



Understanding Israel -

the Mystery of the Gospel

by Tim Kelley

I've mentioned the term "Mystery of the Gospel" a number of times since beginning this series. Variations of this phrase are found in three New Testament passages – Roman's 16:25, Ephesians 3:6, and Ephesians 6:19. There are a number of theories about this *mystery*. Some believe it's how the church has replaced Israel, while others believe it's how non-Jews can become as Jews, thus giving them a place in the Kingdom of God.

In the final passages of his epistle to the Romans, Paul made this statement –

ESV Romans 16:25-27 Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith- ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Paul is saying that the mystery of the ages has been revealed through the words of The Messiah when they are put in the context of the prophets. When you combine Paul's gospel, which is simply that *non-Jews do not have to convert to Judaism in order to be part of the Kingdom of God*, with the words of the Messiah and the prophets, it becomes evident what Paul is trying to convey – Israel, the northern tribes are now able to return to fellowship on equal terms with their brother Judah.

In this study we will look at some of the New Testament passages concerning the lost tribes, then we'll apply what we've seen to this point to come to a conclusion about the Mystery of the Gospel.

Before getting into some of those New Testament passages, I want to bring out a few historical references that point to the fact that in the time of Paul there was clear understanding within the Jewish community that the Lost Tribes were not Jews.

The Book of 2 Kings is a chronicle of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah. It was written near the beginning of the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people. In recording the fall and captivity of the northern tribes by the Assyrians, the chronicle says –

NKJ 2 Kings 17:23 . . . the LORD removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day.

"As it is to this day". At the beginning of the Jewish captivity, it's clear the Jewish people knew that the vast majority of the northern kingdom was still in captivity. They had not returned during the days of Hezekiah or Josiah as is sometimes suggested, but were still in captivity. The prophet Daniel supports this understanding in his prayer of lamentation –

ESV Daniel 9:7 & 11 To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness, but to us open shame, as at this day, to the men of Judah, to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them, because of the treachery that they have committed against you . . . ⁷ "Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the

Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him.

Notice that Daniel delineates between Judah, who was near to him in captivity, and Israel, who had been driven far away. Daniel goes on to say that the cause of their captivity was as a result of the curse written in the Law of Moses, i.e. *The Curse of the Law*.

Roughly 100 years later, in a prayer included in a letter to the Jews in Egypt, the Jews who had just driven the Syrian army out of Judea said this –

2 Maccabees 1:27 Gather those together that are scattered from us, deliver them that serve among the heathen, look upon them that are despised and abhorred, and let the heathen know that thou art our God.

Were the Maccabees wanting to restore the Kingdom of Israel? Possibly. Who were those who were scattered? The northern tribes. It wasn't the Jews in Egypt; they had willingly gone to Egypt to escape the Babylonian captivity and later because of the fertile lands.

Even later, after the death of Messiah Yeshua, Josephus makes two references to the northern tribes as being distinct from Judah –

JOE Ant 11:133 . . . there are but two (Jewish) tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans, while the ten tribes are beyond Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers.

JOE Jwr 2:388 "Where then are those people whom you are to have for your auxiliaries? Must they come from the parts of the world that are uninhabited? for all that are in the habitable earth are [under the] Romans. Unless any of you extend his hopes as far as beyond the Euphrates, and suppose that those of your own nation that dwell in Adiabene will come to your assistance?"

In this first passage, Josephus is clearly stating that the tribes are across the Euphrates, and that they are an immense multitude. According to Steve Collins, they were probably known back then as the Partheans, a people with an army so big that even the Romans would not tangle with them. This goes on to explain the next statement where the Jews are hoping for help to fight the Romans. Josephus states that their only hope is that their own brothers, the Israelites (the Partheans - who are not under Roman rule) might be willing to help them.

These passages show that the northern tribes had not joined in with Judah, nor had they become Jews themselves. But there are many passages in the New Testament that confirm this as well.

Very early in His ministry, Yeshua was being followed by a Canaanite woman who had a demon-possessed daughter. When His disciples encouraged Him to send her away, He answered them saying –

NKJ Matthew 15:24 "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Jeremiah 50:4-6 defines both Israel and Judah as lost sheep, and since this woman was clearly not Jewish, it stands to reason that she must have been from the northern tribes, yet considered a "dog" by the Jews of His day.

Another gospel passage that supports the clear understanding that the Northern tribes had not joined with the Jews is found just after Yeshua raised Lazarus from the dead. This event brought much fame to Yeshua and caused many to follow Him, believing that He was the coming Messiah. The Jewish leadership was concerned believing that if a Jewish king arose, it would mean trouble for the nation. Thus they plotted to kill him. In order to justify their thoughts, Caiaphas, the high priest, made this statement –

ESV John 11:49-50 . . . "You know nothing at all. ⁵⁰ Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish."

