

Why the Jew?

by Reggie Kelly

The sermon explores the significance of the Jewish people in God's redemptive plan and the mysteries surrounding their election and restoration.

Scripture: Isaiah 49:23

Topics: "Israel's Role", "God's Sovereignty"

Description

Reggie Kelly delves into the profound mystery of 'The Tents of Shem' prophecy, emphasizing the unique role of the priestly people in mediating God's revelation and blessing. He explores the significance of Israel's distinctiveness in reflecting God's nature and the controversial yet essential connection between faith, priestly character, and Jewish descent in God's redemptive plan. Kelly highlights the divine purpose behind God's preservation of the Jewish people and the prophetic importance of Israel's role in demonstrating God's sovereignty and grace to all nations, ultimately leading to a transformative national restoration at the second coming of the Messiah.

Transcript

An email to a correspondent concerning a previous message on "The Tents of Shem."

...Your comments have come on the heels of some recently revived discussion over Art Katz's controversial use of the term "to bow" in order to enter into the 'tents of Shem.' I would like to suggest another important aspect of this seminal and multifaceted prophecy, showing from the first, that God's eternal purpose in grace would be mediated through Abraham's elect line, but why?

As you rightly point out, Noah did not bless Shem directly, but the God of Shem, whose distinctive character is unknowable apart from the Spirit of revelation. You rightly suggest that Shem's distinction lies solely in the distinctive character of his God. Thus, the blessing of dwelling in the 'tents of Shem' signifies coming into the true revelation of God as mediated through a priestly people that reflect His nature.

Apart from this priestly character, Jewish descent avails nothing so far as salvation is concerned. However, God is most selective of the means by which He is pleased to mediate the revelation of Himself. This is why Jesus would have the woman at the well understand that "salvation is of the Jews." It is a perfect wisdom that shuts the hidden manna of divine revelation and salvation within, and never outside, the chosen tents of Shem as the hideaway of divine blessing. In order to dethrone pride, God elects to place the blessing in a despised and disregarded place into which one must 'stoop' to enter. There is

something about tents of badger skins and jars of clay that speak eloquently of this divine jealousy. So indeed, we must 'bow' in the sense of 'stooping' to come into and receive what is outwardly weak, foolish, and disallowed of men.

But this is not the whole answer, because we must still ask "who makes one to differ from another?" (1Cor 4:7). It is not surprising that God has chosen the meek, the faithful, and those who reflect His priestly character as the channel of His blessing, but why should natural descent count for anything? Since we know that "in the flesh is nothing good," why distinguish ethnicity in the first place? Why single out a 'distinct' people as the locus and channel of divine blessing, if indeed priestly character is all that counts? Do the Jewish people, by some natural virtue possess a unique aptitude and faculty for the cultivation of moral religion? Some imagine this; but this is to miss the point entirely.

So now that faith has come, why continue to distinguish between Jew and Gentile, and between Israel and the Church? Since the covenant is fulfilled in Christ, so that "in Him" there is neither Jew nor Greek, why does Paul continue to speak of a covenant "with them" (the 'natural branches') that is unfulfilled until the Redeemer's return (Isa 59:19-21; Ro 11:26-27)? It is a distinction that God has sworn to preserve for an important prophetic purpose (Jer 30:11; 31:35-37). What is that purpose? In other words, Why the Jew? As cleverly put to verse, "How odd of God to choose the Jews."

Why isn't faith and priestly character sufficient by itself to mediate blessing to the world? Why should this require embodiment in a specific race of people? Why does God take no rest until Israel fulfills its original calling to be a mediatorial nation of priests to bless all nations (Ex 19:6; Isa 2:3; 62)? This is Israel's millennial destiny (Isa 61:6). Theologians have called this the 'scandal of particularity.' Indeed, if "all that counts is a new creation" (Gal 6:15), then why is it necessary that the life of this new creation be personified and exhibited through Jews as Jews ("the natural branches"), as a distinct nation ALL holy in their land as long as the earth shall last (Isa 4:3; 45:17; 54:13; 59:21; 60:21; 66:21 et al)? Notably, such uniform salvation (not one unsaved among the Jews; Jer 31:34), and the eternal security of a divinely guaranteed perseverance in grace (32:40) is not assured to any other nation. Though the nations will enjoy an unprecedented abundance of salvation in the millennium (Isa 27:6; 66:19; Jer 3:17; Mic 4:1-8; Hab 2:14 et al), many will remain unsaved (Isa 26:10; 60:12; 65:20; Zech 8:23; 14:17; Rev 2:27 et al), so that by the end of the millennium, an innumerable host from all nations are ready at Satan's behest to launch another futile assault against the chosen locus of God's government on earth (Isa 2: 3; Rev 20:7-9).

