

“OLIVE TREE THEOLOGY”



Below is a short biography of David Stern, the author of the following commentary on an important portion of Romans Ch 11. The KEY POINT of the document can be understood in the following excerpt;

“Who are God's people?”

“The most common theology in non-Messianic Judaism would answer this question, “The Jews.” The most common theology in Christendom answers, “The Church.” But from the olive tree we learn that there are three distinct groups at present who are all in some sense part of God's people, and no proper theology can ignore any of them:

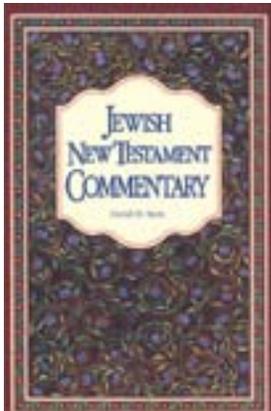
(1) Messianic Jews, who are the natural branches that are part of the cultivated olive tree.

(2) Gentile Christians, the wild olive branches which have been grafted into the cultivate olive tree.

(3) Non-Messianic Jews, the natural branches which have fallen off the cultivated olive tree but can easily be grafted back in again.

What I call “olive tree theology” must take into account all three groups, all three kinds of “branches” defining and describing the past, present and future of God's people. But theologians, like other people, want a simple life. The most widespread Christian oversimplification is found in some forms of Covenant theology and is most correctly called replacement theology. This erroneous theology says”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David H. Stern was born in Los Angeles in 1935, the great-grandson of two of the city's first twenty Jews. He earned a Ph.D. in economics at Princeton University and was a professor at UCLA, mountain-climber, co-author of a book on surfing and owner of health-food stores.

In 1972 he came to faith in Yeshua the Messiah, after which he received a Master of Divinity degree at Fuller Theological Seminary and did graduate work at the University of Judaism.

He was married in 1976 to Martha Frankel, also a Messianic Jew, and together they served one year on the staff of Jews for Jesus. Dr. Stern taught Fuller Theological Seminary's first course in “Judaism and Christianity,” organized Messianic Jewish conferences and leaders' meetings, and served as an officer of the Messianic Jewish Alliance of America.

In 1979 the Stern family made aliyah [immigrated to Israel]. They now live in Jerusalem with their two children and are active in Israel's Messianic Jewish community.

This commentary is a companion to Dr. Stern's Jewish New Testament, which is his translation of the New Testament from the original first-century Greek into enjoyable modern English. This translation brings out the essential Jewishness of the New Testament by its use of Hebrew names and Jewish terminology and by its correction of antisemitic renderings found in other translations.

The Jewish New Testament Commentary discusses, verse by verse, Jewish issues raised in the New Testament - questions Jews have about Yeshua, the New Testament and Christianity; questions Christians have about Judaism and the Jewish roots of their faith; and questions Messianic Jews have about their own identity and role.

The Jewish New Testament and Jewish New Testament Commentary are available singly in hard or soft cover or as a boxed, hardcover matched set. Both are available on CD-ROM. In addition, the Jewish New Testament is available on 16 audio cassettes.

Dr. Stern is also author of Messianic Jewish Manifesto, which outlines the destiny, identity, history, theology and program of today's Messianic Jewish movement, and of Restoring the Jewishness of the Gospel, an abridgment of the “Manifesto” meant for those unaccustomed to thinking of the Gospel as Jewish.

Finally, in 1998, Dr. Stern published the Complete Jewish Bible, his stylistically modified adaptation of an existing Jewish translation of the Tanakh (“Old Testament”) bound together with the Jewish New Testament.

NOTE: Mouse over scriptures in [blue](#) to view scriptures.

