

Romans 11:16-24 The Olive Tree – The Hebraic Roots of our Faith

This passage is about the roots and trees and things horticultural, so it should be especially appealing to gardeners! Paul uses the olive tree as a teaching aid to explain the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers. This relationship was intended by God to bring blessing to the Gentiles, and back to the Jews. However, in practice, even very early on, there were significant tensions.

Paul teaches that Gentile believers in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, are like wild olive branches grafted into an olive tree. There are two main ways of propagating plants, either by taking cuttings, or by grafting. In Paul's analogy gentile believers aren't just planted into good soil, they are grafted into an already existing tree.

Roots are vital to for plant. According to scientists, the roots of a plant *are widely overlooked as to their significance in plant health. 80% of all plant disorders are due to soil or root problems.* In fact roots are quite remarkable: *The plant root system constitutes the major part of the plant body, both in terms of function and bulk...Roots are so massive that their total dry weight may exceed that of the entire plant body. Quantitative investigation revealed that a single rye plant (Secale cereale) that was 4 months old had a total root length of 387 miles (623 km) or an average root growth of about 3 miles (4.83 km) per day. It consisted of some 14 million separate branch roots, with more than 14 billion root hairs. All the roots and root hairs convert to an equivalent total absorptive surface area in contact with the soil of almost 640 sq meters, all contained within a limited volume of about 2 cu ft (0.057 cu. meter) of soil.*¹

The Bible teaches us of the importance of our **spiritual** roots. Jeremiah paints a picture of a tree that sends out its roots by streams of water, or living water, and which does not cease to bear fruit, even in times of drought (Jeremiah 17:7-8). In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-13) it is the plant with good roots in good soil that produces abundant fruit. Roots feed the plant with water and nutrients, and when a branch is grafted into a tree, it benefits from the *nourishing sap of the root* (Romans 11:17).

But what are our spiritual roots? It is right and proper to feel we have spiritual roots in our local church community. But we also have denominational roots. These days most churches have people from different denominational backgrounds. But whatever our own personal spiritual roots, in the broader picture we all share Protestant roots. This means that we trace our faith back to the Reformation. This year, 2017, is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Castle Church door in Wittenburg. We probably feel we have our spiritual roots in the 5 themes at the heart of the Reformation,

- *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone),
- *sola fide* (by faith alone),
- *sola gratia* (by grace alone),
- *solus Christus* (Christ alone)
- *soli Deo Gloria* (glory to God alone).

We can affirm our spiritual roots, and we can give thanks to God for the blessing they have been to us. However ... when Paul was talking about Gentiles, as wild branches, being grafted into the Olive Tree, he wasn't talking about the Baptist Union, or the Church of England, or the Pentecostal Church, or the Catholic Church, or any of the other 30,000+ Christian denominations in the world today! He

¹ <http://www.cropsreview.com/plant-root-system.html>

was talking about being grafted into the remnant of Israel who had received Jesus as their long awaited Messiah, which was like being grafted into an Olive Tree.

The **Olive Tree** was and still is a familiar sight in the Middle East. In Genesis 8:11 the dove brought in her mouth a freshly plucked olive leaf as a sign that the waters of judgment has subsided. The olive tree from which it came was a sign of new (resurrection) life. Believing Gentiles are grafted into an Olive Tree that represents new resurrection life! God alone is the author of life. Although scientists would love to be able to create life through genetic engineering, all attempts have failed, because life comes from God alone (John 10:10).

