

# ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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## COVENANT OF LOVE

A LOOK AT ROMANS 1:16

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# COVENANT OF LOVE

## A LOOK AT ROMANS 1:16

### ONE OF THE MOST ENIGMATIC VERSES IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE

appears in the Newer Testament as the Apostle Paul is writing to the fledgling church in Rome. In the book by that same name, Romans 1:16, he says, *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Messiah, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, **for the Jew first and also for the Greek.**"*

This verse has been the topic of intense study among Christian scholars for millennia, and has resulted in a variety of interpretations, all of which have affected the Christian perception of God's chosen people. Unfortunately, many Jewish scholars believe it to be a contributor to replacement theology, Christian anti-Semitism, and ultimately, to the huge chasm that exists today between the Christian and Jewish communities.

### A New Thing

Since May 14, 1948, the LORD has fulfilled prophecy after prophecy, bringing His people back to the land from the four corners of the earth and revealing Himself, to all who are willing to see, as a loving, faithful, covenant-keeping God. The Jewish people are back in the land, the desert is blooming, the ancient cities are re-inhabited...to name just a few of the millennia-old promises that He has fulfilled in just the past 65 years.

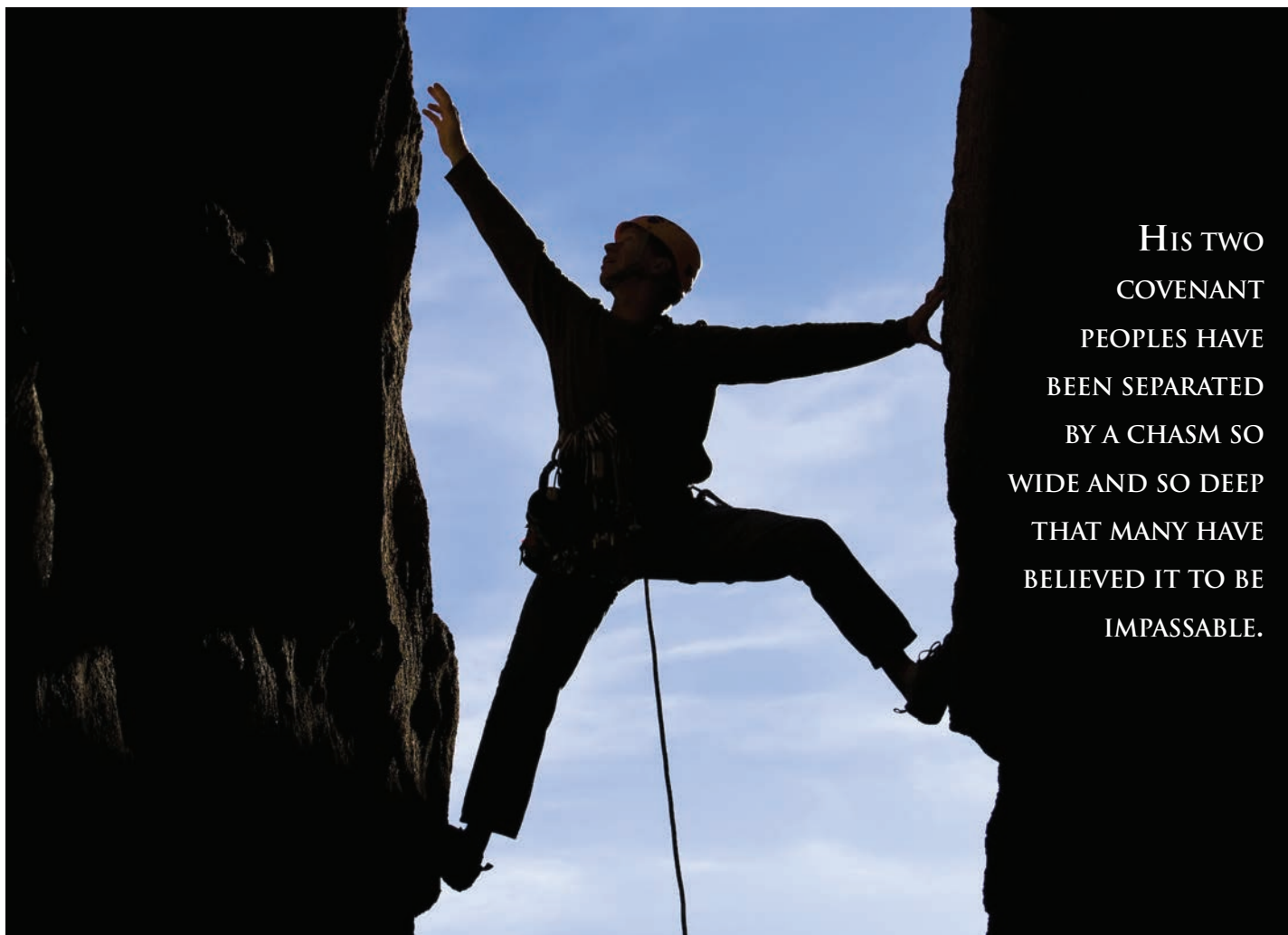
God is doing amazing things in the earth today as He sets the stage for the redemption of mankind. And of course, we know that Israel is the main player on that stage. However, as Bible believers, He invites each one of us to play a part in what He is doing. For Christians, the implications are profound.

