

The “Olive Tree” Symbolism in Romans 11

Introduction

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 in the book of Romans go into detail about God’s covenants with the *Israelites* – beginning with Abraham, continuing through Moses and including the prophets.

Those chapters also discuss the relationship that *Gentiles* have with those covenants. In other words, those chapters also contain information about how Gentiles “fit” into God’s covenants with the patriarchs.

One of the passages that discusses this relationship between Israelites and Gentiles is contained in Romans 11, as follows:

Romans 11:13-24 (NIV):

¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry ¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, ¹⁸ do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

²² Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³ And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴ After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

What is the Olive Tree?

Needless to say, the “olive tree” in the above passage is symbolic; i.e. it *represents* something else. Given the overall context of Romans 9, 10 and 11 – that is, the context of God’s covenants with the Israelites – it appears that the various parts of the olive tree represent the following:

- The “natural branches” represent individual Israelites – i.e., genetic Jews.
- The “wild olive shoots” represent Gentiles – i.e., people from other nations.
- The “root” of the tree represents God’s covenant promises to the patriarchs – Abraham, Issac and Jacob.

Interestingly, the “olive tree” metaphor for Israel is used in other places as well. For example, consider this verse – in which Jeremiah addresses the Israelites:

Jeremiah 11:16 (ESV):

¹⁶The 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.

In that verse (and in many others), Jeremiah is warning the Israelites about the upcoming Babylonian invasion of Judah. Of course, many Israelites were killed during that invasion; and most of the survivors were taken prisoner – and were kept in Babylon for 70 years. The reason why this is important is because the above verse states that the **branches** of the olive tree will be consumed – but it does not state that the **root** will be consumed.

So, this provides additional evidence that the natural *branches* of the olive tree represent individual Israelites – and that the *root* of the olive tree represents God’s covenants with the patriarchs. The verse above tells us that the branches of the olive tree will be consumed, which refers to the fact that most of the Israelites were killed or exiled by the Babylonians. That verse does *not* state that the root will be consumed, though – and that means that God’s promises to the patriarchs were still in place, even after the Babylonians invaded. This is confirmed by the fact that God brought the Israelites *back* to Judah, after the 70 year exile.

Overall, the olive tree symbolism in Romans 11 tells us the following:

- The covenant promises that God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are *still in effect* – even now. This makes sense, as God promised Abraham that he, **himself**, would inherit the land of Canaan – but Abraham did not inherit any of that land during his lifetime. As a result, it logically follows that Abraham *will* inherit the land, *after* he is resurrected – i.e., after Jesus returns.
- The Israelites – i.e., genetic Jews – are still very much a part of God’s plan. This is because they are still the *natural* heirs of the promises that God made with their ancestors – the patriarchs.
- Gentile believers have now been “grafted in” to God’s covenants with the patriarchs. In essence, Gentile Christians are “spiritual heirs” of the promises that God made to Abraham. As Galatians 3:29 states, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Ramifications of this passage

There are several reasons why this “olive tree” symbolism is important. First of all, that symbolism tells us that the covenant promises to the patriarchs are still in effect – and as a result, genetic Jews are still part of God’s plan.

The reason why this point is important is because the majority of mainstream Christian churches subscribe to some form of the “replacement theology” belief. That belief basically asserts the following:

Genetic Jews do **not** have any part in God’s plan any longer – because they have been “replaced” by the Church.

In other words, replacement theology asserts the exact **opposite** of the olive tree symbolism!

As one might expect, the above belief has contributed to severe anti-Semitism, in many different cases. The holocaust of Nazi Germany is just the most obvious case; there was also the 19th century pogroms in Russia, the Spanish Inquisitions in the 15th and 16th centuries, the expulsion of Jews from England and France in 1290 and 1306, etc.

So, which view is correct – the olive tree symbolism, or the replacement theology belief? Well, replacement theology is predicated on the belief that God has “rejected” the Israelites (and has subsequently “replaced” them with the Church).

As a result, let’s see what Scripture has to say, to find out if God has “rejected” the Israelites or not:

Romans 11:1 (ESV):

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

Plainly, God has *not* rejected the Israelites. Consider this: the apostles, the vast majority of the early Christians, and all of the New Testament writers except Luke – were **Israelites**.

