

What About God's Chosen People?

Part X



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Question #21 - *"Is it true that the Jews are God's chosen people? I have a Christian friend who says the Jews were not God's chosen people."*

We ended our last segment talking about how the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem itself was also an important part of what the Jews needed to do upon returning from the captivity and after rebuilding the temple. We talked about how Nehemiah returned from Babylon to accomplish this very task, and discussed how, against all the odds the Jews were facing, they did build up the walls of Jerusalem. This not only restored the city of Jerusalem, but truly reconnected and solidified the Jews who had returned from Babylon as God's chosen nation, back on the land God had promised Abraham the nation would possess.

Is this where the struggles would end for the Jews? Certainly not! After completing much work in rebuilding Jerusalem and helping get the people on the right course, Nehemiah would return to the imperial palace as he had promised the king he would do. However, shortly thereafter, Nehemiah would again be given leave by the king to go back and resume his duties as governor in Judah. (Neh. 13:6) When Nehemiah returned to the land, he found the people, once again, had not lived up to their commitments. Even some in leadership positions had continued to align themselves

with the surrounding people, instead of trusting in God and standing on their own. The struggle to keep the Jewish people together and to re-establish their identity as a people, separated unto the work of God, and again make the land of promise the anchor of all Jews no matter where they might be scattered among the world, would be a long and hard task. As one continues to look at this history, it just re-emphasizes over and over how much there would not have continued to be a chosen nation at all if it had not been God's will that it happen!

The struggle to maintain the nation is not the proof God had or later decided to reject them, but instead, shows us how important to the plan of God and work in this world it was and is that the chosen nation be maintained. God was not going to simply allow His chosen nation to disappear among the populations of the world, and this also emphasizes the point there would be no room for an impostor nation to rise up in its place. Thus, again, the Jewish people are clearly the chosen nation which was once known as Israel. However, all this being true, we must not forget that God will not force people to serve Him, and this means there is a balance, which also proves the point. No impostor nation would have cared to maintain the ways of God by following a lifestyle so unpopular among the world, and this is shown in the fact, even the true nation struggled with whether to follow or turn away. This is why we have the stories of there being the need for men such as Nehemiah, Ezra, and others who were used to bring back to the surface the willingness of the Jewish people to hold on to, at the very least, their heritage.

Especially since people tend to think so much in the terms that children are one's immortality, most people shore up this immortality thought by connecting back to their past. This is a logical thing to do, in that if your children represent your immortality, you represent your forefathers' immortality. This makes the heritage and connectivity to the past something that resonates in the minds of men; and God used this in making the Law, and very specifically the seven feasts given in it, not just something the nation was given as a burden to preserve. Instead, God laid out the feasts and things Israel was to recognize by setting them on a foundation of being something which actually happened to Israel, and as such, became their history. In the Law, Israel is even instructed that when their children ask why their people observe something, such as Passover, they are to be told the stories about where the nation had come from. (Ex. 12:24-27) This made the Word of God, truly, the Hebrew Bible, and, of course, at the time of the return, we are talking about, just that part most often called the Old Testament.

That point brings us to the third item of the list of things for which time was painstakingly taken to restore during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah. The temple had been rebuilt. The city of Jerusalem had been re-established as a city and cultural center for the chosen nation, but what would be the more continual binding tie for all this to remain something the chosen nation would fight for as the generations passed? The answer to this is the written Word of God! Something brought up earlier in this series was the fact the Babylonian captivity was really the birth of the religion of Judaism. Again, I say this based on the simple truth that Jews no longer had the temple and were scattered among the world, and this forced the development of what it meant to follow God's Law under such circumstances. In talking about this the first time, I covered the basic reasons why Jews could not build a temple just anywhere, or a mobile structure such as the original tabernacle had been, in order to set up just anywhere. The Jews understood all this; thus they never tried, but what did happen was the development of what we know as synagogues. This, no doubt, started out as a basic idea long before it grew to be the more elaborate and formal thing we know today. However, the synagogue gave Jews a way to have a place which could house any copies of the written Word they might have, or writings based on the memory different ones had of what the Law said. It also gave Jews a place to meet with one another and study the writings, and worship God even in the absence of the temple.

The synagogue is not meant to be a replacement for the temple but a way of recognizing the temple is unavailable for one reason or another, yet Jews are mindful of the Law, nonetheless. As the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt by the returning captives, one could argue there was no need for synagogues or the like, but this is where the hope of perfect circumstances meets with reality. Many Jews were still captive and without means to return to the promised land; others simply did not know the temple, once again, stood; and some simply did not care because they had settled in where they were and had no desire to return to their homeland. As with any people, there is a whole range of thoughts; and no Jew should be judged by others, for only God can truly know each heart. For all the good or bad in this idea, it should be understood that this was a system of worship that continued, and, in truth, served many Jews well in the aspect of maintaining their heritage no matter where they might reside. It also is true that after the time of Jesus the temple in Jerusalem was, once again, destroyed, but the synagogue system was still in place.