You see, God is doing something today that He has never done before in the entire history of the church. For nearly 2,000 years, Christianity has been disconnected from its ancient Hebraic "root." His two



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covenant peoples have been separated by a chasm so wide and so deep that many have believed it to be impassable. Generations of Christians came and went without ever knowing that Jesus was actually Jewish or understanding the impact that such a connection should have on our faith. But in the past few decades, God has begun the miraculous process of bringing the two together again, plugging Christianity back into that Hebraic root and opening doors of communication between Jews and Christians that have been shut and locked for nearly two millennia.

As a result, many Christians are re-evaluating the church's age-old position on Israel and attempting to understand anew what the relationship between Jews and Christians should actually look like. Many are repenting of Christianity's historic arrogance and decrying the false doctrine of replacement theology. And in the process, many are taking a hard look at Romans 1:16.

## Back to the Basics

In order to understand what Paul was saying to the ancient Romans, we have to go back to the beginning. In Genesis 12:1–3, as God instructs Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and travel to the land of Canaan, He clearly states His purpose in creating a new nation He will call His very own. That purpose is blessing. His people will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth; He will bless them and others through them. And so begins the most remarkable love story in all of history, initiated by God Himself.

In Genesis 15, that same God seals His relationship with His people by entering into a covenant with His friend Abraham, a covenant He describes with the Hebrew word *olam* which means everlasting. Over 20 times in the book of Genesis alone, He reiterates the terms of that covenant, making it clear that it is not only everlasting, but it is also unconditional. His message to Abraham and his offspring is clear: I am giving you the land as an everlasting possession, and I will be your God and you will be My people.

