

## THE LOST GOSPEL OF JERUSALEM<sup>1</sup>

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A Google search of the phrase, “lost gospel,” will result in over 53,000,000 hits. The problem with most claims to have discovered a lost gospel is that they have been found *outside* of the Bible. Nothing claiming to be a “gospel” can have any authority or credibility if found outside of God’s Word. But the question I want to raise is this: Is there a sense in which a vital aspect of the gospel has been lost or overlooked *within* the Scriptures? I believe it has. The lost gospel of Jerusalem is the lost gospel of the apostles, the gospel originally proclaimed here in Jerusalem, the original understanding of the gospel, some of which has indeed been lost.

My thesis today is a simple one; it is that Scripture teaches that the Jewish people should not only be a continuing priority in evangelism and missions, but that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel itself. It is not simply that this priority characterized the ministry of Paul, as recorded in the book of Acts; neither is it merely that this priority is still valid today; it is that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel itself. Ultimately, this is the case, because it is rooted in the promise of the fathers, as first recorded in Genesis 12:3b: “In you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” What I want to do is to demonstrate exactly how the Scriptures conceptualize this priority as “the gospel.” I will try to do this by examining several Scripture passages.

### **Jewish Priority According to Paul in Romans 1:16**

No passage is more commonly used to support the priority of the Jewish people in evangelism and missions than Romans 1:16. It is something of a central verse for those of us in Jewish ministry. Even though Romans 1:16–17 is generally identified as expressing the central theme of the epistle to the Romans, the priority of Israel that is expressed here has not received the attention it is due. So, bear with me as I begin by covering some familiar ground.

Here, Paul says: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” You all know that the word translated “first” in this verse means, “in the first place, above all, especially.” The Greek lexicon supports this understanding, but additional evidence may be found both in the context and in the grammatical structure of the verse. First of all, let me give attention to the contextual evidence for understanding the verse to express a continuing priority of degree for the Jewish people in missions and evangelism—i.e., “to the Jew especially.”

### THE CONTEXT

The place of Israel in God’s economy is never far from Paul’s thought in Romans. In Romans 1:2–3, Paul says that the gospel was “promised beforehand through [God’s] prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the

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flesh.” Michael G. Vanlaningham comments, “Rm 1:2–3 appears to show the special relevance of the gospel to the Jewish people because it has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.” Paul, in explaining his eagerness to preach the gospel in Rome, gives a theological rationale that includes his understanding of the gospel and the priority of the Jewish people in verse 16.

Paul returns to this priority in Romans 2:9–10, using virtually the same phrase two additional times. In Romans 4, Paul explains how righteousness can be imputed by faith to both Jews and Gentiles. In the climactic conclusion of the doctrinal section of the epistle in Romans 9–11, Paul deals with this very issue of the Jewish people and their place in the plan and purposes of God. In chapter 15, Paul, in his appeal for unity in the church, recapitulates by saying, “For I say that Messiah has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy” (Rom 15:8–9a). Finally, he also adds that gentile believers should feel a sense of indebtedness to their Jewish brothers and sisters in Romans 15:27.

The role of Israel in God’s redemptive plan for both Jews and Gentiles is found in **the introduction**, in **the statement of the theme** of the epistle, in **a discussion of the final judgment**, in **the explanation of “the promise to Abraham or to his descendants”** (4:13), in **the climactic portion of the doctrinal section**, as well as in **the practical instructions** to the church. How could Israel **not** be of prime significance in Romans?

Scholars from a variety of theological and interpretive traditions have recognized the centrality of the issue of God’s dealings with Israel. Richard Hays claims that “Paul’s argument is primarily an argument about theodicy . . . . The driving question in Romans is . . . ‘How can we trust this allegedly gracious God if he abandons his promises to Israel?’” Approaching Romans from a slightly different perspective, J. R. Daniel Kirk claims to have sustained the same point. He says, “Romans functions as a defense of the faithfulness of the God of Israel to the promises contained in Scripture.”

Nils Alstrup Dahl claims that Romans 1:16 is “the encompassing theme for the whole main body of the letter,” and that Romans 9–11 is an exposition of “to the Jew first” in Romans 1:16. Along this line, Thomas R. Schreiner concludes: “The priority of the Jews was not merely a historical reality that had now lapsed for Paul. The place of the Jews in the outworking of salvation history was still crucial, and Paul attempts to work out this issue in chapters 9–11.”