Looking at our question for this series, it

deserves mentioning that the synagogue way of doing things also served as a model for what Christians are familiar with, which is the practice of going to church. Now, that's another large subject we don't need to go into deeper here; but if the Jews were not God's chosen nation, the church has some rethinking to do about all its practices! The larger point I wish to get to here is that after the Jews had returned and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem, it again was to be the true center of the chosen nation's service to God, if for no other reason than the fact God's Word said it was to be so, and this means it was important the temple be the place that could be depended on. This brings clarity to why Ezra and Nehemiah's work to get and keep it all on track was so important, and no small part of that work would be the collecting and maintaining of reliable copies of the written Words of God! Like most very important work, this did not come with the grand accolades or show up in the story line as one of the spectacular achievements of the time, but it was!

You see, a great deal of what we know as the Old Testament was in place by the time the Babylonians came to carry away the nation. Certainly the core, which is the Torah, (or first five books), and the early history, such as Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and what the church recognizes as the two books of Samuel were truly solidified. Of course, what we know as the two books of Kings was an ongoing history, the second of the two telling us how the Babylonian captivity came to be; but even these two books were, for the most part, in place before the captivity. The books of those prophets that came before the captivity were also words that had been preserved, and, again, you come to books such as Jeremiah that take you through the direct events of the captivity, making them books along with those like Daniel and Esther, which came about because of those who lived through the events of the captivity. The remainder of the books that belong to the Hebrew Bible were collected during and shortly after the return from the captivity, making these books, for people such as Ezra and Nehemiah, not history but the recording of events as they were happening.

For there to be a true collection, or as it is commonly called, "cannon," of books, there had to be involved with this restoring of the nation the restoring of sure copies of all the writings considered worthy of that cannon, and it can be no coincidence that Ezra was not only a priest of the house of Aaron, but also a scribe! (Ezra 7:1-6) While the Bible records nothing about the specifics of it all, Ezra is credited with compiling the written Word of God into an official cannon that would be maintained at the new temple in Jerusalem, and from

which later copies would be made off of for use in synagogues all across the world. It is only reasonable that his work, at least, brought about the finalizing of the writing and compiling into the cannon, those books which happened during Ezra's time period and which chronologically bring us to the end of the Hebrew Bible. Josephus, who was a Jewish historian of the first century A.D., references 22 sacred books that, according to him, had clearly been recognized as a complete work since the time of Ezra. He notes that there was at his time no dispute, or history of disputes, about the authenticity of these books being the Scriptures, and this makes it as good a historical fact as any historical fact that the Hebrew Bible was a solid set of writings from the time of Its chronological close to the time of Christ.

Beyond that, the Jewish people confirm to us the truth, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the books we know today as the Hebrew Bible being those same books. As to Josephus' mention of there only being 22 books, we must understand that the books were combined in a little different way - as they still are by the Jews to this day - than what most Christians have when opening their Old Testament. By considering the two books of Samuel one book, and doing the same with Kings and Chronicles, one cuts down the count by three books. Ezra and Nehemiah are also counted as one, and all of the "minor prophets" are one scroll to the Jews; thus, one book instead of twelve. All this takes us from the Christian (if you will) count of 39 down to 24 books altogether. Josephus takes out one more in his reckoning by putting the story of Ruth into the book of Judges, and another by combining Jeremiah and Lamentations, which were both written by Jeremiah. It simply makes no difference how you divide or arrange the books when it comes to saying we are all talking about the same set of writings!

The importance to our question about Christians saying the Jews are not or never were the chosen nation is the fact that without the Jewish people and their efforts to maintain the written Word of God, the "church" would have no Old Testament! If the returning captives, and specifically God fearing men such as Ezra, had not followed God and ensured the Hebrew Bible was maintained and put back where it belonged at the center of the chosen nation's life, completing what the Jews needed to truly move forward under the circumstances of there being those both on the land of promise as well as all over the world, the whole story would be different. The Scriptures themselves would have been lost or nothing more than a disorganized smattering of ancient writings spread out all over the place with many various

copies, leaving us to wonder which ones were telling us the right information!