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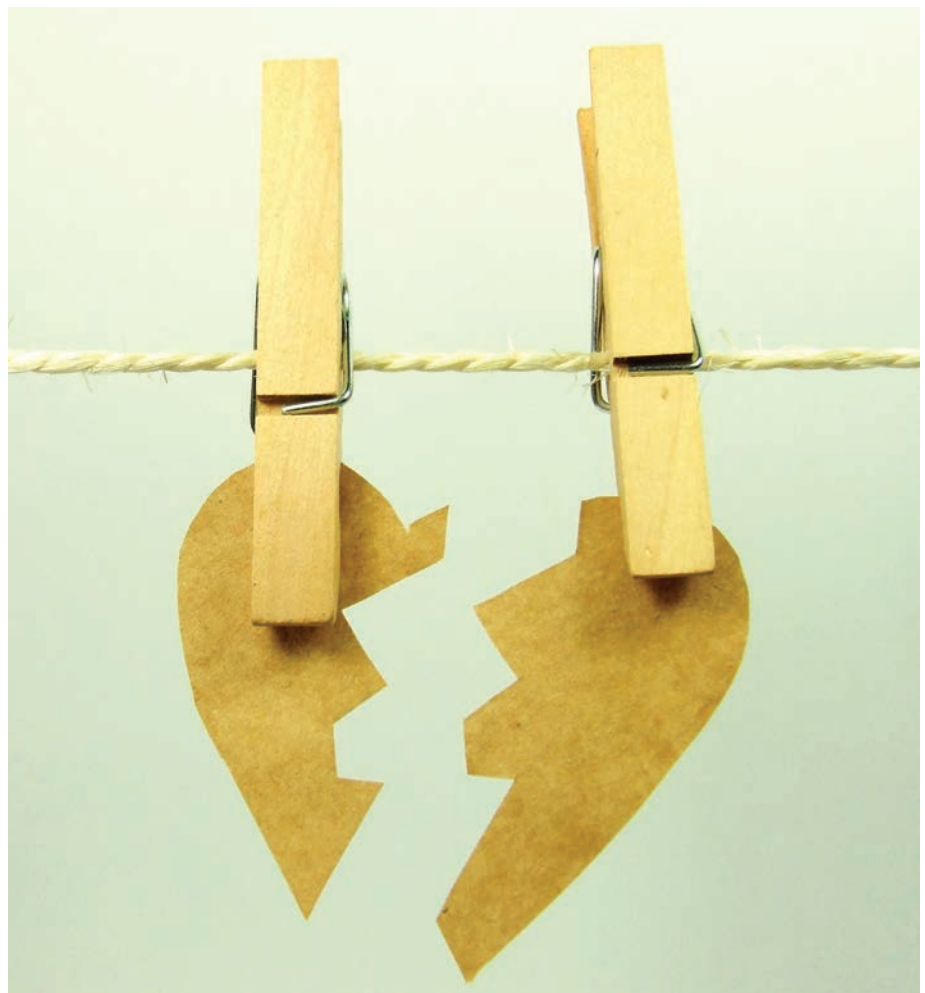
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It is unfortunate that many people today don't understand the meaning of covenant. As I travel around the world on behalf of Bridges for Peace, I often ask Christians a simple question: What is a covenant? The most common answer I receive is "promise." A good answer, but not complete. If God is serious about His covenant being everlasting, He must mean something more than a promise. Promises are very easy to break, and even a cursory glance at our own lives gives ample proof that promises are rarely everlasting.

The second most common answer I receive is "treaty." Again, the answer is incomplete and for the same reason. The history of mankind is littered with broken treaties. Certainly, God means something more than this. The third answer I commonly hear is "contract." Here we are dealing with the legal aspect of covenant, but this answer is again only partially correct. A contract can be made between strangers and is most often constrained by time parameters. A contract is actually by nature self-limiting. It will either be fulfilled or it will be broken, but in either case, it will eventually become null and void.

Clearly, the correct answer is "relationship." When God speaks of covenant with His people, He speaks of coming together in a remarkable union of eternal oneness, a union that is not to be broken.

"I will be your God," He told Abraham. It was a covenant of love, an everlasting relationship. And it was unconditional. Genesis 15 relates a common practice in the ancient Middle East called "cutting a covenant." Both parties entering into a covenant were required to pass between rows of sacrificed animals to seal their agreement. But God deliberately put Abraham to sleep and passed between the animals alone. What a profound statement this must have made to Abraham! It was clear that God, and God alone, was taking responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant.



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And finally, as we build the foundation for our discussion of Romans 1:16, we must look at one more Hebrew word, *chesed*. Dwight Pryor, Hebraic roots teacher of blessed memory, taught that if one was to learn only a single Hebrew word in a lifetime, it should be *chesed*, so important is its meaning in understanding God's heart. Without *chesed*, it is impossible to comprehend what covenant means to the Lord. It is often translated mercy, grace, or loving kindness, but any definition is incomplete without the components of strength, steadfastness, and generosity. It speaks of God's unfathomable, unconditional, extravagant, and tender love for His people, irrevocable and eternal. Used almost exclusively in relation to Israel, *chesed* is God's way of saying to His chosen people, "I cannot constrain Myself. I, by my very nature, am *compelled* to love you!"