Though Caiaphas may have had only the small Jewish nation in mind, the scripture goes on to say that his statement was a prophecy of the restoration of all Israel -

ESV John 11:51-52 . . . He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

So, it's quite clear that during Yeshua's ministry the Lost Tribes of Israel had not joined in with and become known as Jews. There are other passages that continue to support this understanding¹, all of which, when combined with the multitude of Old Testament passages concerning the restoration of Israel, would lead us to understand why His disciples made this statement after His resurrection -

NKJ Acts 1:6 . . . "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

After all they had seen and heard, it would seem logical that Yeshua would restore Israel at that time. It had happened so many times before - Israel would fall into idolatry, God would punish them through another nation, God would raise up a judge and restore Israel. That was the pattern they were used to, but it wasn't going to be that way this time. This time, they were going to recognize that a judge, a messiah had been in their midst, but they were going to have to do some things themselves.

Throughout history Israel had failed to truly repent. Only when things got really bad did they call out to YHVH and He would answer them, but when He did, they quickly fell back into their evil ways. They were never really the witness of God's goodness that He wanted them to convey to the nations. It would be different this time.

YHVH brought them their Messiah. They saw Him, conversed with Him, touched Him, and most importantly, saw the power that was at His disposal. But instead of restoring Israel, He sent His followers out to teach about Him. Since Israel had not been a good witness of God's greatness to this point, they would begin to be a witness by teaching about Him. James, Peter, John, and Paul, leading Jews of their day, would reach out to the Jewish nation, as well as those YHVH was calling from the Northern tribes, to witness to the fact that a true restoration had begun. Yeshua had come to begin the restoration by living an example of proper Torah observance, dying to remove the Curse of the Law, and being resurrected to prove He was The Messiah. Now these men would be a witness to the nations that these things had truly come to pass.

So what did they do? They began to teach. James, Peter, and John taught from within the land of Israel while Paul traveled out to visit the tribes. Though James and Peter were primarily responsible for reaching the Jews, they both addressed letters to the northern tribes. The opening verse of the book of James shows that his audience was all Israel -

NKJ James 1:1 James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad: Greetings.

Likewise, Peter's first epistle was addressed to the "elect exiles" -

ESV 1 Peter 1:1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cap-padocia, Asia, and Bithynia . . .

The phrase *elect exiles* can also mean *chosen sojourners* - the chosen people living in a land that is not their own. This was the fate of the Israelite people if they chose not to follow YHVH. Peter continues to describe his audience by using passages that describe Israel in the Old Testament -

¹ Matt. 10:5-7; Matt. 19:28

ESV 1 Peter 1:10 Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully . . .

Though a number of prophets, including Moses, would also qualify, the prophet Hosea spoke of the mercy YHVH would extend to Israel when He begins to gather them again. Peter goes on to show that his audience was called to become a royal priesthood, YHVH's special people as described in Exodus 19 –

ESV 1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

He then clinches it by applying a passage out of Hosea that was written for the Northern Tribes –

NKJ 1 Peter 2:10 . . . who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

So Peter and James both wrote epistles to those who were returning to YHVH from the northern tribes, but what about Paul. Wasn't he sent to the Gentiles. As we look at some of the things Paul said and wrote, we may come to the conclusion that he was dealing with both Gentiles and those from the northern tribes. For instance, while standing before King Agrippa, Paul said –

NKJ Acts 26:6-7 "And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. ⁷ "To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain . . ."

Paul shows here that He is aware of at least a remnant of the northern tribes, a remnant that is hoping to attain the promise of the restoration of the Kingdom. In the book of Romans, Paul is addressing a mixed congregation of Jews and non-Jews (gentiles). It appears the Jews in the congregation were having a problem understanding that Israel was never saved by their good deeds. In chapter 9 he seems to be addressing a jealousy problem the Jews were having with what is sometimes called *Gentile Inclusion*, but what would be more correctly called *Ephraim Inclusion*.