In light of these contextual observations concerning the role of Israel in God’s purposes, a number of scholars are in agreement that the use of *πρῶτον* in Romans 1:16 should be understood as expressing priority of degree, rather than merely historical sequence. If so, we could understand Romans, to some extent, to be a sustained commentary on what Paul declared to the leaders of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch: “It was *necessary* that the word of God should be spoken to you *first* [*πρῶτον*].” If *πρῶτον* is to be understood as a continuing priority, it also very well may be, chronologically, the first thing that is done. But the focus here is on “first,” in reference to degree—“to the Jew *especially*.” Though the gospel is for all, it is especially (*πρῶτον*) for the Jewish people. Mark A. Seifrid adds, “This qualification of the gospel as ‘for the Jew first,’ by which Paul introduces his gospel, is integral to it and is *not* overturned or reversed by the surprising work of God among the Gentiles.”

## THE GRAMMAR

Evidence for the continuing priority of the Jewish people in evangelism and missions may also be found in the grammatical structure of the verse. Following Paul's denial that he was ashamed of the gospel, he states the nature of the gospel as the reason for his boldness. He says, "for it [i.e., the gospel] is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

I want to call your attention to the present tense here and to the structure of the verse. Since Paul declares that the gospel "*is* the power of God for salvation to all who believe," Greek scholars can disagree about the precise use of the present tense, but the differences between their positions are relatively insignificant, for he is stating timeless, universal truth.<sup>2</sup>

As the verb that governs the remainder of the verse, "is" must have the same sense for all of the dependent phrases that follow. There is also a certain grammatical parallelism: The gospel is the power of God for salvation "*to* everyone who believes, *to* the Jew first." On the basis of the use of the present tense in this verse and this grammatical parallelism, Paul must also be stating timeless, universal truth when he says that this gospel is "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile." If Paul were speaking only of a historical priority in the final phrase, then he would also be speaking only of a historical priority in the former phrase. In other words, if the gospel *was* to the Jew first (but not any longer), then it *was* the power of God unto salvation to all who believed (but not any longer). Clearly, this is not the case! One way to emphasize the significance of both "is" and "first" would be to paraphrase Romans 1:16 as saying, "*As long as* the gospel is the power of God for salvation, *it is especially so* to the Jewish people, and also to the Gentiles."

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM

This creates some tension, however. How can the gospel be "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes," and at the same time be for the Jew especially? The answer is found in Genesis 12:3: ". . . in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." With this, John R. W. Stott says, "God made a promise to Abraham. And an understanding of that promise is indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission." Among many others, William J. Dumbrell agrees and says, "By way of Abraham and Israel, God enters into the world of the nations." In other words, the promises made to Abraham and to his descendants were for the ultimate purpose of reaching the nations.

The promises of Genesis 12:3, particularly the key phrase, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed," are repeated two additional times to Abraham, in Gen 18:18 and 22:18, then to Isaac (Gen 26:4), and to Jacob (Gen 28:14). Though slightly different words may

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<sup>2</sup>Verbal aspect in New Testament Greek has been a topic of significant debate in recent scholarship. Some claim that aspect is foreign to equative or stative verbs. Others claim that gnomic aspect only applies when the subject is divine. Some claim that *ejstin* carries a customary force in Rom 1:16, while others contend that it to be gnomic. However, the larger point is not dependent upon a resolution of this issue.

be used, this crucially important phrase may be divided into three concepts. In reverse order, they are:

- (1) “will / shall be blessed,”<sup>3</sup>
- (2) “all the families / nations of the earth,” and
- (3) “in you / your seed”

The blessing spoken of here was not merely a material blessing, but harkens back to the promised solution for the problem of mankind’s sin. H. C. Leupold says, “A blessing so great that its effect shall extend to ‘all the families of the earth’ can be thought of only in connection with the promised Savior.”

This promise reverberates throughout both the Old and New Testaments. Psalm 67, which was written for use in the Temple, here in Jerusalem, for example, says, “God be gracious to us [Israel] and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us—Selah. That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation *among all nations*. . . . God blesses us, that *all the ends of the earth* may fear Him.” Israel is blessed, so that the nations may be blessed.

Since this is based on Genesis 12:3, the blessing prayed for here, is the blessing of salvation. The psalmist prays for Israel’s salvation so that God’s salvation may be known “among all nations.” If the desire is to see the nations come to the knowledge of salvation, attention must be given to prayer for, and witness to, the Jewish people. The last words of David, recorded here in Jerusalem by Solomon in Psalm 72 reflect this same idea. The blessings of the Son of David are to be extended to “all nations” (v. 17), so that “the whole earth [may] be filled with His glory” (v. 19).

Through Isaiah, God says of Israel,<sup>4</sup> “It is too small a thing that you should be My servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make you a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). This was also first uttered here in Jerusalem, and here, again, Israel is the channel through which salvation is taken to the nations of the world, in keeping with Genesis 12:3. Again, notice carefully what Isaiah writes in chapter 62:

“***For Zion’s sake*** I will not keep silent, and ***for Jerusalem’s sake*** I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning. ***The nations*** will see your righteousness, and ***all kings*** your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate” (Isaiah 62:1–2).

