important factor often overlooked in the theological analysis of God's promises to Abraham and their fulfillment.

The Divine Purpose In The History Of Israel

God was not only going to use Israel as a means of redemption and a means of revelation, but their very history and prophecy were to be a cameo which would reveal God in His dealings with mankind in general. The history of Israel in the Old Testament in their relationship to the Gentiles is also a spiritual analysis of human experience as the people of God seek to live in a temporal world. The careful recital of Israel's failures and successes and the principles which guided their rise or fall according to Romans 15:4 "were written aforetime...for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope."

The relationship of Israel to the nations therefore forms not only an important background for understanding "the times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) and God's dealings with nations other than Israel,

but also makes clear the role of the Gentiles in God's purpose in history. It was to be in the context of their relationship to the nations that Israel was to reveal their particular qualities as a people of God. In this they illustrated the timeless spiritual principles that are involved in a people of God living in a world which is basically anti-God. The history of Israel in relation to the nations prior to the times of the Gentiles and the Babylonian captivity may be divided into seven subdivisions.

Israel in Egypt. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, although promised the land as a perpetual possession of their seed, never actually possessed the Promised Land. Instead, as God predicted in Genesis 15:13, 14, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance." This prophecy of Israel's relationship to Egypt was fulfilled in Genesis 46 when Jacob and his family followed Joseph to the land of Egypt to avoid the famine in the Promised Land.

The sojourn of the children of Israel in Egypt for 430 years (1876-1446 b.c.) increased the people of Israel from 70 to approximately 3,000,000. Their rapid increase in numbers and wealth aroused the opposition of the Egyptian kings. Israel soon became an enslaved people first under the Hyksos rulers who displaced the native Egyptian kings in the period 1730-1580 b.c., and later when the Egyptian kings were able to resume control at which time the iniquitous law requiring the killing of all male children in Israel was imposed. During the reign of Amenhotep II (1447-1421 b.c.), after the imposition of the ten plagues upon Egypt, the nation of Israel was finally expelled from Egypt and the Exodus began. This probably occurred in 1446 b.c., although some critical scholars favor a date as late as 1290 b.c. During the years of their growth in Egypt, God had marvelously begun the preparation of the Promised Land for their occupation. Now, however, it was necessary to temper and discipline the nation Israel for their new role as a separate people inheriting the promises of God.

Israel in the wilderness wanderings. During the forty years in which Israel wandered in the wilderness, they were the objects of God's special care in a way that no people had ever previously experienced. The Exodus from Egypt had been preceded by the miraculous intervention of God in the plagues inflicted upon the Egyptians. This had been supported by the great deliverance from the hosts of the Egyptians at the Red Sea when a miraculous strong wind permitted the Israelites to cross the sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians were engulfed by the returning waters when they attempted to follow.

In the first year of their wilderness wanderings at Mount Sinai, Israel was introduced to the covenant of the law which involved for them not only the obligation to keep a particular rule of life, but to be "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). The comprehensive revelation given to Moses of Israel's moral, ceremonial, and social law as well as the order of worship and the details of the construction of the Tabernacle and its furniture was a tremendous disclosure of God which was greeted almost immediately by rebellion on the part of the people as recorded in Exodus 32.

It was subsequent to this preliminary failure that Israel, after sending out spies to survey the land for forty days, accepted the unfavorable report of the ten spies that the land could not be conquered. Because of their spiritual immaturity and lack of faith, Israel rebelled against God and was saved from extermination only by Moses' intercession (Numbers 14). The subsequent disciplinary judgment of God declared that all the adults would die in the wilderness during forty years of wandering, whereas their little ones whom they said would fall prey to the enemy would inherit the promise of possession of the land (Numbers 14:28-34).

During the wilderness wanderings, for the most part, Israel did not engage in fighting with existing tribes, but their few contacts with other nations were unhappy chapters in the years of their wandering. In Numbers 20:21 Edom, the descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother, refused to let Israel pass through their territory. This began a history of long enmity between Israel and Edom which will continue throughout the times of the Gentiles.

Another traditional enemy of Israel was Sihon of Heshbon, an Amorite, and a descendant of one of the eleven sons of Canaan who also opposed the children of Israel. His opposition, however, was used of God to destroy him as the children of Israel took all of his cities and destroyed them utterly from Aroer to Gilead, that is, most of the land east of Jordan from Galilee to the Dead Sea. Their subsequent contacts with Og King of Bashan, another division of the Amorites, resulted in a similar disaster for Og and his people. They too were exterminated, and the children of Israel occupied this territory, the land to the east of Galilee and somewhat to the north. These preliminary victories at the close of the years of wandering were the forerunner of the conquering of the land west of Jordan. Also illustrated is the spiritual conflict between a people of God and those who are anti-God as represented in their enemies.