In Psalm 52:8 David compares himself to a green olive tree. Commentator John Gill says, *[David] believed he should be as "a green olive tree"; which is a very choice and fruitful tree, has fatness in it, produces an excellent oil; is beautiful to look at; delights in hot climates and sunny places; is found on mountains, we read of the mount of Olives; is ever green and durable, and its leaves and branches are symbols of peace: all which is applicable to truly righteous persons and believers in Christ; who are the excellent of the earth, are filled with the fruits of righteousness; are fat and flourishing; have the oil of grace, the anointing which teaches all things.*

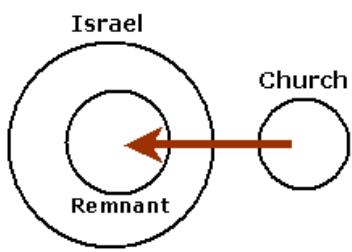
So we see that the Olive Tree is a symbol of human flourishing. This is why Israel herself was likened to *a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit* (Jeremiah 11:16). The true faith of Israel, which was faith in Messiah (Romans 10:4), always brings much blessing (Genesis 12:1-3). This is the Olive Tree into which every Gentile believer has been grafted, whether we realise it or not.

But Jeremiah 11:16 is cast as a warning: *The LORD once called you 'a green olive tree, beautiful with good fruit.' But with the roar of a great tempest he will set fire to it, and its branches will be consumed.* God is no respecter of persons. Jeremiah is saying that God will bring judgment to Israel because of their sin and idolatry.

Paul brings a similarly strong warning to the Gentile believers who thought God had rejected the Jews not to be arrogant or proud (Romans 11:18-22). It may be that they were broken off so that Gentiles could be grafted in (which is the point Paul has been making in Romans 11.) But they were broken off because of unbelief, and *you stand by faith. If God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you!*

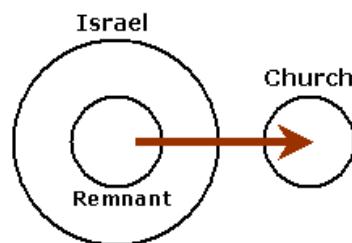
Many of the Gentile believers in Jesus were coming from a pagan background steeped in Greek ways of thinking, often with a lot of anti-Semitic feeling. What they needed was a radical renewal of the mind (Romans 12:1-3). However it wasn't long before the Gentile church forgot, *it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you.* Many of the early Church Fathers were more influenced by Greek philosophy than by Biblical thought and were openly anti-Semitic. Many taught that God had finished with Israel and started anew with the Church. The best way to describe this is by the use of two diagrams². The first diagram (next page) shows Paul's understanding of Gentile Christians in relation to the remnant of Israel.

² See <http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Israel/israel.html> This is an article which goes into this subject in much greater depth, and it is worth reading.



- *The Gentile Church partakes of the covenants and promises given to remnant Israel.*
- *Gentile Christians must identify with Remnant Israel.*

The second diagram shows the way in which this teaching was turned upside down by the early church fathers and entered into mainstream Christianity until this day.



- *The covenants and promises given to Israel are transferred to the Gentile Church.*
- *Jews must convert to Gentile Christianity.*

So what does this mean for us today? We are living today in a spiritual wilderness. Just as at the time of the reformation there was a hunger to get back to God's word (especially among groups like the Baptists,) so today there is a new desire to reconnect to the *nourishing sap of the root*.

Clifford Denton writes, *It is a special time on the prophetic calendar. Many Christians have woken up to the understanding that when the Christian Church began to move away from its association with Israel, Greek and Roman influences infiltrated the doctrines and culture of the Church to fill a theological void. Eloquent (in human terms) though such theologies have been, and as much as they are somewhat Bible-based, much has been neglected as a result of this, leading many of us today to re-consider what the so-called 'early Church fathers' passed on. This is prompting a desire to break from much Christian tradition and to re-connect more firmly with the culture and community of disciples and apostles of the 1st Century. All that they passed on from the rich heritage that preceded the sacrificial ministry of the Lord Jesus the Messiah is now being studied afresh.³*

For us this means getting back to a much more authentic biblically based faith. It means at least acknowledging that the roots of our faith are Hebraic, and that God still has a special place for the Jewish people. It means being on a journey of discovery as we allow God to open up to us more of his Word to us, and to draw on the richness of it.

³ <http://www.prophecytoday.uk/component/k2/itemlist/tag/greek.html>