What is God saying in all of this? I believe it is what He's been saying all along, and intends that Israel demonstrate for one thousand years in the sight of all nations (Ps 98:2-3; Ezk 39:27). Israel exists as a distinct nation for the sake of an ultimate demonstration in history. This is the very purpose of the millennium. This is what makes "the tents of Shem message" so controversial; it underscores a profound mystery.

It is the glory of God to conceal a matter (Prov 25:2). "Truly You are God, who hides Yourself, O God of Israel, the Savior!" (Isa 45:15). It is important to understand that apart from special revelation the hidden things of God are unintelligible to the natural man, but only by revelation is the heart changed. God hides His secret from pride by mediating the revelation of His salvation through something or someone that is disallowed or despised (1Cor 1:27). "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa 53:2). It is a defining principal of all divine dealing and testing. The secret of God's intention (Eph 1:9) is hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes (Mt

11:25-27). "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? (53:1).

Divine mystery is like the "flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." It is a sword of two-edges. To pride, it is a trap and a snare, a rock of offense and a stone of stumbling (cf. Isa 8:14-17; 29:11-14; with 1Cor 1:19; 2:7-14). Conversely, revelation of "the hidden wisdom ordained to our glory" is the kiss of divine friendship (Gen 18:17; Amos 3:7; Jn 15:15) to those who receive what flesh and blood is incapable of receiving (Mt 16:27; 1Cor 2:7 et al). Even when the mystery "hid in other ages" is revealed and preached to all nations (Mt 24:14; Ro 16:25-26), it remains a 'sealed vision' to the children of pride (Isa 8:14-17; 29:11; Dan 9:24; 12:9-10). This is the test by which the world is judged.

The mystery of the gospel (Ro 16:25; 1Cor 2:7-8; Eph 6:19; Rev 10:7; 19:10b) that stumbled Israel (Isa 8:14-17; 49:7; 53:3-5; Mt 21:42) will once more stumble, not only Israel, but all nations, as Last Days' events press the question of the 'everlasting covenant.' Any literal reading of the great volume of prophetic scripture describing world conditions leading up to the Day of the Lord shows clearly that the age will not end before all nations are in great agitation over the question of the land of Israel, and the city of Jerusalem, which is also the question of the everlasting covenant (1Chron 16:17-18; Isa 24:5). The "controversy of Zion" (Ps 2; Isa 34:8; Zech 12:1-2; 14:1-9) is destined to plunge all nations into a final 'valley of decision' (Joel 3:14).

Manifestly, God intends that the entire world be confronted over the question of His sovereign choice of Jacob. It is an ultimate point of divine contention that provokes an ultimate act of divine intervention.

"I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land" (Joel 3:2). "Therefore wait ye upon me, says the Lord, until the day that I rise up to the prey: for my determination is to gather the nations, that I may assemble the kingdoms, to pour upon them mine indignation ..." (Zeph 3:8).

Scripture appears to regard the attitude of the nations towards Israel as the measure of their attitude towards God. Significantly, in the imagery of John's apocalypse, an attack on the people, land, and city of the covenant is regarded as an attack on the Lamb (Rev 17:12-14). This final assemblage of the nations against the symbols of the "holy covenant" (Ezk 38-39; Dan 9:27; 11:22, 28, 30-32; 12:11; Joel 3:2; Zech 12:1-2, 9; 14:2; Mt 24:15-29; Lk 21:24; Rev 11:2; 16:14-16; 19:15-21 et al) is treated in scripture as a consummate effrontery that causes God's "fury to come up in His face" (Ezk 38:18).

Only if the question of Israel were in some direct way related to the gospel could it become such a watershed issue of divine testing at the end of the age, because the gospel is the only ground of the believer's justification. Evidently, the 'blood of the everlasting covenant' (Heb 13:20), which is the heart of the gospel, is inseparable from the literal provisions of the 'everlasting covenant' as it pertains to both the people and the land of Israel (1Chron 16:17; Ps 105:10-11; Ezk 37:25-26 et al), assuring the restoration of both (Lev 26:42; Isa 62:4; Mic 4:1-8; Acts 1:6; 3:18-21; Ro 11:25-29). Therefore, the everlasting covenant is inseparable from the everlasting gospel, as all are comprehended within the mystery of Messiah's twofold appearing to Israel.

