

## *Learning from Israel: The Principle*

The story thus far: we have seen the way in which the *ekklēsia* was severely mauled almost from the start; we have also seen that the post-Pentecost writers of Scripture predicted that this age will be marked by severe trouble for believers, that defection from the gospel will be a sure sign of this age.

Do we have any further evidence to help us in our thinking about all these points, to confirm us in thinking that we believers will be exposed to spiritual danger? Even more, to confirm us in the view that apostasy from the new covenant by believers is certain? (My use of tautological *litotes* is deliberate, for emphasis – only believers can be guilty of apostasy). Do we have any further evidence?

We certainly do. Those same writers made it very clear that believers have a great deal of scriptural information to guide them in their thinking: the history of Israel under the old covenant.

Before we get into the detail, let us stand back and face the big picture. This is always the wisest thing to do: indeed, it is essential to take on board the general, before homing in on the specific. What am I talking about?

The Old Testament is, if I may put it like this, the ‘bigger half’ of the Bible. The old covenant has been fulfilled by Christ and rendered obsolete – obsolete as an active covenant, that is. Israel, as a nation, has served its God-ordained purpose.<sup>1</sup> So why do believers – who patently are not the nation of Israel, who are not under the old covenant, who are not under the Mosaic law – why do believers have a Bible which has, as its larger part, a record of the nation of Israel under that old, obsolete covenant and its law?

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<sup>1</sup> For my arguments, see, for instance, my *Christ; The Upper Room*.

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The New Testament faces this question head on. Please let that register. It faces it because it has to! Let that sink in. Under the Reformed system, the Bible is a flat book, all parts of which are equally relevant to Israel and ‘the church’. Indeed, because Israel and the *ekklēsia* are ‘one church’; Israel was ‘the Old Testament church’, and the *ekklēsia* is ‘the New Testament church’, essentially one and the same church. The old and new covenants are really one covenant in two administrations. This is how the Reformed read the Bible. And this is why the Reformed need never ask why believers have an Old Testament. For those who sing nothing but the psalms, who sprinkle their babies on the basis of circumcision, who demand that believers keep the Jewish sign (Ex. 16; 20:8-11; 31:12-17; Neh. 9:13-15; Ezek. 20:12,20) of the sabbath (albeit adjusted in accordance with Reformed covenant-theology), and so on, the question never crosses their mind. But, as I say, the writers of the post-Pentecost Scriptures knew they had to deal with this vital question. And so they did!

That is the big picture.

Let me say a little more.

Paul was adamant. Despite the undoubted fact that the nation of Israel was not ‘the church’, that Israel was not under the new covenant, even so:

...whatever was written in former days [that is, especially the history of Israel in the days of the old covenant] was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4).

‘Our instruction or learning’? Who were the ‘our’? Paul meant believers in his day – and ever after, until the end of time – during ‘the last days’. The first believers – whether they were Jews or Greeks – had to learn from Israel’s history; and so do we, living as we do, as the first believers were, in the days of the new covenant. We have not grown out of it. Nor will we – until Christ returns. Israel’s history – under a different covenant – serves as a standing warning, example – ‘instruction’ – to believers under their covenant. Not that believers are under the Mosaic law. No, that is never said anywhere in Scripture.

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Indeed, Scripture asserts expressly that believers are not under the law (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:4-6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 2:19; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14). Nevertheless, whatever can be found in the Old Testament is, in some way or another, an illustration for believers in the days of their covenant, the new covenant. Thus said Paul.

The general principle, I remind you, is this:

All Scripture [all – both Old and New Testaments] is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Clearly believers – in the apostle’s day and now – have to learn from Israel’s history. How did Israel respond under their covenant, the old, Mosaic covenant? What can we learn from their mistakes, their history?

That’s the general, overall picture, the big picture. But the post-Pentecost writers brought their teaching into much sharper focus than that!

As we have already seen, Paul could tell the Corinthians that the details of Israel’s failures and sins in the time of the old covenant:

...were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come [that is, living as we do in the days of the new covenant] (1 Cor. 10:11).

How important a statement is that! Israel’s history could not be more relevant today. Alas, as Georg Hegel said: ‘The only thing that we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history’. Let that not be true of us! Consequently, we need to look at Israel’s history, see what it tells us, and what we must learn from it, even though the old covenant under Moses has been fulfilled by Christ, and thus been superseded by the new covenant. And by ‘it’, I mean far more than the particular episodes selected by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10; the whole of

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Israel's history under its covenant – the Mosaic – is instructive for believers in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

Since it has such a major role to play in the matter in hand, let me quote the full context of Paul's statement to the Corinthians:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play'. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:1-13).