Christians could have their New Testament, but they would have no idea of what Jesus was referring to in half of what He had to say. This is true of much of the New Testament's words, and all this continues to solidify the importance of a chosen nation. If the Hebrew Bible was not necessary, there would not even be a question about there ever being a chosen people or nation of God, especially one that would concern Jews and Christians, because the people we know as Jews would be nothing more than any other religious group and/or race with its own set of beliefs. The fact Christianity, even as just a religion, needs the Old Testament, is the reason attempts to throw away the Old and replace it with just the New Testament have always failed; but following the Old Testament story line, both as a historical account as well as in those things prophesied, we see the Bible is not just another old book in the world's collection of human writings. Christianity, the church, or whatever term you want to use, just doesn't make sense without the Hebrew Bible!

Now, as I believe I've mentioned before, the book of Nehemiah is not technically the chronological closing of the Old Testament, because the prophecy of Malachi actually is. However, as a historical narrative, Nehemiah is, for all intents and purposes, the end. At this point, we are about four hundred years from the coming of The Messiah, but, again, man's historical accounts fill in the gap. This is that point I have mentioned before about how we do not have to just take God's word for the fact the Jews have been around and a large part of the human story for a very long time! Man's account continues to show us how the process, and specifically the events prophesied in Daniel's vision, brought the chosen nation to the coming of The Messiah (without which there would be no "church"), and through to what we know the Jews are today. As I said early in this series, the Jews survived both outside as well as inside opposition and challenges, but in the face of incredible odds the Jews survived as a people, and to this day remain, even fighting for their right to the land, and specifically the city of Jerusalem. This is why I think, especially by this point in the study, our question is no longer, are the Jews God's chosen nation, but how could they not be?

Now, Daniel's visions were not meant to be detailed accounts of the time period that exists between the end of what we call the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament, but they certainly are a

clear overview of events for the purpose of understanding the chosen nation's struggles, and work in this world, were not coming to an end just because times might have seemed gloomy during the captivity. What Daniel saw was the fact the chosen nation would go on into the future and be part of the events man's choices would unfold in this world. The struggles and persecution they would face would also not end just because the return to the land of promise took place. Ezra and Nehemiah's story clearly demonstrates to us that even after their work and lifetimes, the struggle would continue as God gave each generation of Jews a chance to maintain, and if willing, to bring the nation back to where God had always wanted them to be. A fact made very specific in what Daniel saw is that this struggle would continue until the only choice left for God, to really bring the nation to where He wanted it to be, was to send The Messiah to lead the way, and the fact this is the purpose for why Jesus was sent when He was is one that many people who claim to know the Word of God unfortunately don't really grasp.

It is good that Christians understand Jesus was willing and did give His life to save the world, but a fact I keep having to point out on this issue is that God doesn't set men up for failure. God sent Jesus knowing Jesus would be crucified, but Jesus was sent to offer Himself as the Leader the chosen nation needed, and The One Who without they could not succeed under the circumstances they had come to. The misunderstanding of this point is what causes so many to believe they can make the argument the church, or something else, replaced the chosen nation after Christ. The Jews had, once again, come to a critical point, and it would seem that rejecting The Messiah would be the last straw for them. On the surface this is an easy argument to make, but the deeper truth we are shown in the New Testament, and certainly in what was revealed to John, is not that the nation was to be rejected, but that their path through future events was going to be far more painful than God had given them the opportunity to have. This is all the more reason true believers, no matter from what race or part of the world they may be, should feel a kinship with the Jews and support them, pray for them, and for God to soon save us all by sending Jesus back to this earth to take the reigns of the chosen nation, and the world as a whole!

The fact the chosen nation's path was going to be far more painful than it needed to be is why Jesus wept over Jerusalem and the nation in Luke 19:41. The opportunity that had come to them through His appearing was greater than any generation that had ever come before. This weeping of Jesus shows us God knew the nation would not take that opportunity, and what would

come next would be great tragedy. However, it also makes the point God would continue to use the Jews, not reject them and allow them to simply disappear as a people, even at that time. It's only because the chosen nation would be maintained that future generations of Jews would, from then forth, face a struggle like none who had come before them had! To understand how the nation came to this point in time, where The Messiah would be their only hope, but also be rejected by them, we need to continue to follow the story of what took place in the time between the work of Ezra and Nehemiah and the coming of Christ. This history shows us the continual struggle to get and keep the nation on track as well as how and where they got off track. It also explains a lot about what happened in the New Testament, if for no other reason than it shows us why there are the groups of people and government/religious structures among the Jews which we see at the opening of The New Testament.