In Genesis 17, God reiterates the covenant while informing Abraham that Sarah will have a son through whom all of His covenant promises will be fulfilled. Abraham reminds God that he already has a son named Ishmael, but God is firm. He will bless Ishmael in other ways, but Isaac will be the son of promise.

It is on this covenantal relationship that everything else rests. Much of what we see happening in the world today, from the ingathering of the exiles to virulent Israel-hatred around the world, is because of this covenant. The Bible is the story of God's interaction with mankind, and at its heart is this covenant. It is the vehicle through which God's incredible *chesed* will be revealed to the nations.

Yet, despite hundreds of Scripture verses to the contrary, replacement theology took root and for nearly 2,000 years remained the standard teaching regarding Israel and the church. Disregarding God's own clear statements of the eternal nature of His covenant with Israel, Christians were taught that God was finished with the Jews and the church was, in fact, the new chosen nation. It is in light of this history that we will examine Romans 1:16.

## So Many Interpretations

Commentaries on the book of Romans put forth a vast array of interpretations of Paul's words, with particular emphasis on the phrase "...for the Jew first and also for the Greek." Some teach that this is simply a timeline, stating the order in which God has chosen to move through history. Many others believe it to be a mandate and a formula for evangelization. Several Jewish scholars list Romans 1:16 among those verses in the Newer Testament that are anti-Semitic and therefore responsible for the persecution of the Jewish people throughout history. And finally, supercessionists saw it as a springboard for proclaiming what was wrong with the Jews and right with the church. Let's begin our discussion by determining what, in fact, Romans 1:16 is *not* saying.

### 1. Is it just a timeline?

Obviously, there is some truth in this understanding. God's covenant relationship with man began with the Jews and it was later that the door was opened to Gentiles. However, our study will reveal a much deeper meaning.

### 2. Are the Jews superior, first in righteousness?

We must remember that Paul is talking to both Jews and Gentiles who are coming into the church, each bringing with them remnants of their past lives. For many Gentiles, that meant a long-held resentment of the Jewish people. With those anti-Semitic ideals came accusations that the Jews believed they were superior to non-Jews and should therefore, as St. Augustine taught, be forced into humbling circumstances to witness to the superiority of the church. But Paul has already made it clear that such is not the case.

*"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all, for we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one"* (Rom. 3:9-10).

### 3. Do the Jewish people have a monopoly on God?

They were often accused of being elitist, believing that since the covenant was theirs first, it was theirs alone. But Paul has addressed this issue before. When speaking to the Ephesians, he made it crystal clear that God's covenant relationship with the Jewish people not only came first but would never end. However, for those who were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, Gentiles who had no hope and were without God in the world, God opened the door of the covenant.

