

# The Israel of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The true Israel of God is a spiritual thing, not a natural thing, and it is characterized by its spiritual distinctiveness, cohesion, and hope.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 18:8, Isaiah 53:10-11, John 13:35, Romans 9:6-8, Galatians 3:16, Galatians 4:19, Galatians 6:16, Colossians 1:27, Colossians 3:1-3

**Topics:** "Unity in Christ", "Spiritual Identity"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the distinction between 'Israel after the flesh' and 'the Israel of God', highlighting that true Israel is not defined by physical lineage but by spiritual rebirth through Christ. He explains that while the Jewish nation has a historical significance, the true children of God are those born of the promise, reflecting the spiritual realities of Christ's travail. Sparks urges believers to recognize their identity in Christ, which transcends earthly ties and emphasizes the need for spiritual discernment and unity among God's people. He warns against losing distinctiveness and cohesion as the true Israel, which is marked by unmistakable features of Christ's character. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of what it means to be part of the spiritual Israel, living in hope and unity as a reflection of God's eternal purpose.

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## Transcript

"When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed... he shall see of the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:10,11).

"They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed" (Romans 9:6-8).

"Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Galatians 3:16).

"And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).

For our present consideration many other fragments of the same kind could be added, but these are sufficient, surely, to impress us. Of course, they will not impress US in the same way as they did those to

whom they were first written. We are not able, without some very real illumination by the Holy Spirit, to recognise and appreciate the tremendous implications, the profound meaning of these statements of Paul. No, we have not yet fathomed all that Paul had come to see of what Christ meant, of what came in with Christ, of what happened when Christ came in, of what turned upon the advent of Christ. May the Spirit of God register something of those tremendous implications, even now.

It was this revelation which came to Paul, and his apprehension of the significance of Christ, that was the cause of all the trouble. If ever there was a man who got into trouble; around whom trouble circled and seethed, wherever he went -- who seemed to make trouble, it was this man Paul. But when you ask what the cause of it all is, it is just this with which we are now occupied. It is a matter which in principle will always set up a furore; and as to its significance it comes from the realm of greater intelligence than the human.

Now Paul did, of course, recognise that there was such a thing as a nation of Jews, a Jewish nation. That sounds far too trite and obvious. With a wave of the hand, and mark you, a significant wave of the hand, a kind of objective wave, he said, "Behold Israel after the flesh". Whilst that is something to take account of, it is, nevertheless, objective -- "Behold Israel, after the flesh". He recognised that that nation stood in a special relationship to the sovereign ways of God in history. Indeed, he was proud and very glad that he had been born in that nation. He had a deep heart-love for his nation, and he longed, as he said, that they might be saved: "Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God is for them, that they might be saved" (Rom. 10:1). Notice how objective is his attitude; he is not saying: "that WE might be saved". Note that, because it is a feature of this whole matter.

But, with all, with all his recognition, all his pleasure, and his longing and praying in that direction, he had come to see that they were not by nature "the Israel of God". That is the root of all the trouble. I underline the words BY NATURE; they were not by nature THE Israel of God, which, of course, they claimed to be. It is true that Israel was something, but the TRUE Israel, the true Israel to which he referred in that fragment "the Israel of God" or the true "Israel of God" -- was not a natural thing at all, and it is not. It is spiritual. It is not a Jewish, historic, earthly thing; it is not Abraham's NATURAL generation. This is what Paul is saying, and it is only what his Master, the Lord Jesus, had said. This Israel is Christ's generation; this "seed" is Christ, and those who are Christ's, begotten, born out of His travail. Christ's seed is essentially spiritual. No one was ever born of Him naturally. And yet, through those many centuries, the world has become occupied by His seed, which He is seeing, as of the travail of His soul. This seed is not begotten of Abraham, but begotten of God; it is not descended from Abraham through Jacob, the man with every feature of that which is natural ("supplanter" his name means, that is, "one who takes hold", whose nature it is to be possessive -- a very clear mark of the natural man) not through ambitious, scheming, cunning, clever, opportunist, unscrupulous and self-strong Jacob. This seed does not come through Jacob, but through Israel. What a great deal that means spiritually; that, having encountered God, and being virtually dead, through the grace of God he has survived. He said "I have seen God face to face, and my life is spared" -- the most wonderful thing has happened; I have seen God face to face, and my LIFE is spared! To come into an encounter with God, as did Jacob, means death: yes, and virtually that is what it was: and typically, Israel must be born, or there is no future -- there is no future at all -- Isra-EL! Surely this all leads us to the true "seed of Christ", the true "Israel of God".

