

THE UNFOLDING OF THE MYSTERY

ISRAEL'S FORMER GLORY

The nation Israel, with all her shortcomings, was once the only bright spot in a dark world. God had promised that through her, as Abraham's multiplied seed, the other nations should be blessed ([Gen. 22:17,18](#)). Ruth, the Moabitess, and others like her, found shelter under the wings of God by coming to Israel ([Ruth 2:12](#)).

Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman:

"Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for SALVATION IS OF THE JEWS" (John 4:22).

Paul, in Rom. 3:1,2, asks the question: "*What advantage then hath the Jew?*" and answers:

"Much every way: CHIEFLY, BECAUSE THAT UNTO THEM WERE COMMITTED THE ORACLES OF GOD."

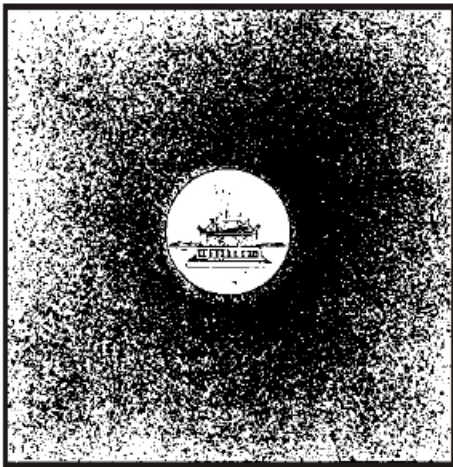
In Rom. 9:4,5, he says:

"... TO [ISRAEL] PERTAINETH THE ADOPTION, AND THE GLORY, AND THE COVENANTS, AND THE GIVING OF THE LAW, AND THE SERVICE OF GOD, AND THE PROMISES;

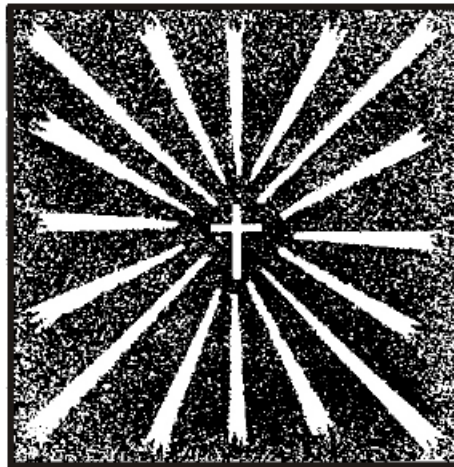
"WHOSE ARE THE FATHERS, AND OF WHOM, AS CONCERNING THE FLESH, CHRIST CAME ..." THE HEART OF ISRAEL'S RELIGION

This honor was not bestowed upon Israel, however, because she was better or more deserving than others. Israel's own King David had written by inspiration:

"The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were Any that did understand, and seek God. "They are ALL gone aside, they are ALL together become filthy: THERE IS NONE THAT DOETH GOOD, NO, NOT ONE" (Psa. 14:2,3).



[Genesis 22:17,18](#) ~ [Isaiah 56:6,7](#)



[Romans 11:32](#) ~ [I Corinthians 1:18-25](#)

This is why, at the heart of Israel's religion, we find a blood sacrifice. We know that *"It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins"* (Heb. 10:4), but these sacrifices atoned²⁷ for sins until such time as Christ should come to *"put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"* (Heb. 9:26). Israel's blood sacrifices were meanwhile a confession of sin, a testimony to the fact that "the wages of sin is death" and an acknowledgment that were it not for God's grace she too would stand outside His favor. Thus it is written:

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul" (Lev. 17:11).

"And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; AND WITHOUT SHEDDING OF BLOOD IS NO REMISSION" (Heb. 9:22).

These means of approach to God, while they indicated that Israel was no better than the Gentiles, gave them, at the same time, a distinct advantage over the Gentiles - and a great responsibility toward them.

Israel was not to keep these blessings to herself, for God had said to Abraham: *"And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed"* (Gen. 22:18).²⁸ They were to be the *agents*, not merely the *objects* of God's blessing.

ISRAEL'S FAILURE

The Word and worship of God were committed to Israel that *through her* the Gentiles might find God. When our Lord cast the money-changers out of the temple, He said:

"Is it not written. My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer?" (Mark 11:17).

The Lord was, of course, referring to Isa. 56:6, 7, where we read:

"Also the sons of the stranger, that join themselves to the Lord, to serve Him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one that keepeth the sabbath from polluting it, and taketh hold of my covenant;

"Even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted upon mine altar; FOR MINE HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED AN HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL PEOPLE."

