

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Unconditional Election: Elect Israel

Understanding Unconditional Election (Part 1)

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At the time of Jesus' birth, Israel was a hotbed of spiritual and civil unrest. The Jews had been a conquered people for over five centuries and Jerusalem, their capital city, a sewer of political squalor. Considered by many Gentiles to be the backwater of the Mediterranean world, Israel's glory days were behind her. Were it not for the Torahic writings, particularly the historical narratives of Kings and Chronicles, the conception that Israel was once a national powerhouse was laughable. Jewish life in the first century bore no resemblance to the stories of grandeur passed down in the oral traditions of the scribes. What once was a model theocracy under King David and King Solomon was now—by way of Roman occupation—the punch line of jokes.

Foreign occupation in Israel was a mainstay, despite a routine changing of the guard. Whoever ruled Mesopotamia, by default, ruled Israel. First came the Assyrians (2 Kings 15:29; 18:11-12; 1 Chron. 5:26), then the Babylonians (2 Kings 24:12-16; Jer. 39-43; Dan. 1-6), followed by the Persians and Greeks (2 Chron. 36:22-23, Ezra 1:1-4), and eventually the Roman Empire (Luke 2:1 cf. Matt. 22:15-21). Control over Israel's territory passed from one Gentile army to the next. That the Jews were treated like commodities and their land up for grabs to the highest bidder only infuriated Jewish hardliners. Hence, with every Gentile flag that unfurled in Israel the seeds of sedition were firmly planted alongside it.

After General Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BC, the Roman Empire's ruthless occupation policy fueled, rather than squelched, Jewish nationalism. Rome's Hellenistic customs and pagan garrisons—adorned with idolatrous emblems no less—drew the ire of patriotic Jews, not the least of which was the zealot party. These anti-Roman freedom-fighters plotted retribution against their foreign taskmasters, and fanned the flames of insurrection among their countrymen. As the Caesars grew more maniacal and tyrannical with each passing administration, so the Jewish zealots grew more ferocious in their terrorist plots.

Tension between Jew and Roman reached a boiling point in 66 AD—a full century after Pompey's conquest and only a few decades after the ascension of Christ. Rome's excessive taxation and extortion, to include her rabid polytheism, promiscuity, priestly appointments, and Emperor Caligula's earlier attempt to defile the Temple with a self-aggrandizing statue, was provocation for revolt. Spearheaded by the zealots, the Jews took up the sword against their Roman invaders. Sadly, it was a bid toward independence that, while not without initial promise, ultimately became the nation's undoing. Rome answered the uprising with an impressive, excessive, and overwhelming show of force.

To quell the various pockets of Jewish resistance, Roman battalions were dispatched to Jerusalem under the command of General Vespasian (9-79 AD), and later his son, General Titus (39-81 AD). Overpowered and outmanned, approximately 1.1 million Jews sought refuge behind the city walls while others fled to the foothills. As the Roman legions blockaded Jerusalem, thereby preventing escape and the admittance of food, they choked the life out of the Jewish stronghold.

Many Jews trapped inside the city died of starvation and pestilence. Others managed to survive on cannibalism. Those caught trying to escape in desperation were whipped and tortured, and eventually crucified. During the three-year siege, crosses sprang up as far as the naked eye could see, filling the Judean landscape with a forest of impaled bodies. The Jewish death tally was so astronomical, according to ancient eyewitnesses, that the region was laid waste of all its vital trees and metals (key resources for crossbeams and nails used in the mass crucifixions).

In 70 AD the Romans finally penetrated Jerusalem's outer wall. In due time the city and most of its population was brought to ruin by sword, spear, and fire. The assault culminated in the demolition of the Temple—the exclamation point on Israel's collapse. Doubtless the haunting prophecy of the Savior just a few decades earlier rang in the ears of many survivors: “As for what you see here,” Jesus had warned, “the time will come when not one stone [of the Temple] will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down” (Luke 21:6).

