

THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

Background

The understanding of 'the chosen people' is rooted in the Biblical teaching of God's election (calling) of Israel. Moses sings of Israel as 'the apple of God's eye' (Deuteronomy 32:10) and Israel is declared time and time again in the Bible to have a special/chosen relationship with God (Exodus 4:22; Psalm 105:6; Jeremiah 31:9 Hosea 11:1).

The term 'Israel' was given to Jacob after he wrestled/strived with 'God' (see Genesis 32:22–32). Later, Jacob's descendants became known as *bene Yisrael* (sons of Israel). However, the blessing of Israel predates Jacob and is initially linked to God's call of Abram, and his faithful covenantal promises to him (see Genesis 12).

These promises are enlarged in the subsequent biblical covenants with Moses and David.

The new covenant follows (see Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Hebrews 8) and many divine promises and prophecies are fulfilled. Ultimately, all will be fulfilled when the Messiah returns.

Both the ancient people of God and believers in Jesus (Jews and Gentiles) received something from God: the Jews remember their people having been saved from slavery in Egypt (as well as receiving many great promises); believers in *Yeshua*, whether Jews or Gentiles, remember that they have been saved from the penalty of sin, are being saved from the power of sin, and will one day be saved from the presence of sin.

Election and covenants

Awareness of what the Bible teaches us about election and covenantal faithfulness is vital to our understanding of God's purposes and promises. Paul explores carefully this understanding in Romans 9–11 and affirms that the gifts and calling of God to his people are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). He looks forward to the day when 'all Israel' will be saved. (See the chapter entitled 'Israel in Romans' in *Israel in the New Testament*¹ for a discussion of the important question as to what the expression 'all Israel' might actually mean in the context of Romans 11:26.) Paul understands that the promises to Israel have been confirmed and not revoked in the ministry of Jesus Christ (see Romans 15:8; 2 Corinthians 1:20).

In the New Testament teaching, through faith in Jesus Christ, Gentiles as well as Jews become part of the elect of God (see Ephesians 1:4; 2:11–22; 1 Peter 1:1). It is also worth exploring that in the New Testament the term 'Israel' is used of *ethnic* Israel (Jacob's descendants) or the *faithful remnant* within Israel (see Romans 9:6 and Romans 11:2–5). The church is both the called out (ecclesia) community – (called out from the sin and unbelief of the world to witness and serve God's purposes) and the grafted in community (see the olive tree teaching in Romans 11) to be built into a spiritual people and to serve as a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:4).

Sadly, ideas about election and those of a 'chosen people' can be misused. It is important to stress that God's election of Israel is primarily a gift for service and witness. Israel is to serve God as a distinctive (holy) community (see Deuteronomy 7:6 and Joel 3:16). This very point is made powerfully in Isaiah 49:6.

In terms of the new (messianic) covenant, note that the language of election is (significantly) employed with hindsight, i.e. Christians look back on what God did for them in a way that should exclude any risk of pride or self-congratulation in us; his grace (gift) is acknowledged and we take no credit whatsoever for his having brought us into the Way of salvation. God's elect in Christ know that they have been brought into the Way of service, obedience and, sometimes, sacrifice. He takes us from the way of sin and death to the new Way of *life*. He calls us to *be holy* (Ephesians 1:4–14).

As we think about God's faithful love for his faithful people and his purposes for the whole of his creation, we should be moved to echo Paul's own sense of mystery, awe and joy as expressed in Romans 11:33 and v. 36, *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out..... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.*

Further reading

See Pawson, David, *Israel in the New Testament*¹ and *Defending Christian Zionism* (Terra Nova Publications), and Jacob, Alex, *The Case for Enlargement Theology* and *Receive the Truth* (Glory to Glory Publications).