
Israel and the Church: Romans 11:17-24, Ephesians 2:11-22

You probably did not expect this subject in our series on the church. The Christian church often ignores the Jewish people. Hardly any of us know any Jewish Christians. We, Christians from a gentile background, have behaved a bit like cuckoos. Once we outnumbered the Jewish believers, we forgot about them and ignored the people of Israel. [Gentiles is the biblical word for all non-Jewish persons.] Out of sight, out of mind.

In the beginning this was very different. Jesus was a Jew and all the first Christians were also Jews. Only gradually did gentiles enter the church. But things soon changed. In Ephesians Paul is writing to a church which consists of believers from a gentile background.

Paul here uses the image of the wall. He reminds his readers of the breakthrough in Jesus: only thanks to Him did gentiles get entry to the people of God. Until Jesus, there was a wall which kept Jews and gentiles apart. But now the two groups form one new humanity (verse 15). The gentiles have now been accepted by God just like the Jews and the distinction has disappeared, thanks to Jesus. We belong together!

Romans 11 shows us that Paul is concerned about his own people, the Jews. Only few of them have accepted Jesus as their Messiah. The question is then: Is that small number because God has rejected Israel? Paul's response to his own question is a loud 'No!' Can we from now on ignore Israel? Again, No! God is faithful to them and many will still come to faith later (verse 25-26). Israel is still God's business and therefore it is also our business as church!

Paul here uses the image of the olive tree. Israel is the tree. The old olive tree still stands because God is faithful to it, although many branches (= unbelieving Jews) have been broken off. The gentile believers in Jesus are like branches grafted into the old tree. Originally we gentiles were not God's people, but now we have been grafted in. Yet we need to respect the original tree and the existing branches. We are in no way superior.

We, gentile believers, are now children of Abraham, but not unconditionally. We need to keep the faith. For both groups being in the tree depends on faith.

In the 21st century Christianity in the West is not doing well. In Africa and South America many are joining the church; they are getting grafted into the tree. But many western branches are getting loose from the tree. Kang-San Tan, the leader of BMS World Mission, foresees a time of 'post-Western Christianity'.

What does this mean for us as church?

1. We are closely connected to the Jews. We need to pray for them and tell them about Jesus, their Messiah. We are indeed indebted to the Jews, for we received the Gospel from them.
2. We must avoid, yes fight, antisemitism. There is no room for caricatures of Jews or conspiracy theories about Jews in church or society.
3. We in the West are nothing special. Neither Americans nor Brits have a special place with God; only his old people Israel. We in the West might even lose what we have unless we remain faithful to Jesus.
4. Mysteriously, God still has a future for the Jews (verses 23, also 25-26).

Our God is faithful. Praise him! But he is not just faithful to us. Israel still has this special place. The Church of Jesus is firmly connected to the Jewish people.