The Significance of Abraham

We begin therefore with the true significance of Abraham. Abraham represents a terminal point in the history of the Old Testament, and then, from him, an unbroken course of national existence proceeded up to Christ. Through Abraham a race was re-born and marked out in special relationship to God's eternal desire. There is much that is technical, interesting and instructive in that study, but we leave it. You know that the first name, designation, of that nation or race, was "Hebrew" which means "that which has come from beyond"; "the man from over there, beyond the river", meaning, beyond the Euphrates, simply, "the man from beyond". The Hebrew race then, is that which has migrated over, come from beyond. Later, they became known as the "Jews"; that is quite a limited title, and just means the "descendants of Judah". In the beginning it just had that limited meaning of "descendants from Judah", in their country of Judea, but it became more general. Later still they became known as Israel -- the descendants of Jacob AFTER his crisis at Peniel.

Knowing all this, Paul nevertheless says that this was not the true Israel. He, like all the others, at one time believed that it was; but he had come to see that it was not the TRUE Israel, that the true Israel is INWARD, and not natural or outward. And that opens up a large field of very important consideration, which we will deal with later.

#### Israel -- A Great Object Lesson

As the tabernacle in the wilderness, and later the temple in the land, with all its components, was the embodiment of spiritual and heavenly principles and realities; as the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts were likewise the embodiment of spiritual realities, and not the realities themselves -- so it was with Israel. These are the things which make up the nation, they make up the life of the nation; they ARE Israel. The point is this -- it was possible, and is possible, to separate between the things themselves and those spiritual thoughts and principles. So that it is possible to have a tabernacle, replete with priesthood, sacrifices, and feasts, and yet not have the spiritual reality. It is possible to separate these things, because they are not one. Even God has no place for those symbols when they have lost their spiritual power and meaning. He will vehemently reject the THINGS -- ark, tabernacle, and everything else -- without compunction.

Paul carries this right through to Israel. He says: "Israel after the flesh" is one thing, "Israel after the Spirit" is ANOTHER; these things can be divided, and God has set aside "Israel after the flesh". Put it another way -- what God is after, what He is concerned with, what He is going on with, is that which was represented by them, the reality.

The cry of all the prophets is that this divide has taken place. Israel is going on with the temple, going on with the services, going on with the sacrifices, but it is all hollow. There is a tremendous difference between the seed of Abraham after the flesh and the seed of Christ. What is the seed of Christ? It is something essentially, intensely, spiritually REAL! It is not something that bears a name; it is not something which holds certain doctrines and truths -- the Law, or what corresponds to that in Christianity. It is not something that performs certain rites, and goes through certain ceremonies. It is not something along that external line at all -- be it intellectual, emotional, volitional, or physical -- it is something inwardly real. It is "Christ IN you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27). This is what God is after. And if Israel was raised up for a purpose, it was to set forth these realities in a pictorial, symbolic way. God's object is not a Jewish nation as such, but a heavenly people, constituted on spiritual realities. Israel is for all time a great object lesson which God has set in the midst of the nations to indicate spiritual principles. They will remain that object lesson to the end. God, in preserving, keeping that nation, does so, not because of that nation itself,

but to maintain an object lesson in the midst of the nations, especially to Christianity.

### Unmistakable Features

Let us look at Israel after the flesh. There are some features which cannot be mistaken! Many years ago, I knew an outstanding and well-known Christian Jew, who had travelled all over the world. He said to me on one occasion: "It does not matter what nation I go into, and how much they have become apparently absorbed in the nation where they are living, I can always tell a Jew; he may have fair hair or dark hair; there may be differences arising from their living in different countries for generations, but there is something that I can always recognise, and I never make a mistake." What does God say about that? He says to us, as being of the seed of Christ, that this true Israel should be at least as pronounced in its features, in its distinctiveness, as they are! There should be no mistaking a child of God. Everybody should know when they have met a child of God. By means of that, God says to us that this seed, which is the true Israel of God, born of the travail of Christ, is to bear the unmistakable character of Christ. All who meet that seed know they have met, not father Abraham, but another Father -- they have met God in Christ.

This is very searching; but it is the true exegesis, the true interpretation of this word -- "his seed", "he shall see his seed": every one betraying His features, bearing His characteristics, being recognised; not because they bear a name -- whether that be Israel or Christian; not because they observe the law and the customs; not because they hold the oracles and the truths; not because they do or do not certain things -- but because they bear the likeness of Him of whom they are born. That is what God says -- unmistakable features! "By this shall ALL men know... if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

