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Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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The Elijah Example

I say then, Hath God cast away his people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elias? how he maketh intercession to God against Israel, saying, Lord, they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone, and they seek my life. But what saith the answer of God unto him? I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. ([Ro 11:1-5](#))

Sadly too many Bible students race through the historical books of the Old Testament (specifically the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles) and focus on a few extraordinary events, but wholly fail to grasp the significant historical events that appear in these records. Notice in Paul's words above that he correctly describes Elijah's conversation with God as "...intercession to God against Israel." Elijah was not praying *for* Israel, but rather *against* them. Only as we understand the spiritual state of the Northern Kingdom (Israel after the kingdom divided with the ascent of Rehoboam, Solomon's son) can we understand Paul's logical strategy in introducing this Old Testament lesson at this point in his personal confrontation of the problem within the Roman church. Because Rehoboam acted on foolish counsel, Jeroboam led a successful revolt that resulted in most of the ten northern tribes forming their own separate nation in the region north of Jerusalem. Not only did they form a separate civil government, they also formed their own false religion. By the time of Elijah, the false religion that began under Jeroboam had disintegrated into a pagan religion with Baal worship as its dreadful primary characteristic.

Despite this amazing failure, for several generations God sent a number of faithful prophets to call the Northern Kingdom back to Him and to His way of life and worship. In the end their efforts utterly failed, and the Northern Kingdom was integrated into the culture of its captors.¹²⁸

Elijah is one of the more notable prophets whom God sent to call the Northern Kingdom to repentance and return. As you study the various prophetic books of the Old Testament, you should make a point at the beginning of your study to uncover whether this particular prophet was sent by God to the Northern Kingdom, commonly referred to in the subsequent Old Testament record as "Israel," or the Southern Kingdom, commonly referred to in the subsequent Old Testament record as "Judah."

Elijah's claim to be the only voice left who was faithful to God in the Northern Kingdom proves to be patently false. It is almost certain that Elijah was fully aware of the hundred prophets whom Obadiah hid by fifties in two caves ([1Ki 18:4](#) and context). Further God responds to Elijah that He has reserved an additional seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee in the worship of Baal. Notice that neither God in First Kings the nineteenth chapter nor Paul in the eleventh chapter of Romans imply that these seven thousand men were fully informed and faithful to God in the specific details of divinely appointed worship. The point is that God in His providence gave these seven thousand men sufficient wisdom to understand the utter abomination of Baal worship so that they refused to participate in that religion. It is rather puzzling that we find no record anywhere in First Kings that Elijah later sought out these seven thousand men or that he in any way sought to further teach them the way of true worship. The record regarding these seven thousand men opens and closes with no other details in the inspired record regarding their identity or subsequent conduct.

It is wholly unjustified and a clear extension beyond the inspired record to equate these seven

thousand men with the informed and faithful remnant of true worshippers in the New Testament Church.

God preserved them from participation in Baal worship, but we cannot describe them further because the Biblical record does not describe them further. The inspired historical Old Testament books clearly document that no true worship existed in the Northern Kingdom from Jeroboam's rebellion till the Northern Kingdom fell.¹²⁹ God alone knew the hearts of these seven thousand men and gave His personal testimony to Elijah as a rebuke of the prophet's self-centered presumption that he was God's one and only man left in the Northern Kingdom. While Elijah in arrogant self-pity claims to be God's last and only hope in the Northern Kingdom, God knows about both the hundred prophets under Obadiah's safe hiding as well as the mysterious and otherwise unnamed seven thousand. What did those seven thousand believe about God? How much did they know about their decadent history? How much did they know about God's true worship in Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom? The Biblical record simply doesn't tell us, so we have no basis on which to offer any form of unsanctified conjecture. Scripture tells us only that they refused to worship Baal. Not worshipping Baal was a courageous and right thing to do, but it is a far cry from actively worshipping God in Spirit and in truth. If we could identify any group during Elijah's time that represented God's faithful worshippers, it would be those who worshipped God in Jerusalem, not any group in the Northern Kingdom. There is no record in any of the inspired historical books of any true worship continuing in the Northern Kingdom subsequent to Jeroboam's rebellion. The inspired record documents one abominable form of false worship after another in the Northern Kingdom, eventually leading to God's abandoning them to their captors and their disappearance from the inspired record as a part of God's preserved people who maintained His way of worship and who worshipped Him through subsequent generations till the coming of God Incarnate in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God's sending one prophet after another into the Northern Kingdom after Jeroboam's rebellion serves as a remarkable example of God's incredible patience and goodness. No doubt advocates of contemporary "lordship perseverance" would have engaged in a strong warning to the people in the Northern Kingdom that questioned whether they were "...really a child of God at all..." However, God's message to the Northern Kingdom through His inspired prophets didn't employ such tactics. God repeatedly called on the people of the Northern Kingdom as His beloved, though clearly rebellious, people to repent and return to Him and to His appointed way of true worship under the Levitical priests in Jerusalem.¹³⁰ We should carefully avoid passing judgment against people whom we consider as being in religious error. Perhaps they are similar to God's rebellious people in the Northern Kingdom; perhaps they are not. The simple reality of the matter is that we cannot judge them righteously. Thus in keeping with Jesus' clear message in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, as well elsewhere in the New Testament record, we should avoid personal judgments regarding the eternal state of other people and leave that matter in the hands of God who alone has both the ability and the right to pass such judgment.