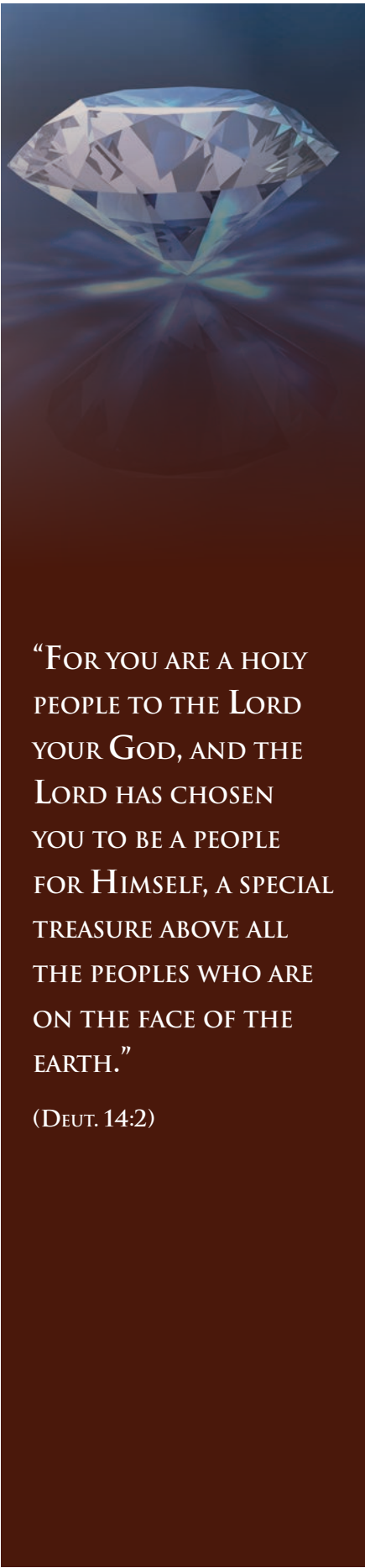
As believers in Yeshua as Messiah, Christians are called to love...unabashedly, uncompromisingly and unconditionally. However, for nearly 2,000 years, the church has shown very little love to the Jewish people.

In a recent teaching letter, Rebecca Brimmer put it this way: "Relationships between Christians and Jews are deeply marred by the pain and suffering Jewish people have experienced from the Christian world...Pain like this is not healed suddenly or superficially. Christians need to act with unconditional love exhibited in a multitude of ways in order to bring healing to the relationship."

As God is calling His church to a ministry of reconciliation, we must re-examine our historical attitude toward His chosen people while remaining faithful to our Christian convictions.







*"Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also..."*  
(Rom. 3:29–30).

#### 4. Is Romans 1:16 a basis for Christian anti-Semitism?

Throughout the ages, Jewish scholars have looked at the Newer Testament and Christian teaching in general in order to determine the basis for what seemed to be a hatred of the Jewish people inherent in Christianity. Several verses were selected that, when combined, seemed to target the Jewish people as an inferior race, disinherited by God and doomed to persecution. We know that Paul never denied his Jewishness and loved his people passionately. He would later admonish the church to beware of arrogance, maintaining a humble attitude toward the Jewish people. Clearly, his statement to the Roman church had nothing to do with anti-Semitism. However, the following statements by early church fathers help us to understand how the Jewish community could think otherwise:

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons: "Jews are disinherited from the grace of God."

Hilary of Poitiers: "Jews are a perverse people, accursed by God forever."

Gregory of Nyssa: "The Jews are a brood of vipers, haters of goodness..."

St. John Chrysostom: "Jews are inveterate murderers, possessed by the devil, their debauchery and drunkenness gives them the manners of the pig. They kill and maim one another. Jews are abandoned by God for the crime of deicide; there is no expiation possible. God has always hated the Jews."

#### 5. Is Romans 1:16 a mandate for evangelization?

Paul spoke prophetically in Romans 11, warning the church against the very arrogance toward the Jewish people that would become its hallmark. I would suggest that in light of 2,000 years of Christian anti-Semitism, he had something else in mind in Roman 1:16. But what was it?

## Chosen and Distinct

Now that we've examined what our verse *doesn't* mean, let's look at some way in which the Jewish people actually are "first:"

#### 1. Chosenness

Deuteronomy 14:2 says, *"For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."* This is but one of dozens of verses that make it clear God did in fact choose the Jewish people. Through Abraham, He created a whole new nation that would be His special treasure. In Genesis 12:1–3, Nehemiah 9:7, Amos 3:2, Romans 11:28–29, to name a few, we are repeatedly reminded of God's choice. And in Deuteronomy 7:7–8a, He tells us why: *"The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all people; but because the Lord loves you..."*