### The Law of Separation

Another thing about "Israel after the flesh", which goes very much along with that, is that law which God laid down for them, so firmly and so severely, and upon the observance or violation of which their very national existence hung -- the law of separation. Abraham is in Ur of the Chaldees, in Babylon, with all the Baalite worship, the two thousand deities, on the other side, over there. God calls him "Abraham the Hebrew"; he has come across, passed over, come out, been severed from his country, and then brought into another land which God is going to purge of every other seed. That is His intention, to purge that land of every other seed, and to populate it and fill it only with this seed; and then to lay down, in the strictest possible way, the law forbidding intermarriage with any other people or nation on pain of unqualified rejection. There were, of course, deep reasons for that. There was the spiritual reason of "other gods", and the opening of the door to that other spiritual realm. That is what is meant by "iniquity" in the Old Testament, what the prophets spoke of as "fornication" -- the marring of "the virgin daughter of Zion". But here it is: no intermarriage whereby there will be loss of distinctiveness of life and character. It is the severest law of God. Because of the violation of that law God had all His long-drawn-out controversy with Israel through the prophets, and, at last, sent the nation where they chose to be -- into another land -- and let them feel something of what that means. The bringing back of that remnant is so full of significance, when you recognise that it is reconstitution on this very principle.

Indeed God has written this large -- and "the things that were written aforetime were written for our learning". He is saying by Israel: On the positive and on the negative side My seed is different; My seed is distinct; My seed must have no intermarriage, it must not lose its distinctiveness, it must be a separate thing. The seed of Christ is like that -- spiritually separate. It seems that right from the beginning, in the

case of Adam and Eve, and from then onward, the one determined intention of Satan has been to destroy that distinctiveness of what is of God. All Israel's history is just that; and he did not stay there, he pressed it through to the very case of Jesus Himself. That is the focal point of the temptations of Jesus, in some way to insinuate something that would destroy His separateness from everything that was not of God. Satan's efforts to destroy distinctiveness, so successful in the case of Israel, so unsuccessful when concentrated upon Jesus Himself, have been continued throughout the history of the church. God's spiritual law is written so deeply here for us. This seed is something not of the flesh, not of this world; something different, something quite other; a divine seed that does not belong here, has not originated here, has not its roots here. "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is... for ye DIED" (Col. 3:1,3). Now Paul saw quite well that Israel after the flesh had become something very other than that, very mixed up and compromised here in this world.

### The Cohesion of Israel

Another thing about Israel which is quite apparent even now, and has been all the way through history, is their cohesion. There is no doubt about it. If you deal with these people, you meet "clannishness" (if you like to call it that), something very loyal to itself -- VERY loyal to itself. They are a people bound together in blood and in consciousness and in jealousy, about whom there is a unity, a cohesion and an integration which is unique. Though scattered over the earth, and seemingly broken up, they are one people. What a lesson! What an object lesson!

Turning to the New Testament we find that this seed, having one origin, one source, one life-principle, is one. That is the meaning of John 17, is it not? The secret of oneness, of unity, is not in doctrine, in practice, in tradition or in names -- God only knows how true that is! It is something deeper than that -- it is in BIRTH, and what that means, inheritance in the blood. How pathetically tragic that there is not this jealousy, this loyalty, among those who claim to be of this seed! What a breakdown! We ought to be very jealous for every child of God; we ought to be loyal to one another, because we are of the same family. There ought to be something here that is stronger than all the outside forces. That has proved true in "Israel after the flesh", for the most violent action of outside forces has only brought out their inward cohesion. Their unity is manifested and even strengthened by opposition and antagonism and persecution -- what a lesson!

### Discrimination as to Food

Then there is this whole question of food -- a very acute question with Israel after the flesh. The Law required them to be very particular, very careful, very discriminating -- but all that is written only as an object lesson. It says something of which the children of God, the true Israel of God, must take note. Have we a spiritual faculty which corresponds to their natural one in selectiveness of food? DISCERNING -- this is exactly what John was talking about in his letter, when he said: "The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you" (1 John 2:27) -- "you know... you know..." -- this is a spiritual instinct or faculty of knowing what is of Christ and what is not of Christ. How important it is to keep the seed pure through spiritual discernment!

### Israel's Governing Hope

There is one further undying feature with "Israel after the flesh". It has persisted all down the ages, and is as strong today as ever it was -- their hope! Why is it that those who are able still go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem? These people are characterized by this deep-set, deep-rooted hope! Hope! Something;

sometime; someone; one day -- they live for that; it is that which has carried them through, supported them, sustained them, kept them -- their hope! If ever that should fade in Israel, they will disintegrate indeed, and they will fall a prey to their enemies. It is this that holds together, and this that gives the power to stand up and go on. With us, it is a spiritual thing, something that is part of our birth. The true spiritual seed of Christ is dominated, mastered, by what the apostle calls, "the blessed hope", "the day of the Lord", "the promise of his coming" -- a master-hope. Is it not true to spiritual experience, that when we are really born again, a sense of prospect, of a future, is born in our hearts, and it remains a strong thing throughout. This is not something taken on as teaching, not even the teaching of the "Second Coming", the coming again of the Lord, but there is something beyond the teaching, the Spirit Himself has given birth to a hope within us. We are living for a Day, and that Day is our strength; it holds us on our way. How true that is, and how rich it is in the suffering people of God in all times, and in our own.