All things considered, Ezra and Nehemiah did an excellent job in doing what they could to ensure the founding elements of what the nation needed was put back in place; but like all men, including those who greatly serve God, their lives would come to an end. As always, this would leave the future generations to make decisions as to how to maintain the ways of God they had been called to perform, and hold onto them among shifting political circumstances in the world at large. With this in mind, the first, and maybe best thing to keep in mind through the events leading to The Messiah, is the Jewish struggle with the issue of national independence versus being under the rule of another government power. This had been an issue before the Babylonian captivity, as we have discussed earlier in this series. The kings of Judah were not satisfied to focus on the work of God without concern for the fact they were a vassal state under a foreign rule, yet that's what God had instructed them to do.

Accepting such a thing is really not such an odd thing to see happen when one considers God gave Israel no king, for God was to be their King; and an earthly king of the chosen nation only came about because the people demanded one. What is interesting when considering the allowance of a foreign king to rule over the land, is the story about how God judged the kings of Babylon during their time of rulership, even bringing their rule of the empire to an end. (Dan. 4:1-5:30) This happened because God is not just the True King of the chosen nation, but of all men; and this simple truth can be emphasized when a power puts itself in the direct line of sight by ruling or attempting to rule over God's chosen nation! This is just another thing we see as a repeating theme in the way God

can, is, and will continue to work, and which will bring about the Second Coming of Christ.

What this simply tells us is that the chosen nation is an irreplaceable part of the plan! Again, it's simple to make flat statements about the Jews not being the chosen nation; but when we study the events for ourselves, we have a deeper understanding that shows us this is not a possibility. They have been and continue to be just too large a piece of the puzzle to have a picture of any kind without them! Now, what one sees by following the history is, for a short time, the Babylonian captivity had firmly put the fact in the minds of the Jewish people that God would allow the nation to fall to foreign powers, especially if they did not serve God. The thought that the chosen nation would never be allowed to fall, no matter how much they turned their backs on God's ways, was the arrogance the pre-captivity kings had staked their lives on, and they had lost. However, the captivity did not put the thoughts and desires for national independence out of the overall picture for the nation, as this issue would come up again and again through the generations. The problem is that human arrogance always finds a way to justify what we want even in the face of being shown what is right.

Between the return from the captivity and the time of Christ, there would be times of virtual independence, or, at least, the ability to manage their affairs without much interference from outside governments. However, they would never truly be out from under the shifting powers of the world. Because of this, the issue could not logically turn again to be the thought the chosen nation would never be allowed to fall, but a thought that brought very much the same issues with it did arise. No matter what the circumstances, there were always those of the chosen nation who believed the nation was righteous enough or, in some way, deserving of complete independence. To be clear, in saying this, I'm not judging those who fought for the right things when it was the right time to do so! I'm only pointing out that a constant thirst, by at least some, to again not accept that living for God and demonstrating His ways could be done at many points without concern for who the secular authority was, caused much bloodshed when it need not have happened. This is part of what Jesus came to show the correct course on. As Ecclesiastes tells us, there is a time for everything. (Eccl. 3:1-8) There is a time to fight and a time to be content. There is also a time to fight for what needs to be corrected internally (which Jesus attempted to show, and this point explains why He was so critical of the nation on many levels), and there is a time to oppose external wrong.

The nation's inability to see this fact clearly, and desire to seek God for when to act and when to hold off, along with the leadership's thirst to maintain their own power, caused many problems. It also became the main issue in crucifying The Messiah when He arrived and had made it clear what His goals were focused on. Many Jews wanted independence, and Jesus did not show Himself to be the conquering hero they wanted Him to be, but this is because The Messiah was about restoring righteousness, not granting the desires of men. What we end up with is history repeating itself over and over, but in each cycle there is a downward movement as well. This downward spiral is why God will need to bring this world to an end one day, and the repeating cycle is why Jesus mentions the coming of the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel, which was something those who know the history understand had already been fulfilled before the coming of Christ. (Matt. 24:15-18)

Looking at the downward spiral we all create in this world, we can see just how right in one aspect people can be when looking at their children as their immortality. When God originally brought the chosen nation out of Egypt and gave them the promised land, the nation faced a problem very similar to those at the return from Babylon. During both times, the problem was not so much the desire to be an independent nation, but the nation's demise through ceasing to be a distinct people by intermingling with those not of the bloodline. The Jews would struggle with this problem over and over, in no small part because it ends up being another reason people disliked there being a chosen nation. People to this very day will look at Jewish families and judge them for thinking their children are too good to marry non-Jewish children. Of course, there are those in every generation willing to cast this restriction aside; and by doing so, many Jewish families have ceased to hold their true distinction. In spite of all these struggles, God continually urges those who are willing and works for the chosen nation to stay a more separated people, maintaining a distinction with even genetic markers modern science can see today that prove they are a unique race, and not just some jumbling group of people claiming to be a specific race!

Until next time, may we each continually choose to be the people God wants us to be!