Israel was not the church, of course. As I have already implied, this will sound strange – even, mad, crazy – to Reformed readers of my book (if there are any), those who mistakenly see the old and new covenants as virtually one covenant in two administrations. But it is the truth! Israel was not the old-

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<sup>2</sup> In Paul's warning commands to the *ekklēsia* – 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption' (Eph. 4:30) and 'Do not quench the Spirit' (1 Thess. 5:19) – can we not hear the prophet's complaint of Israel who 'rebelled and grieved [God's] Holy Spirit' (Isa. 63:10)?

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covenant church; it was Israel.<sup>3</sup> There was no such thing as the old-covenant church; that is the figment of Reformed theologians. Israel was Israel. God formed the nation of Israel to be his old-covenant people; that is, he chose the pagan Abram, made him a believer, justified him by faith, re-named him Abraham, and from his descendants – Isaac, Jacob, and so on – brought forth the nation of Israel centuries after Jacob’s descendants, who had gone down into Egypt in time of famine, had descended into slavery, and had to endure the slaughter of their male offspring by their Egyptian tyrants (Ex. 1:8-22). It was God who, through Moses, led his people out of Egyptian bondage into freedom in the time of the exodus, thereby forming them into a nation – the nation of Israel. God distinguished this nation from all others (Deut. 4:6-45; 5:26; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Acts 2:23; Rom. 3:2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21) by giving them his covenant at Sinai – the old covenant – and its law, which covenant was to last until the coming of the Messiah (Gal. 3:23-26).<sup>4</sup>

The children of Israel knew God’s promise – conditional on their obedience:

If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6)...

...and they were prepared to give God their solemn vow of obedience to all that God made known to them:

...all that the LORD has spoken we will do (Ex. 19:8)...

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Christ, Infant; ‘A Gospel Church’; Battle*. Many serious mistakes follow the mingling of the two covenants: circumcision misguidedly sets the pattern for baptism, so baby-sprinkling replaces the dipping of believers; as Israel was a mixed community, so for those who mingle the covenants, the church is a designedly-mixed conglomeration of the regenerate and unregenerate. And so on.

<sup>4</sup> See my *The Upper Room; Three*.

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...and, furthermore, they were given the clearest of instruction under Moses (Ex. 20 – 40), and repeated warnings and pleadings from the prophets.

Yet, even so, the children of Israel proved themselves serial breakers of the old covenant.<sup>5</sup> As God would later explain through Hosea:

They have transgressed my covenant and rebelled against my law (Hos. 8:1).

In short, after leaving Egypt, Israel spent forty years in the literal wilderness while an entire adult generation (apart from two) perished: ‘With most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness’ (1 Cor. 10:5). But the stark truth is, apart from occasional bright spots, the history of Israel from the exodus until AD70 can be described as a pitiful journey through a howling spiritual wilderness.

So much so, God, having divided Israel into two – the northern and the southern kingdoms – took both into captivity. The northern kingdom, because of its incessant transgression of the covenant under an unbroken line of evil kings, was hauled into captivity under Assyria, and never heard of again as a nation. The southern kingdom, Judah, though it had a few kings who did show marks of obedience, eventually went into captivity under Babylon, but after an exile lasting 70 years, was restored to the land. The restoration, however, fell far short of the glory of the kingdom under Solomon. After Malachi, Judah had no prophet for four centuries, not a word from God, until John the Baptist. In AD70, Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans, the temple was destroyed, and the nation of Judah, as the old-covenant people of God, ceased to exist. The entire system fell with Christ’s fulfilment of the old covenant which rendered it obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

And that, in a nutshell, is the sad history that the apostle told us must serve as a warning to believers; the Jews’ grim response

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<sup>5</sup> See my *Evangelicals*.

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under the old covenant must serve as a warning to believers about their response to God under the new covenant.

In light of all that I have argued in this chapter, there remains only one course open to believers today. We have to get to grips with the Old Testament. We have to understand Israel's history. We have to see the lessons, the illustrations, the warnings, the examples which are set out in the books of Moses, the prophets, and all the rest. And we have to learn those lessons. More, we have to apply those lessons to our own lives and circumstances – all in the light of the new covenant, of course.

And that takes us to the next chapter.