### The Turning Point of the Dispensations

In the light of what we have been saying hitherto, I want to turn you to the Gospel by John, and in particular to the third chapter.

In spite of many years of familiarity with and much reading of that chapter, I feel there is still much in it that I have not yet grasped. All that we have said, and more; all that is indicated and signified in the whole of the Old Testament and of the New Testament is implicit in this third chapter of John's Gospel. It is a chapter upon the meaning of which two mighty dispensations turn. The tremendous change which has been indicated, which Paul came to see by revelation -- this tremendous change from "Israel after the flesh" to "Israel after the Spirit" -- centres in that chapter.

This Gospel by John has been more of a bone of contention, controversy and conflict, than any of the other Gospels. The popular trend amongst Bible "scholars" now is to rank Mark's gospel first and highest. Mark is the key to everything; Mark is the sum of everything; they are making a tremendous amount of Mark! We are not saying they are wrong. After all, there is not much difficulty about Mark, is there? Matthew and Luke -- well, they do not present much trouble, they provoke very little dispute or conflict -- but John! Some of them have written him off altogether, ruled him right out, they will not have him. Is that not significant? When you are dealing with the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke, you are dealing mainly with the historic Jesus, the earthly Christ, what they call the Jesus of history. When you come to John's Gospel, you come into the absolutely spiritual realm -- it is the heavenly Christ that is here -- not born of Adam or Abraham, but -- from eternity. Look at the word "heavenly" on his lips in this Gospel. Everything here is in the spiritual realm. John, as you know, calls all the miracles "signs" -- things that have another meaning, that signify something else, and we cannot see the other, the something else, unless God opens our eyes; it is spiritual and is set in the spiritual realm. That is what Satan hates, that is the cause of all the trouble. Men who only operate in the realm of human intellect and reason, even in their approach to the Scriptures, cannot come into this realm at all without a sense of uneasiness, for it exposes unspirituality. When we come into the realm of the spiritual seed -- or to put that another way -- when we come into the realm where God is after, not an earthly, a traditional, an historical, but a spiritual people, we come into the realm of the intensest conflict and controversy. Notice how this very Gospel proceeds in an atmosphere of antagonism -- it is like that. There comes a time when, because of that, Jesus has to withdraw with His disciples in order to have them alone, to prepare them for a day that is coming. This controversy, this conflict, is constantly surrounding them.

### The Securing of "True Israel" -- the Realm of Intensest Conflict

Now that is very significant in the larger application. The securing of a spiritual, a heavenly, a divine seed, in Satan's domain, is fraught with the bitterest conflict, an opposition, the intensity of which can only be explained on this ground. The more the children of God are found going on with Christ in a spiritual way towards God's full end, the more diverse and inexplicable conflict will they meet, and that from every realm. It just happens! If we really get off the traditional, historical basis of life, even in Christianity, on to those higher levels of what is spiritual or what is of Christ, essentially and utterly of Christ, we shall come into the realm of the bitterest conflict.

That is why this all leads back to the matter of travail which was before us in the previous chapter. We find in the New Testament that the travail was not all over when the child was born. It was not all over typically and symbolically when Israel was secured out of Egypt -- it went on. When Moses came back and met Hobab, his father-in-law, it says they greeted one another, and asked of one another's health, and that "Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done... for Israel's sake, all the travail... by the way" (Ex. 18:8). After Egypt! So the birth is not the end. Paul says: "I am again in travail until Christ be [fully] formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The church was born out of the travail of Christ, but what a travail she has been in again and again, and will be to the end. It all comes back there -- the securing and perfecting of this spiritual seed is fraught with conflict. Whether we see the implications of what is signified by that statement or not, we need to think about it -- it will explain a great deal. There is the difference of two worlds between spiritual Christianity and traditional Christianity, just as much as there is between "Israel after the flesh" and "Israel after the Spirit" -- a tremendous difference. It is going to be seen eventually that the obtaining of the perfected seed of Christ was a very, very costly thing.

May the Lord just write something of this on our hearts, and show us very, very clearly what it is He is really after, that His heart is set upon a people for Himself -- a people according to Christ, a heavenly people, a spiritual people, whose life is not comprised of outward things at all, but whose life is the corporate expression of God's Son; those who bear His unmistakable features. Oh that it might be possible for people to say: There is no mistaking that one -- no mistaking what he is, what she is -- he is a "Jew", she is a "Jew", in the spiritual Israel -- he, she, is a member of Christ!

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