²⁷ The word atone (Hebrew: *kapher*) means to *cover*.

²⁸ It should be noted that in the covenant promises to Israel there is generally, besides the future aspect, the challenge of present fulfillment (Deut. 1:8, Heb. 3:19, etc.).

Israel's covenant relationship with God and her God-given religion, of course, constituted a "middle wall of partition" between her and the ungodly Gentiles, but this did not mean that Israel was to leave the Gentiles in their ungodly state and keep them outside that wall. The Abrahamic Covenant indicated otherwise and from the passage just quoted from Isaiah, it is clear that any Gentiles, willing to become proselytes to Judaism were to be welcomed to the temple, where a covenant people found access to God.

But did the people of Israel make this known among the nations? They did not. They would have left the Gentile world in darkness forever. Indeed, the temple, meant to be a house of prayer for all

nations, had become a center of villainy and fraud. Hence our Lord was forced to add to His quotation from Isaiah, the words: "BUT YE HAVE MADE IT A DEN OF THIEVES."

THE THREE CALLS TO REPENTANCE

It was after 1500 years of failure under the law, with the coming Messianic kingdom in view, that God issued to Israel her three greatest calls to repentance.

The first was by John the Baptist, of whom our Lord said, "*There is not a greater prophet*" (Luke 7:28).

John's ministry was to bring Israel back to God, and so make the way smooth for the coming King. The cry was:

". . . Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth" (Luke 3:4,5).

John labored earnestly to fulfill his mission. His ministry reached into every department of Israel's national life. He dealt with "the people," with the tax gatherers, with the soldiers (Luke 3:10-14). He dared to send the proud Pharisees and Sadducees away, calling them a "generation of vipers," asking them:

"Who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" and saying: "Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance" (Matt. 3:7,8).

He even entered the court of King Herod, rebuking him for living with his brother's wife "and for all the evils which Herod had done" (Luke 3:19).

But with all this Israel as a nation did not repent. Indeed, the great reformer was "shut up in prison" (Luke 3:20) and finally beheaded (Matt. 14:10) by Israel's wicked and licentious king - a crime which would hardly have been tolerated had there been a real reformation in the nation.

So, the way for our Lord was made anything but smooth. He had to take up the cry where John had left off. Nor was the response to our Lord's message any more satisfactory than the response to John's. They despised Him, heckled Him, plotted against Him. When He wrought mighty miracles among them they had the impudence to ask: "*By what authority doest Thou these things? and who gave Thee this authority?*" (Matt. 21:23).

Finally they brought Him to trial on various false charges. And, while under examination and trial, they subjected Him to the most cruel and inhuman treatment. They mocked Him; they scourged Him; they spat in His face. They pulled His beard and His hair; they blindfolded Him, buffeted Him and called upon Him to prophesy who had smitten Him. They crowned Him with thorns; they put a purple robe upon Him and a reed (instead of a sceptre) in His hand, kneeling before Him in mockery. Then, taking the reed from His hand, they smote Him on the head with it.

So intense was their hatred against the Son of God that when the Roman governor, Pilate, finding no fault in Him, would have chastised Him and released Him, "*they cried out all at once, saying, Away with this man . . .*" (Luke 23:18). "*And they were instant with loud voices, requiring that He might be crucified*" (Luke 23:23).

And thus Israel, rather than heeding Christ's call to repentance, actually persuaded Pilate to have Him nailed to a cross, where, writhing in pain, He suffered shame and disgrace for *their* sins.

All this, of course, had not taken God by surprise. Indeed, He had predicted it. The Spirit, through the prophets, had "*testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should FOLLOW*" (1 Peter 1:11). Thus Israel's Messiah, while hanging on the cross, cried: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34).

And now the stage, it seemed, was being set for the glory to follow. Fifty days after the resurrection the Holy Spirit was "poured out" upon the disciples and the signs of the "last days" began to appear (Acts 2). Amid these miraculous signs Israel (of that day) was given her third and last opportunity to repent, with the offer of Christ's return and "the times of refreshing" if she did so. It was the Apostle Peter, chiefly, whom God used to call Israel to repentance at Pentecost. To those who were convicted by His message and inquired what they should do, he answered:

"REPENT, AND BE BAPTIZED EVERY ONE OF YOU IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS, AND YE SHALL RECEIVE THE GIFT OF THE HOLY GHOST" (Acts 2:38).