Romans 11

¹ “In that case, I say, isn’t it that God has repudiated his people?” Heaven forbid! For I myself am a son of Isra’el, from the **seed of Avraham** (Abraham),^u of the tribe of Binyamin (Benjamin). ² **God has not repudiated his people,**^v whom he chose in advance. Or don’t you know what the Tanakh (Old Testament/Scripture) says about Eliyahu (Elijah)? He pleads with God against Isra’el (Israel), ³ **“ADONAI (LORD), they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars, and I’m the only one left, and now they want to kill me too!”**^{w4} But what is God’s answer to him? **“I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not knelt down to Ba’al.”**^{x5} It’s the same way in the present age: there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ (Now if it is by grace, it is accordingly not based on legalistic works; if it were otherwise, grace would no longer be grace.) ⁷ What follows is that Isra’el has not attained the goal for which she is striving. The ones chosen have obtained it, but the rest have been made stonelike, ⁸ just as the *Tanakh* (Old Testament/Scripture) says,

**“God has given them a spirit of dullness
eyes that do not see
and ears that do not hear,
right down to the present day.”**^y

⁹ And David says,

**“Let their dining table become for them
a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a punishment.
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they can’t see,
with their backs bent continually.”**^z

¹¹ “In that case, I say, isn’t it that they have stumbled with the result that they have permanently fallen away?” Heaven forbid! Quite the contrary, it is by means of their stumbling that the deliverance has come to the Gentiles, in order to **provoke them to jealousy.**^{a12} Moreover, if their stumbling is bringing riches to the world - that is, if Isra’el’s (Israel’s) being placed temporarily in a condition less favored than that of the Gentiles is bringing riches to the latter — how much greater riches will Isra’el (Israel) in its fullness bring them!

¹³ However, to those of you who are Gentiles I say this: since I myself am an emissary sent to the Gentiles, I make known the importance of my work ¹⁴ in the hope that somehow I may **provoke** some of my own people to **jealousy** and save some of them! ¹⁵ For if their casting Yeshua (Jesus) aside means reconciliation for the world, what will their accepting him mean? It will be life from the dead!

¹⁶ Now if the *hallah* (bread) offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole loaf. And if the root is holy, so are the branches. ¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you — a wild olive — were grafted in among them and have become equal sharers in the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ then don’t boast as if you were better than the branches! However, if you do boast, remember that you are not supporting the root, the root is supporting you. ¹⁹ So you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ True, but so what? They were broken off because of their lack of trust. However, you keep your place only because of your trust. So don’t be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified! ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, he certainly won’t spare you! ²² So take a good look at God’s kindness and his severity: on the one hand, severity toward those who fell off; but, on the other hand, God’s kindness toward you - provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise, you too will be cut off! ²³ Moreover, the others, if they do not persist in their lack of trust, will be grafted in; because God is able to graft them back in. ²⁴ For if you were cut out of what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree!

²⁵ For, brothers, I want you to understand this truth which God formerly concealed but has now revealed, so that you won’t imagine you know more than you actually do. It is that stoniness, to a degree, has come upon Isra’el

(Israel), until the Gentile world enters in its fullness;²⁶ and that it is in this way that all Isra'el will be saved. As the *Tanakh* (Old Testament/Scripture) says,

**“Out of Tziyon (Zion) will come the Redeemer;
he will turn away ungodliness from Ya'akov (Jacob)
and this will be my covenant with them, . . .
when I take away their sins.”^b**

²⁷
²⁸ With respect to the Good News they are hated for your sake. But with respect to being chosen they are loved for the Patriarchs' sake,²⁹ for God's free gifts and his calling are irrevocable.³⁰ Just as you yourselves were disobedient to God before but have received mercy now because of Isra'el's (Israel's) disobedience;³¹ so also Isra'el (Israel) has been disobedient now, so that by your showing them the same mercy that God has shown you, they too may now receive God's mercy.³² For God has shut up all mankind together in disobedience, in order that he might show mercy to all.

³³ O the depth of the riches
and the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How inscrutable are his judgments!
How unsearchable are his ways!

³⁴ For, **‘Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Who has been his counselor?’^c**

³⁵ Or, **‘Who has given him anything
and made him pay it back?’^d**

³⁶ For from him and through him
and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever!
Amen.

