

Israel's Separation

Nothing so clearly marks God's eternal purpose in forming and preserving the nation of Israel as Israel's separation from the pagans all around her. God formed and called his old-covenant people out of Egypt, delivering them from Egyptian slavery, with the express purpose that they should be his people, set apart from all others under his covenant and law.

As a result, Israel had to make sure that at all times and under all circumstances they maintained that separation. This was to be accomplished by their strict observance of the covenant and its law which God gave them – and only them – at Sinai through Moses. Moreover, they had to preserve that covenant free of all pagan influence: God, having laid that responsibility securely upon his people, reinforced the point by constant repetition,¹

¹ This is God's method. Christ used it in his ministry (see Mark 10:23-27, for instance, particularly concerning his death as recorded by Luke – Luke 9:22,44; 13:33; 17:25; 18:31-33; 22:15 – see, therefore, Luke 24:6-8,25-27). Preachers must not be afraid of repetition; they must keep on reinforcing their teaching. The apostles felt the need for it. Peter said: 'I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know them' (2 Pet. 1:12). Paul could say that 'to write the same things to you is not tedious' (Phil. 3:1); and 'I say (or testify) again' (2 Cor. 11:16; Gal. 5:3); or 'Again I will say' (Phil. 4:4). 'As we have said before, so now I say again' (Gal. 1:9) comes the very next verse after he said it the first time. 'I want to remind you', said Jude (Jude 5). Passing references to the principle are legion. Do we not all feel the need of Hebrews 5:12 – 'you need someone to teach you again'? The practice of the unrefined preacher is not so very far from the truth, after all. 'First, I tells 'em what I'm going to tell 'em; then I tells 'em; then I tells 'em what I've told 'em'. Perhaps more delicately put, but with the same point, are the words of the old preacher to the young Lloyd-Jones. 'I shall really be saying one thing, but I shall say it in three different ways' (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1971, p257). As Samuel Johnson said: 'People need to be reminded more often than they need to be instructed'.

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making it as clear as noonday that if Israel failed in this,² the penalties would be severe.

Centuries after Sinai – by which time they had repeatedly forsaken God and his covenant, and, as a consequence, both Israel and Judah were now in captivity – God used Ezekiel to remind the people of their abject origins, and how he had so richly blessed them, doing so in the most moving of terms (Ezek. 16:3-14).³ This, of course, was to bring home to them the magnitude – the heinousness – of their sin in the breakdown of their separation:

But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colourful shrines, and on them played the whore... You also played the whore with the Egyptians... You played the whore also with the Assyrians, because you were not satisfied; yes, you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied. You multiplied your whoring also with the trading land of Chaldea, and even with this you were not satisfied (Ezek. 16:15-58).

Since the principle of separation plays such a vital role in what follows, let me stress its scriptural foundation as forcibly as I can.

Separation in general

‘Separation’ was the key word for Israel; it was God’s overriding requirement for his people. To maintain their relationship to God, the children of Israel had to keep at the forefront of their minds that they were a special, distinguished and separated people:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the

² God, of course, knew that Israel would fail, and he warned them of it, even making them sing about it – even before it happened (Deut. 31:30 – 32:47)!

³ In the years just before the captivity, Jeremiah had been making a similar point. Jer. 2 is one example.

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land of Egypt: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore [when you break down this separation] I will punish you for all your iniquities' (Amos 3:1-2).

Take the exodus; literally, 'the way out'. In forming Israel to be his people, right from the start of the exodus, during the plagues, God drew a very clear distinction or division between Israel and Egypt making sure the people noticed it (Ex. 8:22-23; 9:4,6,26; 10:23; 11:7; 12:13,23,27). And how dramatically God repeated the distinction at the Red Sea – before, during and after the crossing (Ex. 14:19-31). Even at the foot of Sinai, before they had received the covenant and its law, God reminded Israel of it, taking it to the supreme height:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, 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. 19:4-6).