As Israel stumbled at Jesus, so will all nations stumble over Israel by reason of the same prophetic mystery. "But the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand" (Dan 12:10). Anti-Semitism reveals an autonomous contempt for the constraints of God's sovereign election and rule. Because anti-Semitism results from a failure to regard the sovereignty of God in all things, it is a form of

decide. Not understanding the profound implications of such phrases as "through their fall" (Ro 11:11) and "for your sakes" (11:28), the nations have laid presumptuous and bloody hands on the servant "who is blind" (Isa 42:19) for their sake.

"It was foreordained that Israel should reject him temporarily in order that the Gentiles might accept him. Here again is an example of God permitting his people to be bruised that the world might be healed" (Jacob Gartenhaus; Rebirth of a Nation; pg 59; Broadman).

In the mystery of God, Israel's rejection of "the heir" (the Servant-Son Messiah) is answered in the rejection of Israel (the Servant-Son nation) by the nations. As Israel has said, "We will not have this man rule over us!" so the nations have said, "We will not have this nation rule over us!" All have said, "We will not have THIS God rule over us!"

Because God's pre-temporal decision is not based on works (Ro 9:11-23), it exposes a latent resentment and envy in the natural heart that is disinclined to agree with the righteousness of God's choice, which is ultimately the question of His rule. "Is it not lawful for me to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am good?" (Mt 20:15). This deep seated quarrel with the election, and therefore the Word and rule of God explains the rage of the nations in the Last Days' siege against the people, land, and city of 'the covenant' (Isa 2:4; Isa 34:8; Joel 3:2; Dan 9-12; Mt 24:15-29; 2Thes 2; Rev 11:2; 12; 19). It is the eschatological manifestation of Satan's long war against the covenant (Rev 12:4).

God has predetermined history in a way that defies human understanding. However, the believer knows that nothing concerning God's election is arbitrary or left to chance. Rather, it is indispensable to the glory of His eternal purpose (Gen 18:25). To the natural mind such apparent discrimination will seem arbitrary and unfair, but this is precisely the point. Such a radical challenge to human understanding profoundly discovers the true disposition of the heart. This seems to be the point in Jesus' momentary refusal of the woman of Canaan in Mt 15:22-28. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel ... it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." What does Jesus seek in this woman that causes Him to require her acknowledgment of Israel's unique covenant status and privilege? Something high must come down in order for grace to abound. The apparent 'exclusion' of covenant restriction becomes God's opportunity to 'include' (on the basis of grace alone) all who will 'bow' to the authority and justice (Gen 18:25) of His sovereign right to "have mercy on whom He will have mercy" (Jn 5:21; Ro 9:18 et al).

Paul explains that the election of Jacob is necessary so "that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth" (Ro 9:11). All is to underscore the great maxim of Romans 9:16, "so then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy." History and prophecy will bear this out; the entire drama of redemption, its ends and ultimate goal, depends on the initial establishment and preservation of an essential ethnic distinction between Jew and Gentile. For this cause, Christ must "come out of Jacob" (Num 24:19), and be made of the seed of David according to the flesh (Acts 2:30; Ro 1:3), and for this cause He will 'return' to "the remnant of His brethren" (Deut 30:3; Mic 5:3), Paul's "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Ro 9:3), who will 'in that day' return to Him (Hos 3:4-5; 5:15-6:2; Mt 23:39; Ro 11:25-29). To lose the distinction is to lose the point. It is also to lose the great landmarks of divine instruction. Furthermore, it is to set light by the enormity of divine cost that such an eschatological demonstration implies. "For the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel" (Isa 4:23). "Also your people shall all be righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified" (Isa 60:21).

Through Israel, God will be known to all nations as the God who chooses, and that His favor is not based on anything He 'finds' in man, but on what He has determined to "put within" (create, birth, quicken) those whom He has foreknown (Jer 31:33; 32:40; Ezk 36:26-27; Ro 8:29-30). "Jacob have I loved" (9:13) before he becomes Israel, before he has done good or evil. This opens the question: was the election of Jacob based on divine foresight of the change in his character, or did God's election assure that change? The answer to this question is not left to theological speculation; it is answered by prophecy, and will be ultimately answered by history itself. It is not the change that determines election; it is election that assures the change. This seems to be the point of Paul's analogy of the potter's freedom in Ro 9:21. The same principle that removes the ground from all boasting (Ro 11:18; 1Cor 4:6-7; Eph 2:9), provides the assurance that "God is able to graft them in again" by no might of their own (Ro 11:23).