The conquering of the Promised Land. With the death of Moses, Joshua succeeded him as the leader of Israel, and the book that bears his name records the subsequent conquest of the land. Most of the territory west of Jordan was nominally under the control of Egypt whose King Amenhotep III reigned from approximately 1412-1376 b.c. He had neglected Palestine to the point that its political government was largely conducted by city-states over which there was only lax supervision. They were accordingly ill-prepared to resist an aggressive, co-ordinated attack from the nation Israel.

Israel crossed the Jordan through a miraculous stopping of the waters during the flood state probably in the spring of 1406 b.c. Their conquest of Jericho was aided by a supernatural destruction of the walls subsequently. After an initial defeat, in a second attack they conquered Ai with the result that the larger city Bethel (Joshua 8) was likewise conquered. The southern portion of the land west of Jordan was possessed first by Gibeon who through trickery secured a treaty and then by the defeat of the alliance of five Amorite kings who had besieged Gibeon (10:1-27). Their victory was aided by the supernatural long day of Joshua 10:12-14. The conquest of other kings including Jabin, King of Hazor (Joshua 11:1-11) resulted in the bulk of the land falling to Israel during the first six years of the conquest. Joshua, now approaching old age, arranged for the division of the land even though many of the Canaanites still retained potential for opposition, and some of the land had not yet been possessed. The victory, although tremendous and allowing living space for Israel, was far short of what God had promised if they would truly possess the land by faith (Joshua 1:2-5). They failed to carry out the command of Moses to exterminate completely the Canaanites. The utter immorality and false religions of the Canaanites were to prove so damaging to the people of Israel that it led to the extended period of political anarchy and moral decay which characterized the period of the judges.

The period of the Judges. The early verses of Judges record some of the preliminary victories against the Canaanites. But even before the end of the first chapter the sad record is given: "The children of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites that inhabited Jerusalem" (Judges 1:21). Nor did the children of Manasseh conquer the Canaanites that dwelt in their area, but rather put them under tribute (1:27, 28). Similar failure of other tribes is recorded in verses 29-36. This disobedience of the express command of Moses (Deuteronomy 7:2) set up the situation for Israel's spiritual and political decay.

For more than three centuries Israel was ruled by judges often local in their influence and sometimes contemporary. The lesson repeatedly given, however, was that when Israel sinned, God would use the Gentiles to inflict disciplinary punishment and over-lordship upon them. When they genuinely repented, God would raise up a judge or leader to deliver them from their enemies. Their subsequent deliverance, however, was often short-lived, and they drifted back into the old sins. The book of Joshua is a spiral, but a spiral downward, and Israel's moral situation at the close of Judges was one of total anarchy ethically, religiously, and politically. Israel never sank lower than in the closing chapters of Judges. Such is the clear lesson of what happens to a nation with initial spiritual power when it joins socially and religiously as well as politically with the world totally debased and devoid of moral purity.

As in the later history of Israel, God used the Gentiles to inflict punishment upon the children of Israel. Among the more important enemies of Israel were the Hittites who lay to their north and the Egyptians who were to the south. Also prominent in the period were the Moabites, descendants of Lot, and Amalek, descendants of Esau (Judges 3:12-14). The Canaanites led by Jabin (Judges 4:1-3) were another who oppressed Israel.

In the time of Gideon, the Midianites were the instrument of oppression. Although their origin is obscure, they probably were descendants of Midian a son of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:1-6) who had inhabited much of the land east of Jordan and the Dead Sea. In the time of Moses they had accumulated considerable wealth as nomads (Numbers 31:22, 32-34). They did not figure largely in history outside the Bible and have long since disappeared. The remarkable deliverance by Gideon's three hundred is one of the bright chapters of Judges.

Among the other oppressors of Israel were the Philistines, an ancient people who inhabited the coastal region along the Mediterranean west of the Dead Sea. The Philistines had a long history, having apparently invaded the Middle East from the sea and engaged Raamses III (1195-1164 b.c.), ruler of Egypt, in a series of battles. The Philistines who survived settled in southeast Palestine and eventually gave the entire area the name Palestine, the Greek form of Philistia. The name Philistine appears in the Bible over two hundred times and in more than seventy different chapters.

In many respects the relationship of Israel to the Philistines was their spiritual barometer. When Israel was in the dominant position, it was a token of God's blessing. When they were in oppression by the Philistines, it was a sign of spiritual declension. Much of the closing material of Judges relates to the Philistines. It was not until the time of Samuel that Israel was rescued from forty years of domination by the Philistines (Judges 13:1).