A short while later, to the multitudes gathered at Solomon's porch, Peter cried:

"REPENT YE THEREFORE AND BE CONVERTED, THAT YOUR SINS MAY BE BLOTTED OUT, WHEN [THAT SO] THE TIMES OF REFRESHING SHALL [MAY] COME FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD; "AND HE SHALL SEND JESUS CHRIST, WHICH BEFORE WAS PREACHED UNTO YOU" (Acts 3:19,20).

But still Israel (as a nation) refused to repent. Instead, her rulers forbade the apostles to speak in Christ's name; threatening them, scourging them, imprisoning them. Finally they could not refrain from shedding blood again and Stephen, a man "full of faith and power," was dragged out and stoned to death.

Thus Israel responded to God's three gracious calls to repentance by three brutal murders: those of John the Baptist, Christ and Stephen. And mark well that their guilt increased with each successive murder. In the case of John the Baptist they *permitted* it; in the case of Christ they *demand*ed it; in the case of Stephen they *committed* it. They had turned a deaf ear to the Father (through John), to the Son Himself, while on earth, and to the Holy Spirit (through the Pentecostal believers). They had resisted the Father before Christ's coming; they despised Christ Himself while He was among them; they blasphemed the Holy Spirit after Christ was gone. Now there was no excuse. They had committed the unpardonable sin, of which the Lord had warned them (Matt. 12:31,32).

ISRAEL JOINS THE WORLD'S REBELLION

It must not be supposed that Israel's enmity against Christ spent itself in the murder of Stephen. This was but the beginning of a prolonged and intense persecution of Christ and His followers:

"And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1).

Saul of Tarsus was the leader of this persecution:

"As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3).

The Gentiles had long before rebelled against God at the tower of Babel ([Gen. 11:3,4](#)), "*even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge*" ([Rom. 1:28](#)). For this God finally "gave them up" ([Rom. 1:24,26,28](#)) and scattered them over the face of the earth ([Gen. 11:9](#)). Now Israel had joined the rebellion and God would give them up and scatter them too.

It is sometimes supposed that the scattering of the Jerusalem disciples to Judaea and Samaria was in fulfillment of the "great commission," as recorded in Acts 1:8. The very opposite, however, is the case. These disciples had not left Jerusalem in response to any command of our Lord. They had *fled for their lives*. And the twelve apostles, the very ones our Lord had commanded to go from Jerusalem to all the world, *stayed at Jerusalem!*

It was natural, of course, for the believers at Jerusalem to flee when the fearful persecution broke out, but how shall we regard the conduct of the twelve apostles in staying there?

Were they delinquent in their duty to evangelize the world? The Scriptures answer plainly that they were not. The reason the twelve stayed at Jerusalem was because the kingdom, in which they were to have twelve thrones ([Matt. 19:28](#)), was to be established *at Jerusalem*, and blessing and salvation was to flow *from there* to the ends of the earth; hence their work there was not yet done.

Thus the continuance of the apostles at Jerusalem and the flight of the believing multitude indicated the same thing - that Israel was *not* turning to Christ. Looking back *now* we can see that this great persecution was "the secret crisis in Israel's history," as Sir Robert Anderson called it, and that the kingdom was not, for the time being, to be set up, unless it were by force.

But what about God's plan to send salvation and blessing to the world? Must the nations now remain in darkness because of Israel's refusal to become the channel of blessing?

According to prophecy God's response to the world's rejection of Christ was to be the outpouring of His wrath. He was to *make* Israel (and so the Gentiles) willing in the day of His power. Israel, with the Gentiles had declared war on Him and His Anointed One; He would make a counter-declaration, as it is written:

"Why do the heathen rage, and the people [OF ISRAEL, see [Acts 4:25-27](#)] imagine a vain thing?

"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.

"HE THAT SITTETH IN THE HEAVENS SHALL LAUGH: THE LORD SHALL HAVE THEM IN DERISION. "THEN SHALL HE SPEAK UNTO THEM IN HIS WRATH, AND VEX THEM IN HIS SORE DISPLEASURE" (Psa. 2:1-5).

"THE LORD SAID UNTO MY LORD, SIT THOU AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE THINE ENEMIES THY FOOTSTOOL. "THE LORD SHALL SEND THE ROD OF THY STRENGTH OUT OF ZION: RULE THOU IN THE MIDST OF THINE ENEMIES. "THY PEOPLE SHALL BE WILLING IN THE DAY OF THY POWER . . ." (Psa. 110:1-3).