He is raising his voice for Zion’s sake, for Jerusalem’s sake, until she has received salvation, so that the nations and all kings will see her righteousness, and will presumably come to know that

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<sup>3</sup>Some translations of Genesis 22:18 and 26:4 have “all the families of the earth *will bless themselves*.” It should be enough that the Septuagint and the New Testament both understand this verb as a simple passive (Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8). Opinion now seems to favor understanding the “reflexive” forms in a passive sense, possibly communicating an intensification of the action (i.e., all the families of the earth *will pride themselves in participating in the blessing* of Abraham or Isaac, etc.).

<sup>4</sup>This second of the “servant songs” may also refer to the Messiah.

same salvation.

Returning to Genesis 12, notice one other fact about this marvelous promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: it is not completely fulfilled with the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua. Instead, in a sense, the death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua, along with the subsequent empowerment of the Holy Spirit, *make participation in the fulfillment of this promise possible*. With the New Covenant, the blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant is finally made available to the nations. It is not fulfilled until “all the families of the earth” are blessed with the message of salvation. In other words, *this promise provides the very rationale for a world-wide mission*. Thomas Schirrmacher says, “The promise to the patriarchs, that all people will be blessed through their offspring, is again and again quoted and mentioned as proof for world mission.” Indeed, more than any other passage it provides the basis and the motive for Paul’s missionary theology and method.

Yet, much of the literature on the biblical basis of missions approaches the history of Israel in such a manner as to render it nothing more than a history of failure. Israel, however, was never intended to serve as a foil for the “righteous” Gentiles, but instead, as a mirror in which the nations could see their own wickedness. There is little awareness that the promises to Abraham depend upon the faithfulness of God, not the faithfulness of Israel.

Many approach the biblical basis of missions almost as if Israel were God’s “Plan A,” that utterly failed, and the church is His “Plan B” that is finally succeeding. The problem is in their failure to recognize the “divine passive” in Genesis 12:3. God promised, “In you, all the families of the earth *will be* blessed;” He was not commanding Israel, “You are to bless all the families of the earth.” It is not that Israel failed to obey God’s commission, but that God has not yet completely fulfilled His promise. Kenneth Mathews says, “The verse in context indicates that the Lord, not Abram, is the dispenser of blessing for the nations. Abram has no exclusive claim on God’s blessing; rather, God has exclusive claim on Abram and on all those who submit to his God.” It is a grave mistake to conceive of God’s plan as contingent upon the obedience and faithfulness of His people, whether one is speaking of Israel or of the church.<sup>5</sup>

#### PETER AND PAUL ON THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM

If the Scriptures teach that the Jewish people are to be a continuing priority in evangelism and missions, how can it be said that this priority is intrinsic to the gospel? For most Christians the gospel is all about the death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua—the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world—it is that “Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4). In no way should the message of the gospel change; however, the gospel may include more than the message itself. Paul refers to this message of salvation as “The

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<sup>5</sup>Some see contingency in Gen 18:19, and therefore grounds for understanding the Abrahamic Covenant as conditional. It is possible, however, to take מְלֶכֶת as expressing purpose rather than contingency. Furthermore, the two clauses introduced by וְעַתָּה may be taken as coordinate clauses, rather than as sequential. They are both directly related to the initial statement, “For I have chosen him.” That is to say, God chose Abraham for two purposes given here: 1) so that he might instruct his descendants in the way of the Lord, and 2) so that He might fulfill His promises to Abraham.

blessing of Abraham” (Gal 3:14), and in Romans 10:8, he calls it “the word of faith.” For Peter and Paul, this message of salvation was certainly central and could be referred to as “the gospel which I preached” (I Cor 15:1), but the term, “gospel,” may encompass more than the message itself.

The “promise made to the fathers” (Acts 13:32, cf. 26:6) gives rise to the New Covenant, the gospel, the church, and its mission. What do Peter and Paul have to say about this “gospel of Abraham”—the promise of Genesis? One of only two times this promise is quoted in the New Testament is in Galatians 3:8. As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had a burden for their salvation—so, one should have expected him to emphasize “all the nations/families of the earth” in this ancient promise. He strongly insisted that Gentiles did not need to become Jews in order to be saved. Perhaps unexpectedly, in Galatians 3:8, Paul refers to this promise from Genesis 12:3 as “the gospel”! Here, he says, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel* beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘*All the nations* will be blessed in you.’” Paul is emphasizing that the message of salvation was for Gentiles, as well as for the Jewish people. In fact, he goes on to say, “Messiah redeemed us . . . in order that in Messiah Yeshua the *blessing* of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal 3:13–14). Yet, in Galatians 3:8, Paul is not speaking of the “blessing” itself as the “gospel,” but the fact that “all the nations” would be blessed. In other words, Paul is taking the phrase “all the families of the earth” to make the point that salvation is for Gentiles as well as Jews, and he is calling it “the gospel.”