#### 2. Advantage

In Romans 3:1, Paul asks the very question that we are examining. Do the Jewish people have some kind of advantage over everybody else? And his reply? Much in every way! They were entrusted, Paul says, with the very words of God Himself. They were to introduce mankind to the concept of eternal salvation, bear the mantle of monotheism throughout history, ensure that the Word of God would be accurately and reverently passed from generation to generation, receive special revelation through Moses and the prophets, be recipients of promises made to no other people, and act as the human channel through which the Messiah would come. Romans 9:4–5 says: *"...who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Messiah came..."*

#### 3. Priority

In Matthew 15:24, Yeshua says He was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In that same book, as He sends His disciples out to heal the sick and raise the dead, He instructs them to avoid the Gentiles, going only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. When He walked this earth, Yeshua resisted even speaking to non-Jews. His priority was to renew the hearts of the Jewish people, reminding them of God's incredible love and mercy.

"FOR YOU ARE A HOLY  
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(DEUT. 14:2)

And we must remember that His conversations with them were not about conversion. They were about fulfillment. How unfortunate that the church would eventually come to embrace replacement theology and refuse the Jewish people their rightful place as those *“to whom belong the adoption, the glory, the giving of the law, the service of God and the promises...”* as taught by Paul in Romans 9.

#### 4. Redemption

Yeshua Himself makes it crystal clear when speaking to the Samaritan woman in John 4:22: *“You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.”*

So let’s recap. Although Romans 1:16 has historically been misinterpreted and misapplied, there are many scriptural references verifying God’s special relationship with the Jewish people. They were clearly historically chosen, set apart to be guardians of revelation and of Scripture. Christians recognize that they are the people chosen to be family to Yeshua, the Messiah. Unarguably, salvation came to the earth through God’s covenant relationship with Abraham.

Interestingly, however, Romans 1:16 is not the only place that the phrase *“for the Jew first and then for the Greek”* appears in Scripture. We also find it in Romans 2:9–11: *“...tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.”*

Suddenly, our understanding of the verse becomes a bit more complicated.

### Lock, Stock and Barrel

I would like to introduce you to the term “merism,” a popular literary mechanism in ancient Semitic writings and even today. It refers to a pair or more of contrasting words used to express totality or completeness, or using parts of a subject to describe the whole. Basically, it is a way of expressing a thing in its entirety, with nothing omitted.

There are several merisms in common use today, one of which is “lock, stock and barrel.” If I say I want the whole thing (whatever it might be), lock, stock and barrel, that doesn’t mean I want the lock one day, the stock the next and the barrel later. It means I want it all...now. And there are other such merisms that we use every day:

They came from near and far.

It appeals to both young and old.

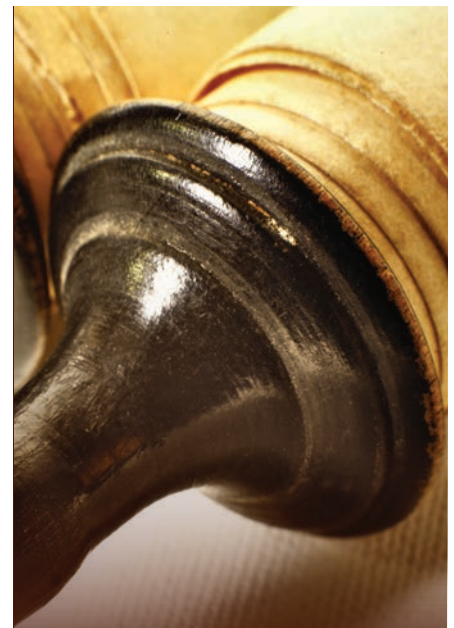
It is loved by rich and poor alike.

It spans the length and breadth of the earth.

In each instance, the implication is totality, a thing in its entirety with nothing omitted. The Bible is rife with merisms, many of which have been misunderstood by our Greek-thinking forefathers. I believe when Paul spoke of “body, soul and spirit,” he meant totality, a person as a thing in its entirety with nothing omitted. When Yeshua is referred to as the “Alpha and the Omega,” or the Lord as the One who “was and is and is to come,” the implication is clearly totality.

