

The Olive Tree Analogy

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The Olive Tree analogy played a vital role in Paul's attempt to resolve problems in the Roman Church. This article seeks to show the weakness of the popularly held idea that the Gentiles were being grafted into Israel. A thorough argument is made here for the purpose of clarifying the context of Olive Tree passage and the content. Such analysis provides some critical considerations on an issue that doesn't receive as much attention in a straightforward commentary on Romans. So now I'm providing a little more details for people who were not yet convinced from the commentary and for those people not yet wanting to explore the commentary on the whole book of Romans.

Why isn't the Olive Tree argument about Israel?

Paul did not indicate specifically that he was speaking of a parable to be unraveled. Nor did the context suggest that Paul intended to show mysteries.

The Olive Tree argument in Romans 11 was not written as a general discourse on the relationship between Israel and the Roman believers. Paul's purpose was about the problem of Roman believers boasting against Jews and speaking how unnatural such boasting appears.

Worse yet, the whole flow of Romans 9 to 11 focused on dispelling the tension between Gentiles and Jews. It wasn't until the ninth chapter that Paul felt that the audience was ready to hear the word "Israel."

With the racial tension, the Gentile believers in Rome didn't want to hear about Jews, yet the term "Jews" was a bit more acceptable to hear than the word "Israel." I don't know whether the word "Jew" (the Greek version) was more pejorative than "Israel." But finally in Romans 9 Paul decided to speak specifically of Israel. (Another part of the reason of mention of Israel likely was due to the tendency of prophecies to speak about Israel rather than about Jews.)

Much of the material just presented helps to show that the Roman audience would not be pleased with Paul saying that they all were Israelites.

Furthermore if Paul actually sought to reduce tension, he would not logically sneak in an argument that the Gentile believers were now part of Israel. This would have been self-defeating on Paul's part if his secret analogy had been discovered.

Its true there was an effort to mix Jew and Gentile in the analogy. And this mixing of Jew and Gentile in the Church would normally be natural. The Church

in Rome started with Jews upon which Gentiles were added to the Jewish gatherings. Its just that the further step of saying Gentiles are part of Israel – such a step would have exceeded level of the Gentiles' tolerance.

What does the Olive Tree analogy represent?

First note that the Olive Tree doesn't represent the Church because the branches could not be broken off the Church. In this sense then a mistake would be made to say that the Church is Israel or that Israel is the Church.

Such a description of the Church would mean that Christians could barely hold onto salvation and then could loose salvation in moments where they don't feel like they have sufficient faith anymore. (Even such deep exploration of scriptural passages would nearly be forbidden due to the temporary doubts that would arise in the student of the Bible at times where he was finding his previously held beliefs to be wrong.)

If the Olive Tree represented Israel, as being those who were saved and initially those who were of the bloodline in general, a problem occurs in the analogy in saying that Jews were previously part of the Olive Tree, previous to their point of coming to faith in Jesus. (But such idea only applies of the first century, not to times before Christ.) They never were of the Olive Tree if Paul's analogy applied to being of faith as a requirement to being part of Israel. (Note that "Israel" at this point of the argument referred again to the whole bloodline application of the word "Israel".) Therefore, if the Jews were, roughly speaking, part of the tree beforehand, then this could not be due to their having been of faith. (Note that the Olive Tree analogy really has to be seen as a rough analogy – especially in light of the fact that most didn't have faith – such general lack of followers of Jesus was largely what led to the problems Paul addressed in Rom 9 to 11.)

The Olive Tree best can be seen to be describing the rough concept of "people of God." But of course this is what popular theology has held anyhow yet with the added step of calling this "people of God" as being Israel.

Yet once that step of naming such group as "Israel" occurs, the theologian makes a fatal error. [The old Jerusalem was destroyed – this was the physical Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem then was created, or gained preeminence. But with Jerusalem no promise was made. Israel had promises that had to be fulfilled to show God's faithfulness – and by the very meaning of the word *promise*.] This would be an error both for obfuscating the proper fulfilling of prophecies that Jesus addressed and Paul explained (Rom 9 to 11 showing God's faithfulness to Israel).