Some people assert that God *only* considers Jews who have accepted Christ to be His people. In other words, this view states that Jews who have not accepted Christ are no longer favored by God *at all*.

So, let’s see what Scripture has to say, about God’s view of Jews who have not accepted Christ:

Romans 11:28-29 (ESV):

²⁸ As regards the gospel, they [the Jews] are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

As a result, it certainly appears that even Jews who have **not** accepted Christ are *still* beloved by God – because they are the natural descendants of the patriarchs.

(Of course, Zechariah 12:10 indicates that *when* Jesus returns, there will be a widespread acknowledgement by Jews that Jesus is the Christ. The point is that Jews who have not *currently* accepted Christ are *still* beloved by God.)

There is another reason why the olive tree symbolism is an important item as well. One of the paragraphs above referred to the anti-Semitism belief – i.e., hatred and discrimination against genetic Jews, because of the idea that Jews are inherently inferior (and evil), compared to other people.

As it turns out, an opposite belief to anti-Semitism exists as well. This opposite belief is called **ultra**-Semitism. In essence, ultra-Semitism holds that genetic Jews are inherently **superior** to other people – especially in a spiritual sense.

In addition, ultra-Semitism advocates usually assert that genetic Jews will automatically be saved – **solely** on the basis of their heritage! In other words, ultra-Semitism is basically a Jewish version of “once saved, always saved”.

Interestingly, the olive tree symbolism also addresses the ultra-Semitism belief. Take another look at one particular subset of that passage:

Romans 11:19-22 (NIV):

¹⁹ You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰ Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble.

²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

The above verses tell us that some of the natural branches of the olive tree were *broken off* – because of their unbelief. This implies that some Israelites – i.e., genetic Jews – have been excluded from God’s covenant with the patriarchs, **because** of their lack of faith in God.

As a result, the olive tree passage certainly appears to contradict the idea that genetic Jews will *automatically* be saved, simply because of their heritage. In other words, Jews need to *maintain their faith* in God, in order to be saved – just like Gentiles need to.

The following passage also speaks to this same point. In that passage, John the Baptist is speaking to some Jews who came to visit him:

Matthew 3:7-9 (ESV):

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Notice what the Pharisees and Sadducees were thinking – they were saying to themselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’. In other words, they thought that they were automatically “entitled” to salvation, *solely* because of their genetic heritage. In other words, they had the “ultra-Semitism” belief.

However, John the Baptist refuted that belief, by stating that God could “raise up children for Abraham” from **stones** if He chose to. (In fact, that statement may be somewhat prophetic – i.e., it may refer to the fact that *Gentiles* would soon be given the opportunity for salvation.)

Another point on this same subject deals with the “Judaizers” that the apostle Paul contended with. These Judaizers were Jewish Christians, who claimed that Gentiles needed to *formally* convert to Judaism – according to all of the rabbinical **traditions** – before they could believe in Jesus and be saved. Those Judaizers *almost certainly* had the **ultra-Semitism** mindset.

Conclusion

Overall, there are three main points that the “olive tree” symbolism in Romans 11 brings out:

- Israelites (genetic Jews) are still part of God’s plan; because they are the *natural* heirs of the patriarchs – and it is important for Gentiles to acknowledge that fact. However, note that genetic Jews will **not** “automatically” be saved – i.e., Jews need to *maintain* their faith in God, in order to be saved – just like Gentiles need to.

- Gentiles now have the opportunity to become **full** heirs of God's promises to the patriarchs – and it is important for Jews to acknowledge that fact. However, Gentile Christians should not consider themselves to be “superior” to Jews – because after all, Jews are the “natural” heirs of those promises.

- The final point to note is that the “olive tree” symbolism harmonizes with the “one new humanity” metaphor that Paul uses in Ephesians 2. In that chapter, Paul writes about the fact that faithful Jews – **and** faithful Gentiles – have *both* been reconciled to God; and are *both* considered members of God's household. This parallels the olive tree passage – in which both “natural branches” (Jews) and “wild olive shoots” (Gentiles) are obtaining nourishment from the “olive tree root” (God's covenants to the patriarchs).

To conclude, here is the “one new humanity” passage from Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:11-22 (NIV):

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—

¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.