Supreme height? Yes, indeed. Israel, as a nation, as the old-covenant people of God, was to be given a special priesthood in the order of Aaron, the entire law and covenant hanging absolutely on that priesthood (Heb. 7:11-12). And yet – and yet – at the foot of Sinai God was not only telling Israel that they would be given a special priesthood, but that they – as a whole – would be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation'! What a privileged people they were! More: what a tremendous responsibility God was now laying upon them – to maintain their holiness (separation) under the covenant!⁴

Let me stress this. Although God could say: 'All the earth is mine', he chose to declare to the Israelites: 'You shall be a special treasure to me above all people'. But there was a condition: 'Now therefore, *if* you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, *then* you shall be a special treasure to me above all people' (Ex. 19:5). 'Keep my covenant'; in other

⁴ See Peterson pp27-28,65-66.

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words: 'Remain true to me and keep my law'. And in so doing, they would be a holy kingdom of priests.

The people, receiving the law, promised their obedience as God's holy nation, and did so before Moses ascended Sinai: 'Then all the people answered together and said: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do"' (Ex. 19:8). On Moses' return, they said the same: 'Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said: "All the words which the LORD has said we will do"' (Ex. 24:3).

The tables of the law were housed in the special box constructed for the purpose – the ark of the covenant for Israel (Ex. 25:10,15-16; 40:19-20; Deut. 10:1-5; 1 Kings 8:9; Heb. 9:4), its name – 'the ark of the *covenant*' – pregnant with meaning: the commandments and the covenant were one (Ex. 34:28; Lev. 26:15; Deut. 4:13), housed in this holy box placed at the very centre of the Jewish religion and nation. In years to come, David would want to build a temple with the express purpose of housing the ark:

I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God, and I made preparations for building (1 Chron. 28:2).

No hand – not even a Jewish hand – was allowed to touch the ark – death fell upon any Israelite who transgressed in that regard (2 Sam. 6:6-7).

In all this, God was once again underlining the call for separation from pagans, and stressing death as the consequence of disobedience; the law was crystal clear and rigid on it (Rom. 7:9-10; 2 Cor. 3:6-7,9; Heb. 12:18-24). God was signalling the status of the law as the separating marker for Israel.

So important was the principle of Israel's uniqueness, God reiterated it in the plains of Moab at the second giving of the law just before Israel crossed the Jordan and entered Canaan:

You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession,

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out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deut. 7:6).

Thus God, in giving Israel the covenant and its law, distinguished – separated – his people from all others. In this, Israel was unique among all the nations:

[God] has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws (Ps. 147:19-20).

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God (Rom. 3:1-2).

[Consider] 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, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen (Rom. 9:4-5; see also Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Mal. 4:4).

Comment is surely superfluous. Israel was given the old covenant and its law; of all the nations, Israel alone was given the law; it was given to them, and no others. In this way, God clearly distinguished Israel, separating and marking out his people from all the rest. As Moses said to God:

If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth? (Ex. 33:15-16).

No wonder, then, that Balaam, describing Israel, declared they were, as a nation:

...a people dwelling alone, and not counting itself among the nations! (Num. 23:9).

At least, that is what Israel should have been. How many times God spelled this out to Israel! How often he raised up prophet after prophet to call them back when they strayed; often, alas, in

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vain!⁵ He was always insisting that they should, without fail, maintain their distinct, separate position.

I make no apology for stressing this: it is precisely what God himself did. Take the book of Deuteronomy. God could not have made it any clearer. Over and over again, he emphasised that he had brought the Hebrews out of Egypt in order to be a separate people, distinct from all others in every way; consequently, they should never adulterate God's covenant, never introduce pagan principles into it, never incorporate, accommodate or adopt pagan ways and systems into Judaism. No deviation would be tolerated. The Hebrews had – without fail, at all times and under all circumstances – to maintain their separateness under the covenant and its law. It is no exaggeration to say that Israel's separation and distinctiveness – which had to be maintained at all costs – was the leading item on God's agenda when he gave them the law for the second (third) time, just before they entered the promised land. See scores of references throughout the book of Deuteronomy.⁶

Take just three:

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess 'served' their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way. But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and

⁵ See my *Evangelicals*. 'The spiritual leaders of the nation had a constant struggle to preserve the distinctiveness of Israel's "worship" from the influence of Canaanite religion' (Peterson p37).