^u 2 Chronicles 20:7, Psalms 105:6

^y Deuteronomy 29:3(4), Isaiah 29:10

^c Isaiah 40:13

^v 1 Knigs 19:10, 14

^z Psalms 69:23-24(22-23)

^d Job 41:3(11)

^w Deuteronomy 32:21

^a Deuteronomy 32:21

^x 1 Kings 19:18

^b Isaiah 59:20-21, 27:9

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Commentary on Romans 11:9-25

19-21 So, seeking an excuse for pride, you, a new imaginary opponent (see 10:14-15N), a prideful boastful Gentile Christian, **will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in,”** the implication being that God prefers Gentiles to Jews. Sha’ul’s (Paul’s) answer is, literally, “[It is] well”; my rendering, **True, but so what?** brings out the implicit irony, the point being that the opponent’s statement, though true, cannot be made into a ground for boasting against the branches. For even though **They were broken off because of their lack of trust**, nevertheless, the only reason **you stay in place** is **because of your trust** in the God of the Jews and in the Jewish Messiah. **So don’t be arrogant; on the contrary, be terrified** of letting pride in having been included with God’s people replace trust in God. This was the very sin Sha’ul (Paul) found unbelieving Jews prone to at [2:17-29](#), and compare [Mt 3:9](#). “Stand in awe” or even “fear,” as some translations have, are not strong enough; you are to **be terrified**, once you face the fact that **if God did not spare the natural branches** when they apostatized through lack of trust in him, **he certainly won’t spare you**, a grafted-in branch, when you, through antisemitic pride, demonstrate that same lack of trust.

22 Some people think that if they have given mental assent to the proposition that Yeshua (Jesus) is the Messiah, they have “eternal security” with God, no matter how they live their lives. This parody of genuine trust is rightly called “cheap grace.” The truth of the matter is that “faith” without actions to match is dead ([Ya 2:14-26](#)); in other words, salvation is conditional: **provided you maintain yourself in that kindness! Otherwise you too will be cut off!** This involves taking care that faith “works itself out in love” ([Ga 5:6](#), [Ep 2:10](#)).

23-24 Conversely, the only condition non-Messianic Jews must meet in order to become sharers in the promises God made them is **not to persist in their lack of trust**. Then they will most certainly **be grafted in; because God is able to graft them back in**. This means that God can keep his promises, which is specifically the issue behind Chapters 9-11 (see 9:1 - 11:36N).

God’s ability to graft them back in is proved by another *kal v’chomer* argument (see [Mt 6:30N](#)), that if **you** Gentiles **were cut out of what is by nature a wild olive tree**, a nation of pagans separated from God’s promises ([Ep 2:11-12&NN](#)), and were **grafted, contrary to nature**, that is, contrary to normal agricultural practice, contrary to what makes economic sense, **into a cultivated olive tree**, the Jewish people, enabling God’s “foolishness” ([IC 1:17-31](#)) to highlight his sovereign control over his purposes ([9:6b-29](#)); then (the climax of the argument), **how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree!** How much easier it will be to bring an understanding of spiritual truth to those who belong to the people God has been dealing with for thousands of years than to those who do not! The analogy does not apply to every single Jew over against every single Gentile - especially today, when some Jews are raised without any Jewish identification, while many Gentiles, particularly those raised in Christian homes, have been exposed to spiritual truth as much as or more than many Jews. But, leaving modern exceptions aside, it ought to be easier for a Jew to believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah than for a Gentile (and this would certainly have been so when Sha’ul wrote), since “Messiah” is a concept which is part of Jewish culture, whereas a Gentile has to be introduced to an idea alien to his culture (see [Ac II :20-23N](#).) Furthermore, a Jew, as a member of the Jewish people, has the advantages enumerated at [9:4-5](#). This is why a “Jews for Jesus” broadside says, in a lighthearted vein, “You don’t have to be Jewish to believe in Jesus - But it helps.”