Samuel and Eli the priest were the last two of the fourteen judges which prefaced the appointment of Saul as King. It was through Samuel that the crushing defeat of Israel at Ebenezer (I Samuel 4), in which Eli and his sons died, was turned into a victory in a later battle recorded in I Samuel 7. Another attempt was made by the Philistines to gain power in the battle which resulted in the death of Saul and Jonathan (I Samuel 31). The period of the Judges was completely indecisive as far as victory for Israel is concerned, but is a record of human failure, contrasted to divine grace extended to a people when repentant. God's forgiveness was a demonstration of the faithfulness of God to a people who deserved judgment rather than mercy. The sovereign purpose of God in the nation Israel, though obscure in Judges, emerges more clearly in the period of the kingdoms.

The kingdoms of Saul, David, and Solomon. When Israel rejected the theocratic rule of God through judges and demanded that a king be appointed, God made clear that they were inviting oppressive rulers who would make slaves of their children and who would demand a large portion of their income. Their desire to be like the Gentiles was obviously born of the flesh rather than of the Spirit. In granting their request, however, prophecy was being fulfilled, for God had said to Abraham, "Kings shall come out of thee" (Genesis 17:6).

The first king to be appointed was Saul, anointed privately by Samuel, then later named publicly and finally confirmed after the victory at Jabesh-Gilead (I Samuel 11). Saul proved, however, to be an inept ruler, foolishly proud of his sovereignty and position, and jealous of David who had become a national hero by conquering Goliath. The fulfillment of the prophecy of his death in battle is recorded in the closing chapter of I Samuel and the first chapter of II Samuel. David immediately was proclaimed king over his own tribe of Judah (II Samuel 2:4). After a period of civil war and the death of Ish-bosheth the ruler of the ten tribes, he became king over all Israel about 1003 b.c. Among the first achievements of his reign was the complete rout of the Philistines.

The reign of David occurred at a time in which neighboring nations were in a weakened or inefficient state and unable to counter his rising power. The Hittites to the north had been broken by Barbarian invasions and rendered ineffective. Assyria likewise was in a weakened state, and Egypt was in a battle of power between the priests and merchants who alternately ruled from 1100 b.c. on. The reign of David was a glorious achievement of a man whom God had blessed and who was gifted as a warrior, general, and king. His power extended from the Euphrates River to the northeast, to the Mediterranean to the west, and the Red Sea to the south.

His long reign was not without its complications. His lax discipline of his sons, the product of multiple marriages, his crime in relation to Uriah and Bathsheba, and his sin in numbering the people were blots on his record. God nevertheless assured to him that his son would have a glorious reign, and in due time Solomon succeeded David.

In contrast to the experience of his father, Solomon's reign was one of peace and luxury, and social and cultural advance. He exceeded his father in multiple marriages, many of them with heathen women, with the result that his children were not brought up in the knowledge of the Lord (cp. Deuteronomy 17:17). He likewise violated the law in his reliance upon many chariots and military strength, instead of depending upon God (Deuteronomy 17:16). His luxurious living and demand for many buildings resulted in increased oppression and taxation which in turn led to the divided kingdom after his death.

The period of Saul, David, and Solomon was, from an outward standpoint, undoubtedly one of the most glorious in the history of Israel. Its outer glory, however, did not hide many spiritual failures which ultimately resulted in the captivities and the destruction of the monuments erected by David and Solomon.

The divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel. After the death of Solomon in 930 b.c. his son Rehoboam, who succeeded him, foolishly continued the oppressive taxation with the result that the ten tribes withdrew and formed the northern kingdom of Israel. Although endowed with many advantages over the kingdom of Judah, the kingdom of Israel from the start was a record of spiritual failure. Their reliance upon idols, commercial prosperity, and the fertility of the soil in their area led them to depart from God and to neglect the sanctuary in Jerusalem. The golden calves introduced by Jeroboam, their first king at Dan and Bethel, were blasphemous substitutes for the true worship of God.

The kings of Israel without exception were ungodly men, and the course of Israel was downward for the next two centuries ending in the captivity of the ten tribes by Assyria 721 b.c. The period was marked with warfare between Israel and Judah and at times both kingdoms were dominated by outsiders such as the Syrian domination 841-790 b.c. Although there were periods of prosperity and strength, as under Jeroboam II, when outside oppression was at a minimum, the path of the kingdom of Israel was downward.

