

How Did We Treat the Root?

By Rev. W.J.J. Glashouwer

"If the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you." Romans 11:16-18, NIV

"The root of Israel is holy, because this people came forth from God's chosen ones: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. The root now sanctifies the entire tree to God, who, through the voice of Moses, also named Israel a holy people, a people formed by Himself, whom He created for His glory."

Mr Isaac da Costa, 1880

(cf. Deuteronomy 7:6; Isaiah 43:1,7,21)

Gentiles engrafted into the root

Christianity is a 2000 year old branch, firmly attached to Jewish roots. Beginning with Abraham and the Patriarchs, the Gentiles are promised God's blessings if they in turn bless Abraham's descendants. God chose to graft Gentiles into the root.

And what has happened to the engrafted branches from the wild olive tree during these past 2000 years? Has not God worked in the Church with Gentiles - some faithful and devout, others not so faithful nor devout, and even some completely secularized? The Church has always had its orthodox and liberal members (and everything in between) with an invisible and true Church always present, God's holy remnant. In short, the root supports the one people of God, whom God has travelled with throughout history. Israel and Gentiles in the Church are indivisibly bound to one another. The Church is not about replacement theology!

Israel the root

What does the Bible say about Israel? At one time, "The LORD called [Israel] a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form" (Jeremiah 11:16, NIV). And God also spoke these words, "I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendour will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon" (Hosea 14:5-6, NIV).

After Noah saw the flood begin to recede, he sent out a dove. Scripture says, "When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf" (Genesis 8:11, NIV). The olive tree even survived God's judgment! In the Bible olive oil often symbolizes the Holy Spirit, flowing from olives, but only after they are pressed. Israel is the olive, that sometimes has branches removed and that has wild branches grafted in. Yet the Bible even says about the branches that were removed: "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34, NIV).

The sin of Christianity

How did we treat the root, Israel? A historian once wrote that three anti-Jewish strategies have been implemented since the fourth century: forced conversion, banning, and destruction. Christian zealots said, "You have no right to live among us unless you believe in Jesus." Then secular rulers said, "You have no right to live among us." Lastly, the Nazis completed this with, "You have no right to live."

A process that started by driving Jews into Christianity, soon degraded into banning the Jews from Christian society, and ultimately led to mass murder by the Nazis. The Nazis, and those who cooperated with them, simply built upon a foundation laid centuries earlier, and completed a historical process. Unfortunately, the Church did little or nothing. The church remained strangely silent during the "Shoah" (Hebrew for holocaust, means catastrophe). Thank God for a few individual Christians who cared. Only when Christianity confesses its sins of the centuries, can there be any hope for its future.

No growth without the root

We should celebrate two thousand years of Christianity with a deeply felt conviction of guilt concerning our treatment of the Jewish people. If God does not save all the natural branches, He will not save all the engrafted wild branches either ... and Gentile Christians may also be cut away. Those who look only to the New Testament, leaving out the Old, are like those trying to build the second floor of a house, without building the first floor. Only when the sap starts flowing from the root again, can the real fruit grow!

Some quotations from commentaries on Romans 11

Dr. S. Greidanus - *New Testament Commentary* (1933): "First born and root both point to the patriarchs, especially Abraham. The point is that God remains faithful to His covenant, that He started with the patriarchs, and that He continues this covenant with their descendants. This is why these descendants are holy, which is our guarantee that God will someday bring these descendants to conversion, so that He can extend the blessings of the covenant to them. This does not exclude that several, perhaps many, branches will be cut off and drop away ... If the root is healthy, the tree can survive without necessarily keeping all its branches and leaves."

F. Godet - *Commentary on Romans* (1900): "The Jews are dedicated to God through their origin, through the call of Abraham, who confirmed their calling. Some want to interpret the first born with converted Jews, forming the security of Israel's conversion. But something similar could then also be said about the Gentiles, while it is clear that this passage refers specifically to the Jews. Origin and Theodoret refer to Christ, who secures the conversion of the people that brought Him forth. But then this reasoning should also apply to the Gentiles, as Jesus was not only Jew, but also human. No, the patriarchs are meant. In them all people were holy. Origin sees Christ in the root, who through his heavenly origin is the real Creator of the Jewish people. The covenant, however, does not give an inclination to think about the pre-existence of Christ.. These equations then teach us that the Jewish people only have to remain in their original soil to be fruitful, while the Gentiles have to be replanted."

Joseph Shulam - *A Commentary on the Jewish roots of Romans* (1998): "The root and its (original) branches are Israel. Even more so: the root is not cut off. The stump remains, and only from the root can new branches - even those that are grafted in - receive life."

Rev. G. Doekes - *The Meaning of Israel's Fall* (1915): "One should not think that Israel's fall affected its holiness. However deep the misery it is in, it is privileged above all other nations through its origin in Abraham. Abraham was sanctified as the patriarch to God's people. And in his sanctification the entire nation that would spring from him through Isaac and Jacob, was dedicated and set aside by the Lord to be a blessing to all nations of the earth."

Werner de Boer - *Wuppertaler Study Bible* (1962): "Whether we should think specifically of Abraham and the patriarchs, when we read the word 'root' or whether we should see God's general mercy in it, in any case, the great tree of Israel grows from such a 'holy root' and through this root, it is 'holy' as a whole. Is this a view that shows us a salvation from a historical perspective we had long forgotten, yes, even one we objected to?"

"We live, feel and think as if Paul tells us here that the old olive tree has been cast aside by God and He planted you, Christians from the nations, as a completely new tree next to it. We still use the Old Testament, and take ownership of the parts that suit us and have religious value, but all that old history really does not concern us. Perhaps we should replace all this Jewish Old Testament with the history and religious traditions of our own nations, as was suggested quite seriously by some.

"We think: 'At least Israel could then learn and receive something from us. We are the ones that joyfully accepted the Gospel and fused it seamlessly with our own national nature. We are not like the Jews, who rejected it.' This is precisely the type of vain reasoning that Paul wishes to denounce. It is upside down, as if we are carrying the root, while it is clear the root carries us!

"Modesty, and not vainly putting our own self-consciousness before Israel, brings enormous gain! Through this the complete Godly history of the Old Testament also becomes our history! In every aspect we share in the life-giving sap of the root. Abraham also becomes our father (Romans 11:4,11 and 16). The Psalms are then our prayers. The prophets also speak for us. And we - branches grafted into the same olive tree - inherit the promise with 'the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs...' (Romans 9:4-5, NIV).

There is only one Gospel, in which we are included: '... heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 3:6, NIV). But that is as far as it goes. It's not us carrying the root, but the root carrying us... A root can sometimes seem small, tough and ugly. But she is and remains the root on which the rest of the tree lives and grows."

Rev. W.J.J. Glashouwer is Int'l President of Christians for Israel

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