And so it was.

In victory, the Romans slaughtered upwards of one million Jews indiscriminately. What few survivors remained—some 97,000, according to Josephus—were sentenced to a life of forced labor in Egyptian mines or sent to Roman arenas where they eventually fell to the lions and gladiators. The Temple's sacred relics were impounded to Rome and put on public display in celebration of the conquest.

With the Temple reduced to rubble and the Jews dispossessed, Israel ceased to be a nation. The *Diaspora*, as historians call it, saw fugitive Jews disperse to alien lands throughout Europe, bringing a sudden end to a Semitic presence in the land of Canaan. Geo-political Israel was erased from the world map. It would be nearly two millennia before the Star of David would once again shine brightly in the Middle East.

How Israel became an independent state in the twentieth century, after 1,878 years of persecution and exile, is nothing short of miraculous. Against the backdrop of World War II, and while in the despotic grip of a German madman—Adolf Hitler—the Jews experienced their darkest hour yet. However in the midst of their despair God remembered His covenant promises to Abraham.

Few biblical prophecies are as stupefying as that which came about in the wake of World War II. Hitler's firebrand hatred for European Jewry is well documented, ultimately realized in the Holocaust—the state-sponsored extermination of approximately six million Jews. All persons suspected to be of Semitic heritage were rounded up by Nazi stormtroopers in German-occupied countries throughout Europe, dislocated from their families and homes, imprisoned, tortured, and put to death in Nazi concentration camps in the most grisly ways. For six years, 1939-1945, Nazi persecution of the Jews was unremitting. Finally, with the Allied victory over Germany, Italy, and Japan in 1945, World War II came to an end, and with it Hitler's anti-Semitic rampage.

When the American soldiers discovered the Jewish mass graves left by the Nazis—as well as the Jewish survivors left to die in the concentration camps—they were unprepared for what they saw and shocked by what they found. The Jews were a ravished people. Because their communities had been decimated by Hitler’s regime, surviving Jews had no homes to return to, little or no family remaining, and were suffering in dire poverty. At best, the future of the Jewish people looked bleak.

When the Nuremberg Trials brought Hitler’s war crimes to life before a watching world, sympathy for the Jews grew markedly. From 1945-1948, there was a groundswell of public support for the State of Israel by Jews worldwide, and in the United States in particular. But Palestinian Arabs, who inhabited much of Jerusalem while under British rule, refused to heed the universal call for a Jewish nation. They would not be displaced without a fight. Aware of the volatile situation, Great Britain keenly relinquished its rule over Palestine and handed over the thorny problem to the United Nations to negotiate.

No sooner had England evacuated Palestine did various Jews who had already immigrated to the area declare statehood. The Jewish People’s Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum on May 14, 1948, and issued its formal declaration. It read in part: “This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State ... it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.”

With the support of the United Nations, America was the first country to officially recognize the new Israel—eleven minutes, in fact, after the declaration of independence was announced. U.S. President Harry Truman signed a letter of recognition, despite the objections of the State Department. The USSR followed Truman’s lead three days later.

The rebirth of Israel as an independent nation in 1948 is one of the most significant events in world history. Never before has an entire race of people, especially one as persecuted as the Jews, ever been without a homeland for so long without assimilating into surrounding populations. That being said, no other conquered race could claim for themselves the ironclad promises of God, who had pledged to the patriarch Abraham: “The whole land of Canaan ... I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:8). Centuries later, through the prophet Jeremiah, God also promised the descendants of Abraham:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess,” says the Lord ... “I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them in my furious anger and great wrath; I will bring them back to this place and let them live in safety” (Jer. 30:3; 32:37).

Some 2,800 years before the events of World War II, and three centuries before the abovementioned prophecy issued by Jeremiah, God hinted through Isaiah that Israel would be nationally restored. But even more breathtaking, God promised to accomplish this feat in *a single day*. Isaiah records God’s words as follows:

“Who has ever heard of such things? Who has ever seen things like this?
Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?