The other problem of calling this "Olive Tree" people as being "Israel" lies in the fact that Paul didn't say this was so. Connection of the Olive Tree with Israel

then forms only as a matter of speculation. Such speculation, as has been shown thus far, even appears to be made against the logic and context of Romans 11.

Therefore the Olive Tree can be identified loosely as the “people of God” with the initial group consisting of Jews, as being the bloodline Israel.

Explanation of the Early Olive Tree

The Olive Tree analogy, in applying to the first thirty years of the first century, before the death and resurrection of Jesus, then included all Jews, all of Israel, but not cause they all were saved. Maybe the only basis of such inclusion was that their membership in this Olive Tree wasn't challenged.

Now, after the Day of Pentecost, the people of God, having only consisted of Israel, were challenged by the preaching about Christ Jesus. Some people accepted the message and remained part of the tree. Most of the Israel bloodline rejected the message and were hence broken off. They stumbled. (Rom 9:32-33)

[WEAK: In actual analysis, if the Olive Tree were the true Israel, Paul would have had to say that only the stump existed and branches were now being grafted in.
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Now some Jews who initially rejected Jesus could eventually have accepted Him and hence be grafted back in. But such explanation only hints to a little bit of logic in the analogy, not to the actual design of the analogy – cause the analogy wasn't about salvation but was about stopping the Gentile boasting.

Paul's intent wasn't really to use the Olive Tree analogy to create a general model of how salvation works. The intent was to remove the Gentile boasting by showing that the most natural situation would be that Jews were followers of Christ – so the message was “don't boast and prohibit that which is most natural.” (Note that this natural expectation for Jewish salvation, as the logical recipients, was the point of Romans 9:1-5. Paul maintained continuity of ideas from Romans 9 to 11.)

Problems with Theology made from Olive Tree

We often get bad fruit when trying to get doctrines from the Olive Tree analogy.

One of the bad fruits would be a doctrine of tentative salvation by faith that people can waiver in faith and lose salvation. But any doctrine about the nature of faith, as obtained from the Olive Tree analogy would be going beyond the purpose and reach of Paul's analogy. The analogy wasn't to describe how people get saved nor about the working of their faith in the process of salvation.

Some additional bad fruit would be:

- a) that all the bloodline Israel was saved before Christ
- b) that they then could lose salvation
- c) that Gentiles could lose salvation
- d) that after losing salvation, people would be able to regain salvation

We identify the tree as being Israel and then improperly handle prophecies about Israel found in scripture. It would seem that we defer prophetic fulfillment of items that had to be fulfilled in the first century which then would go against Paul's description of imminent fulfillment in Romans 9 to 11.

The question can be asked "how is a Gentile broken off the tree?" This should leave any theologian dumbfounded. Beyond maybe some eschatological situations where apparently saved people were found not to have been of faith (for many who were among us now have left because they never really were of us -- 1John 2:18-19) but there is no reasonable explanation of how true believers can stop being true believers.

It is true that Paul says that Jews then could have been grafted in if they didn't continue in unbelief. When expressing this, there was no similar statement regarding the idea that Gentiles believers could become faithless again. The closest to this idea is the question whether the Gentiles continued in God's goodness (Rom 11:22 WEB translation) – which most likely had an eschatological meaning rather than application to general theology concepts. If the metaphor actually was trying to teach something about faith, the passage would have referred to the Gentiles' situation regarding faith.

Notice also that the Jews were described here as continuing in unbelief. That is to say that the people Paul talked about had never been saved, it was the unbelief that existed before Christ and throughout His ministry.

Another problem, when extending the Olive Tree analogy to modern times, would be that of differentiating between Jew and Gentile. For, at this point in time, there would be many people among the nations who have heard the gospel and not responded. Hence, the nations, at least those nations where the gospel is well known, would be "continuing in unbelief" just as the Jews were in Paul's time. But then also the tree analogy could not be logically extended to say that the Gentiles are part of the Olive Tree before being saved. Therefore, the Olive Tree analogy only has logic when applied to the first century. Though this last problem may apply only to our ability to apply the Olive Tree analogy today, rather than on the original implications of the analogy. (We can't uproot the analogy and move it into modern times as a description, or differentiation, of Jew and Gentile today.)