The only other place where this promise to the fathers is quoted in the NT is in Acts 3. Speaking in the Temple, here in Jerusalem, Peter emphasized “in you” to express Jewish priority. He said to a crowd that was entirely Jewish, in Acts 3:25–26: “It is *you* who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And *in your seed* all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ For *you first* [πρῶτον], God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.” Peter is quoting this key clause from Genesis 22:18. This is the same promise, but in Gen 22:18, God is repeating it to Abraham when he offered up his son, Isaac, in the same area occupied by the Temple in Peter’s day. But here, Peter is emphasizing the third aspect of the gospel, listed above (“in your seed”) and “you first,” in order to establish the necessity of a Jewish priority that required Yeshua going to the Jews in the first place, or especially.<sup>6</sup> Both Peter and Paul are referring to the same promise in Genesis, although with different emphases! So here we have Peter, Paul, and Abraham in perfect harmony!<sup>7</sup>

When a man returns from the mailbox, he might say, “We received a letter from Mom,” and his wife would probably have a mental image of an addressed envelope, with a cancelled stamp, and a message inside. Later, if she were to ask, “What did the letter say,” then reference would be to the message itself. The same elasticity is found in the term, “gospel.” It

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<sup>6</sup>In Acts 3:26, the case for taking πρῶτον as expressing priority of degree is not as clear, but it can still be made on the basis of his quotation of Gen 22:18 in the previous verse.

<sup>7</sup>The promised “seed” (“in your seed”) ultimately has reference to Yeshua, as God’s “servant” (Acts 3:26), but this does not negate the broader referent, “you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers,” i.e., the Jewish people. How else can Peter derive Jewish priority from this quotation from Genesis?

could refer to the message of salvation itself, or it could refer to the 3-fold promise repeated five times in Genesis, the “promise of the fathers” (see Acts 13:32; 26:6; and Rom 15:8).

For Peter and Paul, the gospel apparently included:

- (1) the blessing of salvation (as promised in Genesis), but it also included the other two parts of this promise from Genesis, namely,
- (2) “all the nations,” that is, it included both Jew and Gentile, and
- (3) “in you,” that is, in Abraham’s descendants, the Jewish people.

In Romans 1:16, Paul brings these ideas together, even though he does not quote this key phrase in the Abrahamic Covenant. Here, again, the same three elements are present that were observed above: (1) “the power of God unto salvation” (the promised blessing); (2) “to everyone who believes” (“all the families / nations of the earth”); and (3) “to the Jew first” (“in you / your descendants”).

Furthermore, Romans 1:16 is not speaking of missionary strategy, *per se*, but of the very nature of the gospel. Paul is answering the implied question, “What is the gospel?” He says, the gospel “is,” and the phrases which follow speak to the nature of the gospel itself. Far from being a temporary methodology in missions, or a method that was unique to Paul, he is revealing something foundational about the gospel itself. He is saying that the gospel *is*: (1) God’s power unto salvation, that it is (2) for “all who believe,” and (3) that it is “to the Jew especially.” J. Lanier Burns says, “In Romans, Paul emphasizes ‘to the Jew first’ in accordance with a biblical priority that had endured from Abraham’s commission to bless the world through the chosen fathers Isaac and Jacob.” Seifrid puts it this way: “Gentile faith rests on a gospel that belongs first to Jews.” **This is the lost gospel of Jerusalem—the gospel of Jewish priority and gentile inclusion.**

If the New Testament includes the universality of the gospel (as in Gal 3:8) and the priority of the Jewish people (as in Rom 1:16), any view of the gospel that ignores these emphases reflects a deficient understanding of the gospel. Therefore, one would be justified in concluding that if a message does not offer “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom 1:16) through faith alone in the death, burial, and resurrection of Yeshua (1 Cor 15:3–4), it is not the gospel. Likewise, if this salvation is not for Gentiles, as well as for the Jewish people, it is not the gospel (Gal 3:8). Finally, if it is not for the Jewish people, especially, it is not the gospel. **This is the Lost Gospel of Jerusalem—the gospel of Jewish priority and gentile inclusion.**

For Peter, the blessing of salvation was to run on two tracks: Jewish priority and (he would later learn) gentile inclusion. For Paul, the blessing of salvation was to run on two tracks: Jewish priority and gentile inclusion. In this, they were in perfect harmony with Abraham who saw the blessing of salvation running on two tracks: Jewish priority and gentile inclusion, and that’s the gospel! Understanding the importance of Jewish priority in missions and evangelism and implementing that priority in the witness of the church will restore a biblical emphasis, bring God’s blessing (Gen 12:3), and may result in a stronger remnant of Jewish people who know their Messiah. In any case, we need to reassert the lost gospel of Jerusalem, and there can be no more fitting place from which to do it than here, in the City of the Great King!