⁶ Deut. 4:20,34,37,45-46; 5:6,15; 6:14; 7:2-6,16,25-26; 8:19; 11:16-17; 12:2-5,8,13,29-32; 13:1-18; 16:3-6,12,21-22; 17:2-7,14-16; 18:9-14,20; 20:1,16-18; 26:8; 28:14,27,60,64,68; 29:16-29; 30:17-18; 31:16-22; 32:9,12,16-18,21,23-25,37-38; 33:27. See also my 'Thoughts on Deuteronomy' on my sermonaudio.com page. Better still, read the book of Deuteronomy.

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your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes (Deut. 12:2-8).

When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying: 'How did these nations "serve" their gods? – that I also may do the same'. You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way, for every abominable thing that the LORD hates they have done for their gods, for they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it (Deut. 12:29-32).

The LORD has said to you: 'You shall never return that way [that is, to Egypt] again' (Deut. 17:16).

Just one more passage to drive home how vital this question of separation was for Israel; Joshua, in his final address to Israel just before he died, urged the people to:

...be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or 'serve' them or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that the LORD your God will no longer drive out

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these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you.

And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed. But just as all the good things that the LORD your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so the LORD will bring upon you all the evil things, until he has destroyed you from off this good land that the LORD your God has given you, if you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and 'serve' other gods and bow down to them. Then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land that he has given to you (Josh. 23:6-16).

Consequently:

Now therefore fear the LORD and 'serve' him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers 'served' beyond the River and in Egypt, and 'serve' the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to 'serve' the LORD, choose this day whom you will 'serve', whether the gods your fathers 'served' in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will 'serve' the LORD (Josh. 24:14-15).

Though the people vowed that they would 'serve' the LORD and stay faithful to him, Joshua had his doubts. So much so, he set up a stone as a witness against the people, telling them: 'Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God' (Josh. 24:16-27).⁷

⁷ Joshua's doubts were well founded. Although Israel remained faithful to God during his lifetime and that of the elders who had worked with him (Josh. 24:31), the following generation rapidly fell into apostasy, failing in every respect (Judg. 1:19 – 2:15). From that low point, their course was mostly downward.

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Nothing made this separation clearer than the sabbath, sitting, as it does, at the heart of the old covenant and its law.

Separation: the sabbath, in particular

At Sinai – more specifically, in the case of the sabbath, in the Wilderness of Sin (Ex. 16:22-30) – God, in giving this new nation his law in order to mark them out as his people, within that law gave them a special – unique – sign to show that they were his people: a double uniqueness – the law with the sabbath sign at its heart. This sign belonged to no other people, since only Israel was his nation: ‘Moreover I also gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between them and me, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them’ (Ezek. 20:12); that is, the LORD who separates them from all other peoples.⁸ At Sinai, God commanded the Jews ‘to hallow my sabbaths, and they will be a sign between me and you, that you may know that I am the LORD your God’ (Ezek. 20:20), and that requirement applied to all the following generations (Ex. 31:13). By ‘sabbaths’, of course, God meant all the sabbaths, the weekly sabbaths in particular.

In short, God commanded the Hebrew people from that time on to keep his law – including the sabbath, especially the sabbath – *as a sign that they were God's nation, distinct from all others:*

Surely my sabbaths you shall keep, for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that it is the LORD who sanctifies you. You shall keep the sabbath, therefore, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death... Work shall be done for six days, but the seventh is the sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the sabbath day, he shall surely be put to death. Therefore the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever; for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed (Ex. 31:13-17).

⁸ See my *Fivefold*.

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There were other signs – including ‘the sign of circumcision’ (Gen. 17:11; Rom. 4:11); Abraham had been given this special indicator, this special marker, unique to him and his descendants; it was a sign for them and for them alone.⁹ The Feast of Unleavened Bread, which the Israelites had to observe when they were settled in their land, served as another sign (Ex. 12:43-49; 13:8-9). Likewise, the redemption of the firstborn (Ex. 13:11-16). So did the dietary laws, which marked Israel as a separate, holy people (Lev. 11:1-47, especially verses 44-45). These signs were given to the Jews for the Jews, serving as distinguishing, separating markers for Israel, setting and keeping the nation apart from pagans.¹⁰

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The upshot

The evidence is overwhelming. God had singled Israel out to be special and separate right from the start. They should never have forgotten that it was only they who had received the Sinaitic covenant and the law (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5, and so on). Again, the sabbath, an integral – not to say, cardinal – aspect of the law, was God’s special sign separating Israel from all other people (Ex. 31:12-17; Neh. 9:14; Ezek. 20:12). The temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the

⁹ Other nations circumcised, of course, but as the texts cited show, the descendants of Abraham treated it as a God-ordained sign marking their separation from all others.