Because the truth of election is ultimately humbling, it is ultimately redemptive. It is the death sentence to everything that is lofty and self-assured, but the seal (2Tim 2:19) of a 'blessed assurance' where 'confidence in the flesh' has been shattered. Nothing else so profoundly offends and tests the natural heart, and this is why I am in agreement with the controversial use of the term 'bow,' when used in this context. Though strange to modern hearing, it is, after all, a very biblical metaphor (Isa 49:23; 60:14). The only bowing that scripture intends is before the God who is distinguished by what He has spoken and performed (Rev 19:10b).

Through Israel's restoration, the covenants of promise receive final historical vindication. Apart from this great apocalyptic act of divine power, the covenant is incomplete; but because the election cannot fail, "all Israel shall be saved" (cf. Isa 54:13; 59:21; Amos 9:9; Jn 6:45; Ro 9:6; 11:26). God has gone to utmost lengths of imponderable divine cost in order to make ultimate and public demonstration of this principle through a people that history has shown to be hopelessly incapable of covenant fulfillment. This is precisely the point. Israel's impossible condition exists for the glory of God (Jn 9:3 with Jn 11:3, 15).

The conditional promise which said "IF you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land" (Isa 1:19), is made secure by an eschatological act of transforming grace ensuring Israel's collective 'willingness' IN THAT DAY.

"Your people shall be willing in the day of Your power" (Ps 110:3)

All of the blessings and promises of the conditional covenant are unconditionally guaranteed by the sovereign "I wills" of God's predetermined purpose (cf. Jer 24:7; 31:33; 32:39-40; Ezk 11:19; 36:27 et al), ensuring that "from THAT DAY and forward" (Ezk 39:22), "all Israel" will know Him distinctively and experientially as the "God who raises the dead" (Ps 102:20; Ezk 37:13; Hos 6:1-2; Eph 2:1; 2Cor 1:9). Then will all Israel say with one voice "blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Ps 118:22-26; Mt 23:39 with Zech 12:10)

The covenant, in its totality, is incomplete until "they [ARE] all Israel that are of Israel" (Isa 60:21; Jer 31:34). This is the climax of the covenant. This was the expectation of the OT prophets and it remained the expectation of Paul. This is what Paul means when he says "and so all Israel shall be saved ... for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sin" (Ro 11:26-27). This miracle of national transformation comes through the supernatural regeneration of the surviving remnant (Isa 4:2; Zech 13:8-9) by the revelation of their rejected and now returning Messiah (Ps 118:22; Zech 12:10). It will come suddenly and at once ("in one day"; Isa 66:8; Ezk 39:22; Zech 3:9), "immediately after the tribulation of those days (Mt 24:29), "when the power of the holy people has been completely shattered" (compare Deut

32:36; Dan 12:7 with Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1). It is the Day of the Lord. "Behold, it is come, and it is done, saith the Lord GOD; this is the day whereof I have spoken" (Ezek 39:8, 22; Rev 16:14-17). It is Joseph revealed to his brethren. It is the persecutor Saul arrested in his opposition to become Paul to the nations.

In the same way that Paul could say "When it pleased God to reveal His Son in me ..." (Gal 1:15-16), even so, at "the time appointed" (Ps 102:12; Dan 11:27, 35) the nation of the Jews will know the mystery that was revealed to Paul in its own Damascus Road experience (cf. Isa 8:14-17; Dan 9:24; 12:9; Ezk 39:22-23; Zech 12:10; with Rev 10:7; 20:2). Israel's final restoration to covenant favor at the second coming of her rejected Messiah is history's ultimate answer to the question "hath God really said" (Gen 3:1). This is why God has unfinished business with "the natural branches."

For this cause, Israel must be transformed into a holy nation of priests in the sight of all nations, as an ultimate testimony to the sovereignty of God's ways in grace, whereby men from every nation (Isa 55:3; 61:8-9; Zech 8:23 et al) are made to see, to be humbled, and so cry out "while on others thou art calling, do not pass me by!" I believe that this helps to explain why the "tents of Shem" message is so controversial. It touches issues of great sensitivity that challenge comfortable categories. True prophetic revelation provokes and requires a deep wrestling with implications that are not always spelled out, because God still hides His secret from autonomous self-reliance, even in the plain hearing of it.

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