The “olive tree” analogy of vv. [17-24](#) casts new light on the important theological ques-

Who are God's People?

tion, "Who are God's people?" The most common theology in non-Messianic Judaism would answer this question, "The Jews." The most common theology in Christendom answers, "The Church." But from the olive tree we learn that there are three distinct groups at present who are all in some sense part of God's people, and no proper theology can ignore any of them:

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What I call "olive tree theology" must take into account all three groups, all three kinds of "branches" defining and describing the past, present and future of God's people.

But theologians, like other people, want a simple life. The most widespread Christian oversimplification is found in some forms of Covenant theology and is most correctly called replacement theology. This erroneous theology says that the Jews used to be God's chosen people; but when they spurned Jesus, God spurned them and chose a new people, the Church, to replace them - so that now, the Church receives all of God's promises and blessings, while the Jews get only the curses. Were this thinly disguised antisemitism true, Sha'ul would have to picture a cultivated olive tree with its root, trunk and branches all dead, and the wild olive branches living by themselves, grafted into nothing alive.

Unfortunately, Replacement theology is currently gaining strength in several growing movements in Christendom: Dominionism, Reconstructionism, "Kingdom Now," and in England, Restorationism. These movements are spreading the correct idea that the Church should not retreat into a ghetto or a fortress mentality, but should bring the presence of the Kingdom into the world, actively attempting to improve life here on earth - actually a very Jewish idea. It is truly a shame that these movements propagate Replacement theology, since they don't need it to make their point; indeed, many Christians who could benefit are driven away by it. I wish these movements would see that there is no logical connection between their program for improving life on this planet and Replacement theology, and would repudiate the latter. For additional discussion of Replacement theology see notes at Mt 5:5, 24:34; Lk 21:24; Ac 1:6-7, 21:21; R02:28-29; 11:1-32, 11-32, 11-12, 28-29; 2C 1:20; Ga6:16; Ep2:11-16.

In reaction to Replacement theology, the Jews, first the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), later Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), and after him many Jewish and Christian thinkers seeking good relations between the two faith communities, came up with Two-Covenant theology. This says that Jews are saved by the covenants with Avraham and Moshe, while Christians are saved by the covenant with Jesus. Messianic Jews have no place in this picture, even though Yeshua's first followers were Jewish. Were this correct, Sha'ul would have to describe two separate olive trees, both cultivated, but cultivated differently, with no grafting of branches, and presumably no fallen branches. The main flaw in Two-Covenant theology is that it confuses Jewish national salvation with the personal salvation of individual Jews. The covenants with Avraham and Moshe guarantee Jewish national salvation, but only the covenant with Yeshua brings individual salvation, and it is needed today for national salvation as well (2C 1:20&N). For further discussion, see Yn 14:6N, my Messianic Jewish Manifesto, pp. 256-259, and the journal Mishkan, No. II (1989), P. O. Box 116, Jerusalem 91000, Israel (the entire issue is devoted to this topic).

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was also a Christian reaction to Cov-

Replacement, Dispensational or Olive Tree Theology?

enant theology which has come to be known as Dispensationalism. In this view, both the Jews and the Christians are peoples of God, but their promises differ. There are varieties of Dispensationalism, but in one form the Church's promises are heavenly and the Jews' earthly. Sha' ul would have to picture two different kinds of trees - an olive tree and, say, a pear. Messianic Jews leaving God's people of earthly promise and joining God's people of heavenly promise would, I suppose, be olive branches grafted into the pear tree - a horticultural and spiritual monstrosity and impossibility! This view arose from a well-meaning attempt to deal with the main problem created by Replacement theology, namely, that there are obviously promises in the Tanakh which God made to the Jewish people that were unconditional, not depending on the faithfulness of the Jewish people, promises which God intended to fulfill in the process of returning the Jewish people to faith (see Ezekiel 36 and [Jeremiah 31:30-37](#)). Replacement theology overlooks these or misconstrues them. But Dispensationalism, by separating the futures of the Jews and the Christians, falls short of saying what needs to be said.