The nation of Judah, composed of the two tribes Judah and Benjamin in and around Jerusalem, had the advantage of the spiritual strength of being the religious center of the nation. Although some of its kings were wicked men, there were periods of revival as under Hezekiah and Josiah. They only temporarily, however, and somewhat superficially brought the children of Israel back to God. Ultimately the two remaining tribes fell to the invading Medes and Babylonians, as prophesied by Nahum (3:18, 19). The Babylonian defeat of the Egyptians at Carchemish in 605 b.c. introduced the period of Babylonian domination which continued for more than a half century and made possible the captivity of the two remaining tribes, many of whom were carried off into ancient Babylon. The kings who would fight their enemies, which Israel had demanded of God, had brought only temporary prosperity. Morally, the period of the kings, especially the kings of Israel, was no better than the period of the judges. Israel had yet to learn the lessons that under the law blessing could be secured only by obedience. Although God was a gracious God who welcomed a repentant people, there was a high price to pay for neglect of the law and for worship of idols.

Post-captivity. In the captivity of Israel by Assyria and the captivity of Judah by the Babylonians, most of the population were carried off into captivity. The ten tribes suffered a series of deportations beginning in the reign of Pekah, king of Israel, when Tiglath-pileser III about 740 b.c. carried off the tribes to the east of Jordan to Assyria (I Chronicles 5:26) and some of those in Galilee (II Kings 15:29). In 721 b.c. Samaria was captured and more than 25,000 of the population went into captivity. Before the Babylonian captivity even began, it is estimated that 200,000 captives were taken from the ten tribes as well as the cities of Judah.

The Babylonian captivity began with the fall of Jerusalem 606 b.c. when selected captives including Daniel were carried off to Babylon. This was followed by a major deportation in 597 b.c. when 10,000 of the leaders of Judah were deported. Another major deportation took place in 586 b.c. when Jerusalem itself was destroyed.

The captivities continued until 538 b.c. when Cyrus issued a decree for a return of some of the pilgrims to their ancient land (Ezra 1:2). With the time taken to organize the expedition and return to their ancient land, the predicted seventy years was consumed between 606 b.c. and 536 b.c. in fulfillment of the prediction of seventy years of captivity (Jeremiah 25:11, 12; 29:10). The returning pilgrims, after some delay, were able to build the temple, completed about 516 b.c. or exactly seventy years after Jerusalem itself was laid desolate and the previous temple destroyed (Daniel 9:2).

The number of the returning pilgrims in the first expedition were 42,360 (Ezra 2:64). Their servants brought the total number to approximately 50,000. Most of these were from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and Levi, but included some from other tribes. Some of those carried off in the Assyrian captivities returned as they were able, until all twelve tribes were represented. A later expedition led by Ezra (Ezra 7-10) further swelled the number of returning pilgrims. Under the leadership of Nehemiah the walls of the city were rebuilt and a plan for the rebuilding of the city itself was adopted and put into effect.

As the Old Testament closes, the children of Israel are back in the land, but always under some form of Gentile supervision and authority. The remaining centuries which led up to Christ were unhappy ones for Israel especially under the fearful persecutions of the Romans who according to Josephus slaughtered more than 1,000,000 Israelites in the siege of Jerusalem alone in a.d. 70. In the second century following Christ. Palestine was almost devoid of Jews, who had been scattered to the four winds. It was not until the twentieth century that Israel was restored to their ancient land and re-established as a nation there.

In the history of God's dealings with Israel He revealed His attributes in a way in which He did not reveal them to the Gentile world. To Israel, God had made many wonderful and everlasting promises. They were to be a people who would continue forever (Jeremiah 31:35-37). They were to have a king forever of the line of David (II Samuel 7:16). They were to have title to the land forever (Genesis 17:8).

These promises, though unfulfilled to generations which neglected the Word of God and trusted in idols made with hands, nevertheless manifest God's faithfulness in dealing with an erring people. Even in the midst of their apostasy and sin, when the prophets of God thundered warnings of divine judgment, there is the recurring note of God's unfailing purpose, of God's faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The certainty of the ultimate fulfillment of the promises is made clear as they are repeated again and again in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The relationship of the Gentiles to Israel is always that of a supporting role. God's sovereignty and divine power are again and again manifested in His dealings with the nations, but this is always subordinated to His purpose for Israel and the fulfillment of the spiritual promises to all who would trust in the God of Israel. The eternal shines again and again through the temporal, and the immediate actors on the stage are never allowed to forget that behind the scenes God is still directing the panorama of history to His desired and prophesied end. Prophecy concerning the Gentiles, accordingly, although more expansive in its character and worldwide in its significance, is always presented in Scripture in relation to God's purposes for Israel. World history which is not related to this is usually omitted in Scripture. The Biblical point of view, therefore, is quite different from that of the world in general to whom Israel was an insignificant people. From the standpoint of God's divine election, Israel is instead the key, and through Israel God was to fulfill His purpose whether redemptive, political, or eschatological.

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