Since, based on Peter's and James' epistles, we know the first century apostles of Yeshua were dealing with a returning remnant of Ephraim, the northern tribes, it would be plausible that Paul would have been dealing with them also, or at least aware of what was happening. In addition, it would be plausible that the Jewish community was aware that this remnant of Ephraim was returning to the Hebraic walk. If so, the attitude of the Jews toward Ephraim would probably be similar to that of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son – "why is he being allowed back and given a place of honor after he went off and blew his inheritance. Haven't I always been here with you?" So to explain his position, Paul uses the analogy of a potter –

ESV Romans 9:20-24 ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory- ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

Paul reminds his audience that God is the potter, and thus He is able to use His creation as He sees fit. He created vessels of wrath (Ephraim and Judah) so that His glory could be shown by extending mercy to those same vessels – but in their own time. Knowing that the Jews understood that YHVH had extended mercy to them numerous times, he asks in verses 23 and 24, (paraphrased) "since God is glorified in extending mercy to us Jews, can He not be glorified in doing the same for the Gentiles?", but wait – who are the Gentiles?

The Greek word for gentiles is *ethnos* and simply means a multitude or a people. In the first century, anyone who was not a Jew was considered a Gentile, or more correctly, a heathen since they were not believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So in the verse mentioned above, the *Gentiles* could

be any large group of people . . . or could they? No, Paul defined what group of people he was calling *Gentiles* in the next few passages, using three distinct prophecies. The first is a quote from Hosea 2:23 -

ESV Romans 9:25-26 As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" ²⁶ "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

This Hosea passage, as we mentioned earlier, is a direct link to Ephraim. The other two passages show that the *Gentiles* in verse 24 are Israelites. Though it's somewhat confusing, Paul continues to use the term *Gentiles* to refer to Ephraim and *Israel* to refer to the Jews in order to make a distinction between the ATTITUDES of the people; the Jews who think they're works give them a place in the kingdom, and those of Ephraim, who acknowledge they've been saved by *grace*.

Let's now begin to understand the *Mystery of the Gospel*, but in order to do so, we need to go back and rehearse some of the things we've seen so far:

- Both the northern tribes (Ephraim) and the southern tribes (Judah) are Israelites, but . . .
- According to Hosea, upon its captivity, Ephraim would cease to be Israel in a *civil* and a *religious* sense (though not a racial sense)
- After Ephraim's captivity, Judah came to represent all Israel in a *religious* sense because they were the only people *acting like Hebrews* by worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This may shed some light on passages such as –

ESV Zechariah 8:23 . . . In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a Jew, saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'"

ESV Romans 3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.²

The term *Jew* is used because, in that day, they are the only game in town. If you were following the God of Abraham, you were, or you became, a Jew. God was only with the Jews, not the Egyptians, the Philistines, or the Greeks. Only the Jews . . . that is, until Messiah Yeshua came on the scene. When He died, the penalty of the Torah, the *Curse of the Law*, was paid. Redemption for Israel was now possible. Now Ephraim could once again be called "YHVH's people".

Continuing in Romans, Paul attempts to explain what is happening – why all of the sudden these non-Jewish Israelites (who he refers to as *gentiles*) are coming on the scene and showing up at the synagogue. Why do they understand that Yeshua is Messiah while many of our fellow Jews do not? And why are they observing OUR Torah?

Paul explains that God is working out a purpose. Judah has stumbled (been blinded) in regards to the Messiah, but not to the point of falling –

ESV Romans 11:11 So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

Judah, though she has maintained an observance of Torah, has been blinded to the Messiah, thus Ephraim (the Gentiles) has picked up the Messiah's banner and has taught Him to the nations – imperfectly for 2000 years - but now sees Him as Messiah and the Lawgiver. Once Judah begins to understand that Yeshua is Messiah, they will be jealous of Ephraim and want the complete Messiah/Torah package themselves.

² See Deut. 4:5-8 God gave the responsibility of the Torah to all Israel, not just the Jews.

Paul then says –

NKJ Romans 11:25 For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

This is all done in God's timing, but is contingent on Ephraim – the fullness of the Gentiles³ - doing his part.

I believe the Mystery of the Gospel is the story of Israel, but more precisely, it is that YHVH can take a rebellious group of people, sift them through the nations, give them a hint of His plan (Messiah Yeshua), mix it with all the pagan religions, then let them spread what they know throughout the world. Then, when the time is right, He can take this same group of people, open their eyes to the truth, and they will just as eagerly spread the truth as they did the error, thus fulfilling the prophecies about them. Then the grand finale is when YHVH gathers these repentant Israelites and Judah joins them, making one nation out of two, but this time, a nation with a solid and unchanging King. As a result, YHVH will save the honor and integrity of His holy name. This is the Mystery of the Gospel.

Everything we've discussed these past few weeks concerning Israel was to bring us to this point. God has a plan for Israel. It all had to happen this way, because as Paul clearly states in the very next verse -

ESV Romans 11:26 And in this way all Israel will be saved . . .

Shalom Aleichem

³ Genesis 48:19