These words of David are the consistent testimony of Old Testament prophecy. Was the judgment now to fall? No, it was against the dark background of man's failure and sin that God was now to reveal the riches of His grace.

THE SECRET PURPOSE UNFOLDED

The first intimation of God's purpose concerning the dispensation of grace was the salvation of Saul, the chief of sinners, and the leader of Israel's - yea, the world's - rebellion against Christ ([I Tim. 1:13-16](#)).

To him the Lord revealed what He could not yet reveal to the other apostles when He gave them their great commission: i.e., that Israel would be set aside and salvation sent by grace to all directly through the crucified, risen, exalted Christ.

One of the first lessons Paul learned was that God was to conclude Israel, along with the Gentiles, in unbelief. He, like the twelve, would have launched his ministry from Jerusalem but when, after His conversion, he returned there, the Lord appeared to him and said:

"Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: FOR THEY WILL NOT RECEIVE TRY TESTIMONY CONCERNING ME" (Acts 22:18).

Compare this statement with Luke 24:47 and see what God was now doing. He was concluding Israel in unbelief along with the Gentiles. And why? In order that He might offer salvation to all men by grace, *solely and directly through the merits of Christ*.

"FOR GOD HATH CONCLUDED²⁹ THEM ALL IN UNBELIEF, THAT HE MIGHT HAVE MERCY UPON ALL" (Rom. 11:32).

Thus, through the *fall* of Israel, salvation was now to be preached to the Gentiles ([Rom. 11:11, 12,15](#)). With the raising up of Paul to replace the twelve as "the apostle of the Gentiles" ([Rom. 11:13](#)), God began to bring Jewish religion to an end and to usher in the "reign" of grace.³⁰

Here the reader should turn to the foregoing chart and note how God, having fully demonstrated that *"there is no difference"* between Jew and Gentile ([Rom. 3:22,23](#)), now magnifies the *cross* and its power to save ([Eph. 1:7](#)).

"FOR HE IS OUR PEACE, WHO HATH MADE BOTH ONE AND HATH BROKEN DOWN THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION BETWEEN US; "HAVING ABOLISHED IN HIS FLESH THE ENMITY... "... THAT HE MIGHT RECONCILE BOTH UNTO GOD IN ONE BODY BY THE CROSS, HAVING SLAIN THE ENMITY THEREBY" (Eph. 2:14-16).

Thus the middle wall of partition has been broken down (see chart) and Jewish and Gentile believers are reconciled to God in one body *by the cross*. *The cross, the finished work of Christ*, is what God would have us proclaim to the world today ([I Cor. 1:18](#), [II Cor. 5:14-21](#), [Gal. 6:14](#), [Eph. 1:7](#), etc.), for therein lies the secret of "His purpose and grace."

Mark well, however, that *reconciliation* postulates *alienation*; hence *reconciliation* could not be proclaimed until Israel had been cast away along with the Gentiles and the alienation of *all* from God had been fully demonstrated, *"The casting away of them"* opened the way for *"the reconciling of the world"* ([Rom. 11:15](#)).

The "*dispensation of the grace of God*," the reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles to God *in one body* by the cross, is the great mystery which was hid in God until revealed to and through the Apostle Paul. Paul was the natural representative of God's purpose concerning the body because he was himself a Hebrew and a Roman in one person (See [Acts 26:16-18](#), New Tr.), an enemy *reconciled* to God and His Christ, the "pattern" whom God chose to "show forth all longsuffering" ([I Tim. 1:16](#)) and "one born out of (before the] due time" ([I Cor. 15.8](#)) as *both* Jews and Gentiles are today. All this will be discussed further in another lesson.

God's prophesied purpose to bless the nations *through Israel* will, of course, still be carried out, but while Israel remains in her unrepentant state God is blessing Jews *and* Gentiles *through Christ*, Abraham's Seed, in spite of the failure of Abraham's *multiplied* seed ([Gal. 3:16,19,22](#), [Eph. 3:5,6](#)).

This is in accordance with His "eternal purpose," and is a living demonstration of the fact that *all* blessing flows from Calvary; that even millennial blessing will flow *from Christ*, through Israel, to the Gentiles.

"O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" (Rom. 11:33).

²⁹ Gr. *sunkleio*: to shut up together, to include together.

³⁰ See Rom. 5:20,21 and I Tim. 1:13-16 and note the phrases: "grace," "much more abound." "exceeding abundant," "that grace might reign" and "in me first" (or, *chiefly*).