Yet no sooner is Zion in labor than she gives birth to her children. Do I bring to the moment of birth and not give delivery?" says the Lord. "Do I close up the womb when I bring to delivery?" says your God (Isa. 66:8-9).

On May 14, 1948 God set in motion the fulfillment of His prophetic promise to Israel. Having been brought to the brink of extinction by the horrors of the Holocaust, facing persecution around the world, and surrounded by their Arab enemies, the Jewish people gathered together in Israel and declared themselves a nation in *a single day*. Two thousand years in the making, God had brought the Jews to full delivery and gave birth to them a second time.

God sovereignly reversed the horrors perpetrated in World War II for His own glorious ends. For this reason (as well as many others) most Bible-believing Christians today are prone to love and support the State of Israel and Jews the world over. We are enamored by the remarkable story behind Israel's rise and fall in ancient history, and her tumultuous resurgence in modern times. The chronicles of Israel tell the story of a God who is faithful to His promises and who deliberately interferes in the affairs of human history to affect His sovereign purposes. The extraordinary renaissance of the Hebrew nation in 1948 reminds Christians of the veracity of Scripture and the irrevocability of the Lord's covenant commitments.

The election of Israel as God's chosen people, and her eventual restoration, has its origin with the patriarch Abraham. God promised that He would make Abraham's name great (Gen. 12:2); that his physical descendants would rival the stars in number and become a colony of nations on earth (Gen. 13:16; 17:4-5). Even more remarkable, from Abraham's vast posterity God promised to set apart a special race for Himself—the Hebrews/Jews—through whom a channel of blessing would come into the world (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). Included in this promise was the inheritance of a strategically-located land that flowed with milk and honey (Exod. 3:8); the boundaries of which are described in Genesis 15:18–21.

The contract God made with Abraham—known as the Abrahamic Covenant—was an unconditional contract. God's promise required nothing from the patriarch in return. In fact, its unconditional nature is described in Genesis 15 where Abraham, while subdued in a deep trance, envisioned God moving between the halves of slaughtered animals in the form of a smoking furnace and a flaming torch. This theophany was a sign of ratification that told Abraham that the stipulations attached to the divine contract fell upon, and were bound to, God alone. In effect, God was saying to Abraham through the furnace and torch: "*May it be to Me as one of these slaughtered animals if I do not fulfill My promise to you and make you into a great nation with an everlasting land for your possession*" (e.g. Jer. 34:18, 20b).

God's promise to Abraham was the sole basis for Israel becoming God's chosen people. The nation's divine election is emphasized elsewhere by Moses, who told the Hebrews: "Yet the Lord set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today." (Deut. 10:15). Moreover, God vowed to Israel on Mount Sinai: "Out of all the nations you will be my own special possession" (Exod. 19:5). As a God of covenant blessing, He betrothed Himself to Israel as her Groom (Jer. 3:14; Hos. 2:2, 16, 19-20; Isa. 54:4-8).

The exclusive choice of Israel as God's chosen people, at its most basic meaning, speaks to unmerited grace. God did not choose the Hebrews because they were more commendable than their surrounding neighbors or because they possessed inherent goodness that earned them His favored-nation status. To the contrary, the Bible unmistakably declares that, in God's eyes, Israel was "a stiff-necked people" and the "fewest of all peoples" in whom righteousness was found wanting (Deut. 7:6-8; 9:5-7). In other words, they were far from impressive and arguably the least worthy. Yet God unconditionally chose them, in covenant relationship with Abraham, to be His elect people in accord with His good pleasure. Dr. Claude Mariottini, Professor of Old Testament at Northern Baptist Seminary, writes:

God chose a people who were slaves in Egypt, redeemed them and established a special relationship with them. The point that [Moses] was trying to convey to the new generation of Israelites was that it was because of God's faithful love and because of the promise he had made to Abraham that he, in his sovereignty, elected Israel to be his special people and his special possession [not because of any inherent righteousness of their own].¹