¹⁰ The very essence of a discriminating sign or marker is that it is special. The sabbath – which so many still mistakenly want to make an exception, saying it applied and still applies to all men – must have been special to the nation of the Jews – it *must* have been – otherwise the whole point of the sabbath as a sign would have been lost. If everybody had the day, if it was a creation ordinance applying to all men as men, inevitably it could not have been distinctive to the Jews, and consequently no sign at all. At a stroke, sabbatarian teaching renders null and void those passages which speak of the day as a unique sign for the Jews as a nation. See how differently Nehemiah treated the behaviour of the Jews and pagans concerning the day (Neh. 9:13-15). For more on all this, see my *Sabbath Notes; Sabbath Questions; Essential*.

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feasts, all marked Israel as separate. And right from the word 'Go', God had left his people in no doubt as to their duty with regard to pagans:

You shall not bow down to their gods nor 'serve' them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces... You shall make no covenant with them and their gods (Ex. 23:24,32).

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods (Ex. 34:12-16).

I am the LORD your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev. 18:2-5).

Remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God (Num. 15:39-40).

When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it. You shall inherit the land by lot according to your clans... But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those of them whom you let remain shall be as barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall trouble you in the land where you dwell. And I will do to you as I thought to do to them (Num. 33:51-56).

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You shall make no covenant with [the pagans] (Deut. 7:2).

Even more fundamentally, God's law was explicit. Take the first three of the ten commandments written on stone:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before [besides] me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or 'serve' them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain (Ex. 20:2-7).¹¹

Do not miss the way in which God linked, on the one hand, his people turning to pagan principles, practice and help, copying pagan ways, with, on the other hand, idolatry; that is just how serious it was. Whenever Israel and Judah trusted pagans, called on pagan help, they were, in God's sight, on the high road to idolatry! It was but a short step, or an easy slide, from one to the other.

The cost of disobedience was immense, as the psalmist recorded:

[The children of Israel] tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their idols. When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel. He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe. He gave his people over to the sword and vented his wrath on his heritage. Fire devoured their young men, and their young women had no marriage song. Their

¹¹ It did not stop at Sinai. See Deut. 5:7; 6:14; 2 Kings 17:5; Ps. 81:9; Isa. 42:8; Jer. 25:6; 35:15.

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priests fell by the sword, and their widows made no lamentation (Ps. 78:56-64).

Take Isaiah 30. Judah, by going to Egypt for military and political help against Assyria, sinned with a high hand, and brought upon themselves the wrath of God. Egypt!¹² To go to Egypt of all places! The long-term cost of such disobedience to the covenant was horrendous.¹³ Not only would Judah be exiled for seventy years to Babylon, the nation would never be fully restored. The temple, for instance, would never reach the glory it had had in Solomon's day (Ezra 3:12-13; Hag. 2:3).

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I admit the weight of this chapter, but I make no apology for it. The point we need to carry with us is that God separated the children of Israel from all others, and, as the people of God, they had to maintain this separation through thick and thin. Any mingling with pagans was abhorrent to God. As I will now show, nowhere did this apply more strongly and clearly than in Israel's observance of 'public worship' during the age of the old covenant. This is what I was referring to when I observed that not only is it wrong to move from the old covenant to the new in an un-nuanced way, but those who take such an approach nearly always ignore the fundamental requirement God laid on Israel in the observation of the old covenant. And that fundamental requirement was separation. And nowhere was separation more critical than in the matter of Israel's 'worship'. The point is not merely historical: it is vital in the overall argument I am making about 'public worship' today.

¹² See my *Evangelicals*.

¹³ On this occasion they avoided captivity, but it could not be long delayed.