The mysterious appearance of these seven thousand in Elijah's life, as well as their introduction in Paul's teachings at this particular point is highly instructive. Since the Northern Kingdom had consciously isolated its people from both the Mosaic Law and worship in Jerusalem, the refusal of these seven thousand men to worship Baal would present Paul's critics with a near inexplicable challenge. How did they know to refuse Baal worship? They no longer had Moses' Law. Apparently they were separate from the prophet, so they didn't even have Elijah to lead and teach them. Where did they gain the knowledge and the spiritual courage to refuse to worship Baal? Paul's explanation of the "righteousness of faith" speaking to God's regenerate children offers a comfortable explanation of the seven thousand, but a blind reliance on the Law that his critics held would be wholly incapable of explaining the presence and conduct of these seven thousand men.

What logical purpose does the Elijah example serve in Paul's argument with his detractors at Rome? Given the question with which Paul opens this chapter, "Hath God cast away his people?" Paul clearly challenges his critics with the difficult task to explain how God eventually forsook the whole Northern Kingdom some seven hundred years earlier, though not before God sent generations of prophets to call the rebellious Northern Kingdom people to repent and return to the true worship of God at Jerusalem. This obvious and undeniable example of a majority of the nation falling away from God's blessings and falling under divine judgment becomes a parallel in Paul's argumentation against his detractors who apparently defended some form of racial or cultural sanctity apart from the righteousness of faith and her noble and true speaking to their conscience.

Paul comfortably defends God's faithfulness to His covenant promise to preserve His people, "...whom he foreknew..." at the same time faithfully passing righteous judgment against those who refused the divine testimony "against" them. As in Elijah's time, for several years after the crucifixion, God sent godly men to the Jewish people, calling them to believe in Jesus, their true Messiah and God Incarnate. As in Elijah's time, these people stubbornly refused the testimony of those godly men who brought them the divine testimony. Nevertheless, according to Paul, God in no way failed to preserve His "...people which he foreknew." Those whom God chose as His own special people, be they "Northern Kingdom" rebels, Southern Kingdom worshippers, or first century legalistic Jews, were not, and could not be, separated from His love for them in Christ Jesus. God was altogether righteous in His severe judgment against His own people who refused His prophets and their testimony, at the same time never compromising in any way His faithfulness to preserve His beloved elect in His love for them in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul affirms, "*Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace,*" he affirms that God has an elect people among those Jews who refused to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah just as He had an elect people in the Northern Kingdom in Elijah's time. When we think no one will believe our message and embrace the truth of the gospel, we need to go back to the eleventh chapter of Romans and the nineteenth chapter of First Kings, recalling God's rebuke of Elijah. God preserves a people that are His, but our self-indulgent focus that fosters a presumptuous belief that we occupy a favored position with God will blind us to those who might otherwise hear and believe our message. As we remain faithful to God in being His witnesses despite living in a hostile world, He promises that our testimony will find receptive ears and hearts. Whether people believe our witness or not, God calls on us to be faithful in our testimony, not "fruit inspectors" of the results of our testimony or judges of the eternal state of any and all who may not believe our testimony. "**Be thou faithful** unto death..." God reminds us repeatedly in Scripture.