To change the metaphor, let theology picture God as a juggler. Traditional Jewish theology sees God as throwing one ball into the air, the Jews. Christian Replacement theology sees him as having thrown the Jewish ball into the air in the past, but now he has let it fall and is juggling the Christian ball. Two-Covenant theology and Dispensationalism see God as somewhat more coordinated - he can juggle two balls at a time, both the Jews and the Christians. But only "olive tree theology" credits God with being able to juggle all three balls at once, Gentile Christians, Messianic Jews and non-Messianic Jews, without letting any of them drop to the ground.

At this point "olive tree theology" is relatively undeveloped. But it is in ferment: theologians are proposing solutions to the problem of who is God's people that include all three groups and allow for both universal personal salvation and Jewish national salvation only through Yeshua - although no one of these solutions is widely known and taught. Walter Kaiser's "promise theology" is one effort in this direction, while the Jewish believer Arnold Fruchtenbaum has done a monumental piece of research on the subject in his *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Ariel Ministries, P. O. Box 3723, Tustin, California 92681, 1989, 1104 pages). Undoing the work of centuries of misunderstanding will require substantial efforts not only in theology but in but in the reeducation of the components of God's people (however defined) to understand who they really are and how they relate to each other and to the Almighty.

25 For. The word points forward to the reason, given immediately, why Sha'ul has presented the olive-tree metaphor (vv. [17-24](#)).

Brothers. He emphasizes that he considers not only Messianic Jews but also Gentile Christians his brothers in faith, because some of them might have taken umbrage at the sharpness of his immediately preceding remarks (compare [Ac 3:17&N](#)).

Truth which God formerly concealed but has now revealed. This whole phrase translates the single Greek word "*musterion*," which does not mean "mystery" either in its modern sense of "riddle" or in its ancient Greek "mystery-religion" sense of a secret disclosed only to initiates.

Why is what Sha'ul says here a secret truth that was not understood until he explained it? Because one would have expected Israel to be the first nation to be saved. Israel has had advantages enjoyed by no other people ([3:1-2,9:4-5](#)), the Gospel itself is "to the Jew especially" ([1:16&N](#)), and God has promised Jewish national salvation ([Ezekiel 36:24-36](#), [Mt 23:37-39&N](#), [Ac 1:6-7&N](#)). Why, then, is he doing the unexpected, making

Joint Heirs

the Gentiles “joint-heirs” (Ep 3:3-9) with the Jews? In order to give the fullest possible demonstration of his love for all humanity and not Jews only (vv. 30-32 below).

So that you won’t imagine you know more than you actually do, literally, “lest you be wise in yourselves,” conceited, so that you Gentiles might separate yourselves from Jews and imagine you are better than they are. “Do not be wise in your own eyes; but fear *Adonai* and depart from evil” (Proverbs 3:7).

Stoniness, or “hardness” (Greek *porosis*). See v. 7N on “made stonelike.”

To a degree, Greek *apo merous*, “from part.” The literal sense could yield this rendering: “Stoniness has come upon Israel, stemming from part of it.” Though close to Sha’ul’s point, grammatical considerations exclude it; because in the four other places where the phrase is found in the New Testament, it has descriptive force. Therefore it should be understood here as modifying “stoniness”; so that translations which read, “Hardness has come upon part of Israel” (the part that rejects Yeshua) are wrong, even though the statement is true. Sha’ul is focusing not on parts but on wholes. “No man is an island, entire of itself” (John Donne) - all Israel, including the part that accepts Yeshua, is affected by this partial stoniness; for, as the next two clauses show, it delays Israel’s national salvation.

The stoniness is not total, because there are and always have been Jews trusting Yeshua. It is wrong to see in the term “partial stoniness” a veiled approval of non-Messianic Judaism as superior to the “total stoniness” of paganism; that is the opposite of Sha’ul’s point, which is that rejection of Yeshua by people with so many advantages (9:4-5) demonstrates utter stoniness (This is no new problem for the Jewish people - in the Tanakh God frequently called us stubborn and stiffnecked.)

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