And there are many, many others. Genesis 1:1 indicates that totality of God’s creation with the words, *“the heavens and the earth.”* Psalm 139 speaks of His intimate, complete knowledge of His creatures by stating, *“You know my sitting down and my rising up.”* I Kings 4:25 indicates the entire nation of Israel through the phrase, *“from Dan as far as Beersheba.”*

A classic example is found in Acts 1:8, *“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* Some in the Christian world have considered this verse an “order of Apostolic preaching,” making of it a doctrinal key to the proper plan of evangelism. I believe it is a merism. Yeshua is saying, *“I want you to take this message everywhere.”*



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## And the Meaning Is...

Again, in understanding Romans 1:16, we must remember that Paul is speaking to both Gentiles and Jews who have come into the church, and this verse has a strong message for both.

To the Gentiles who come tainted by anti-Semitism, he is reminding them that salvation comes only through the Jewish people. God's prophetic fulfillment must come through them, just as God told Abraham in Genesis 17. Not through Ishmael, or anyone else, only through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

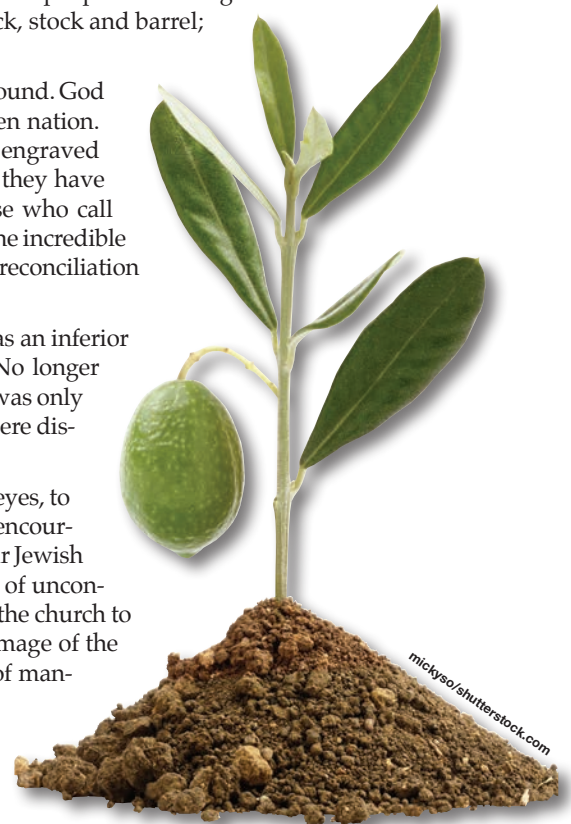
And he is reminding the Jewish people of the message of God's salvation. Even though it was theirs first, it is not theirs exclusively. It is God's mercy expressing itself in an amazing gift. It is He blessing the earth through His people of blessing as He promised in Genesis. And it is for everyone; lock, stock and barrel; Jew and Gentile alike.

For Christians today, the implications here are profound. God calls the Jewish people His special treasure, His chosen nation. He says He loves them with an everlasting love and has engraved them on the palms of His hands. Yet, for 2,000 years, they have suffered horror and persecution at the hands of those who call themselves Christians. Each of us alive right now has the incredible privilege and opportunity to be a part of God's plan of reconciliation as He brings his two covenant peoples back together.

No longer can the church view the Jewish people as an inferior race, important only as an object of evangelization. No longer can we claim, contrary to Scripture, that the covenant was only "temporary" and not eternal; that the Jewish people were disinherited by God and replaced by the church.

It is time to view the Jewish people through God's eyes, to love them with His love, uplift them with His words, encourage them by His spirit. It is time for us to reach out to our Jewish brethren with sincerity and respect, extending a hand of unconditional love and friendship. It is time, at long last, for the church to step into its highest calling, that of truly bearing the image of the One who by His very nature is compelled to love *all* of mankind, lock, stock and barrel.

By Rev. Cheryl Hauer  
International Development Director



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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

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