Contextual Issues

When considering the contextual issues, as described herein, further insight into the specific perspective of the letter to the Romans are documented at www.BibleReexamined.com under the Romans Topics section.

Primarily, a problem was found in the attempt to treat the Olive Tree analogy as a general analogy about faith or salvation. Such problem actually arises from the general context of Romans 9 to 11, that Paul had spoken of Israel, in its greatest extent, as being the bloodline. This letter only spoke of Israel in light of the promises made to Israel with emphasis on God's faithfulness to Israel (both to the man and to his descendants). Such faithfulness could not be fulfilled by suddenly appending a new group of people to his progeny. The promise never was made to Gentiles nor could the promise be extended to Gentiles, at least not as a proper part of the original promise (though maybe the benefits could be extended to Gentiles and this be done without harming the intent and fulfillment of the original promise – but such extension doesn't diminish the requirement to fulfill the original promise).

So the context of Romans 9 to 11 included the effort to show fulfillment of the promise to Jacob and his bloodline descendants. Such question of God's faithfulness arose in Romans 9:6 "But it is not as though the word of God has come to nothing" with an additional issue of the low number of Jews being saved at that time.

The context doesn't necessarily mean that the Olive Tree could only address the problem of boasting but merely that the analogy first and foremost was for the purpose of stopping the boasting. Other doctrines then would be at best subservient to Paul's original purpose.

Natural Explanation of the Olive Tree

Paul provided the analogy to dissuade boasting among the Gentile believers in Rome.

Where the analogy spoke of Jews logically being the branches to be grafted back in, this was to tell the Gentiles to stop rejecting the Jews, the natural branches, from being grafted. Such viewpoint of the analogy shows that the issue addressed wasn't whether the Jews could have faith, but rather the issue was whether the Gentiles were decreasing the likelihood of Jews coming to faith.

Also, Paul spoke of the Gentiles as being wild branches (Rom 11:17) being grafted in did not have as logical reason to join the tree as did the Jews.

Now looking again at the idea of the wild branches in Rom 11:17, the Gentiles were indeed described as olive branches. The analogy doesn't treat Israel as the only Olive Tree, as so often has been assumed. It seems that many people who

have commented on the Olive Tree as being Israel have done so on the basis that scripture described Israel elsewhere as being the sole Olive Tree of God. But in contrast to such idea, Paul made his analogy on the idea that the Gentiles were branches from another Olive Tree, but this other tree being a wild uncultivated tree. Note though that the existence of the wild tree only helps us to move away from holding to the idea of a single sacrosanct Olive Tree existing within the analogy.

Another point is that the wild branches, even after being grafted in, were still wild branches. There was no conversion to make these wild branches as a natural part of the tree. But when Gentiles became believers, they truly became members of Christ's body (at least in some sense as implied by the concept of becoming members of Christ's body). So, the distinction of wild and cultivated branches does not fit as a description of the body of Christ especially where some members could be considered natural while some as wild. Elsewhere the scriptures show that the Gentile and Jew were joined into one new man.

The Olive Tree metaphor stands in stark contrast to the analogy of Jesus as the vine with believers as the branches. He spoke of the vine without any mention of wild branches. The primary idea of the vine is that we, as believers, had to abide in the vine.

Part of the contrast also appears in the mention by John the Baptist that the axe was already being positioned at the base or root of the tree. There also were some other prophecies about branches being burned—probably from Isaiah. The idea here was that the analogies weren't about the Israel of promise but instead were about those among the Jews who weren't accepting Christ at that time.

Conclusions

The study of the Olive Tree metaphor showed some major reasons why the metaphor didn't bring Roman Gentile believers as part of Israel.

1. Contrary to the definition of Israel as a bloodline
2. Contrary to the general context of Romans 9 to 11
3. Contrary to the specific verses speaking of the Olive Tree metaphor.

No grounds were left for holding on to the idea that Paul was using the metaphor to say that Gentiles were grafted into Israel. This study only considered the passages in Romans 9 to 11 and does not particularly state a conclusion about the nature of Gentile believers from other books of the Bible.