It is beyond doubt in Scripture that God gave preferential treatment to Israel. And He did so, we learn, at the expense of all other nations on earth (Exod. 19:5; Deut. 20:16-17; Mal. 1:2-3 cf. Rom. 9:12-14). Yet strangely enough, this divine *particularism*—that is, God's exclusive choice of, and unique affection for, the Hebrew people—is largely innocuous to most Christians today. Though we stand united against favoritism and racism, it's a curious thing that so few Christians—Arminians especially—object to the idea that God set apart for Himself an elect nation in whom were "entrusted ... the very words of God" (Rom. 3:2) while ordering the annihilation of others countries (Deut. 2:34; 3:6; 20:16-18, Josh. 11:20; Judges 2:1-3 cf. 1 Sam. 15:2-3). But why favor the Israelites? Why didn't God choose the Egyptians, Ammonites, Hittites, or the Moabites instead?

That Christians see God's fingerprints all over Israel's decimation in 70 AD and, more importantly, her extraordinary resurgence in 1948 is attested to widely throughout the Church. We also admit to the unique calling of Abraham as a man beloved of God and from whom the chosen people were born. Furthermore, we are quick to concede that Israel, when she least deserved it, was handpicked by God—elected and set apart—as His chosen people to be a channel of blessing to the world. In short, we agree, essentially, on God's unconditional election of Israel through Abraham.

However, when the subject at hand changes from God's election of *Israel* to God's election of *individuals*, the love-fest between Calvinists and Arminians grows cold. Unconditional Election suddenly becomes a bone of contention, even hostile divorce, rather than a shared fundamental truth. It seems that no other doctrine within the canon of Calvinism, with the possible exception of Limited Atonement, is more despised by Arminians than that which teaches God's unconditional election of *people*. "It's one thing to say God loves one particular nation at the expense of others," Arminians will protest, "but it's altogether another thing to suggest that He chose one person for salvation while arbitrarily passing over someone else."

Here Arminianism entangles itself with contradiction. It is a peculiar thing, if not theologically inconsistent, that many Christians have no problem with Israel's unconditional election in the Old Testament. Yet they wholeheartedly object to the election of *persons* unconditionally as taught in the New Testament. That God should show the same sovereign discretion in choosing a people for salvation as He did in choosing a nation for blessing is *anathema* to them. It is the height of unfairness, they contend. One Reformed writer captures the Arminian inconsistency this way:

Nobody seems to have a problem that God called out Israel and set them apart and set his love upon them and distinguished them ... God didn't come in a bush to Pharaoh and say, "Hey Pharaoh, I'm going to be your God. I'm going to take care of you and all your people and I'm going to give you my law and I'm going to place you in a land and I'm going to give you grace galore and through you the nations will be blessed." But now in the New Testament, [according to the Arminian] supposedly God cannot set his affection upon this person as distinct from that person [as He did with Israel in distinction from the other nations].²

According to the Old Testament, God chose Israel out of all the nations of the world to be His special people on earth. In the same way, according to the New Testament, He has chosen specific saints from an international community to comprise His royal priesthood in heaven. But if the Reformed doctrine of Unconditional Election is true—that God elects unconditionally certain people for salvation in the same manner that He unconditionally elected Israel for blessing—we must be prepared to answer certain questions: On what basis does God elect people for salvation, if not on His own sovereign will? And, if God elected the Jews to be His people of blessing why then do Calvinists presuppose that individual election goes beyond blessing to include salvation? To these questions, and more, Calvinists must be prepared to give thoughtful answers.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹As cited at doctor.claudemariottini.com/2010/02/election-of-israel.html

²Eric Holmberg; *Amazing Grace: The History & Theology of Calvinism*; Study Guide and Workbook; (The Apologetics Group; 2009); p. 49