

What Does the Olive Tree Symbolize

by Tony Warren



There are many different ideas in the church concerning what the Olive Tree symbolizes. I've heard everything from the nation of Israel, peace, the church to prudence and fertility. I won't deal with any of the extrabiblical theories here, as I assume you're reading this to find Biblical answers to this question, "*what does the Olive Tree symbolize?*" There is a rich background in the Old Testament for the olive tree motif, but it is most often used in connection with God's covenanted people. To that end, we start where first the Olive Tree is referenced in the Scripture, as its leaf is plucked by a dove and brought to Noah as a sign of the covenant of grace upon a judged world. In other words, that the judgment that God had brought upon the earth had been lifted.

Genesis 8:10-11

- "And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark;
- And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: *so Noah knew that the waters were abated* from off the earth."

This dove bringing the leaf of the Olive Tree is a symbol that the judgment of God had receded, an illustration of the covenant of Grace wherein He had ceased from His judgment of man. In Scripture the Olive Tree is representing peace only as it pertains to the peace with God, and it is never seen as symbolizing of fertility. By this Olive leaf brought to Noah by the dove, God illustrates healing in the cessation of His judgment in the flood. It was a token of the covenant. This truth can also be seen in the sign of the rainbow after the flood, a token of that same promise or covenant in the cessation of His judgment.

Genesis 9:11-13

- "And I will *establish my covenant* with you; neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there any more be a flood to

destroy the earth.

- And God said, This is the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations:
- I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth."

As the rainbow was a token of the covenant or oath that God made, so the Olive leaf illustrated the covenant promise in the cessation of the judgment of the flood to Noah and the 7 souls within the Ark. This covenant symbolism in the Olive Tree holds true throughout the Scriptures. From the oil of the Olive Tree to light the lamps continually ([Exodus 27:20](#); [Leviticus 24:2](#)) representing the light for God's covenanted people, to the Olive Oil used for anointing ([Exodus 40:9](#); [Deuteronomy 28:40](#)) His chosen, to the two Cherubim made of Olive Trees ([1st Kings 6:23](#); [6:31](#)) of the Holy Temple, to believers spoken of as Green Olive Trees in God's House ([Psalms 52:8](#)), to the mount of Olives ([Mark 11:1](#)), to God's anointed ([Psalms 52:8](#)). They all ultimately point to the restoration work of Christ for God's people. Christ is the true anointing of God's people. The Hebrew word translated Olive Tree literally means *tree of oil*, and is from a primitive root meaning *to be illuminated*. God uses it to illustrate anointing, fatness, ointments, oil and the olive. It points to God's blessings or making Holy. So the question, "*what does the Olive Tree symbolize*," is answered in that God uses it to represent the anointed group of people that are His congregation. Whether on the Old Testament side of the cross or the New, the Olive Tree represents God's congregation. There is no greater illustration of this than what is found in Romans chapter eleven.

What Does The Olive Tree Symbolize We are fully aware that there are some theologians who have attempted to designate this tree as the emblem of the nation of Israel. But that theory can easily be disproved merely by accepting God's Word that the Gentile branches are coming (being grafted) into this tree that they become part of it. It goes without saying that the Gentile believers are not, and have not been emigrating into the nation of Israel to become part of it, so the Olive Tree does not represent national Israel. Also, faith cannot be a prerequisite for citizenship in the nation of Israel, as if that were true most of the nation would be cast out. What this symbolizes is God's covenanted congregation--those that become a part of the assembly of saints. If we examine Romans chapter eleven, in its proper context, this is illustrated perfectly:

Romans 11:17-27

- And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild Olive Tree, wert grafted in among them, *and with them* partakest of the root and fatness of the Olive Tree;
- Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee.
- Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in.
- Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear:

- For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee.
- Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off.
- And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again.
- For if thou wert cut out of the Olive Tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good Olive Tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own Olive Tree?
- For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.
- And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:
- For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins."

It is quite evident from the Scriptures, as well as nature itself, that the root of a tree is its support system, and not vice versa (verse 18). Thus the branches grafted in cannot boast against the branches broken off, as the root is the reason that they thrive there, not their own goodness. So there is no reason for pride on the part of Gentiles in any idea that they come into the covenant and stand by their own merit. For the Root represents Christ ([Isaiah 53:2](#); [Romans 15:8-12](#); [Colossians 2:6-7](#); [Revelation 5:5](#)), the source of God's fulfillment of the covenant in the promised blessings to Israel. It is the Root (Christ) through whom the tree receives the sustenance of life. In this Spiritual portrait we must understand that without the Messiah as the Root through whom comes the fatness, all believers (both Jew and Gentile) would be disassociated from covenant Israel. This is how the Olive Tree represents God's covenanted people. Not that it is the Israel of God, but that it represents it. Just as the Holy Temple represents God's people, this tree is a token of God's anointed people. Indeed from comparing Scripture with Scripture, we learn from God's cryptic illustrations of the Olive Tree that this is true:

#1. The Olive Tree symbolizes one covenanted congregation of God in one body, not two.

#2. From Gentile branches being grafted in the Olive Tree, it cannot be the nation of Israel.

#3. The Olive Tree cannot possibly be spiritual, unproveable Israel, which cannot have some broken off.

#4. Contrary to Greek mythology, the Olive Tree does not symbolize fertility.

So What does the Olive Tree symbolize? Look again at verse seventeen: "*And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild Olive Tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the Olive Tree...*" Clearly the wild Olive Tree symbolizes the children of the nations (gentiles) of the world who were not God's covenanted people, coming in to the covenant relationship *with the Jews*. Even as it was prophesied or written before, which is exactly what

verses 26 and 27 declares. God uses this Olive tree to illustrate that the promise of a Deliverer to Israel is fulfilled, and He point blank says, *for this is My covenant with them*:

Romans 11:26-27

- "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:
- For *this is my covenant unto them*, when I shall take away their sins."

It was prophesied long ago that the Messiah would come and deliver Israel from her sins, and God is declaring in Romans eleven that this is what this covenant tree symbolizes. These are God's people, Jew and Gentile in one tree, fulfilling that prophesy of the deliverer taking away the sins of Israel. So the Olive Tree can neither represent the political nation of Israel, nor the New Testament indivisible church. It signifies the covenanted congregation of Israel, made up of both Jew and Gentile.

Romans 2:28-29

- "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:
- But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Not as though the Word of God has been made of no effect by this, because in God's eyes they are not all Israel, which are of the nation of Israel. The Israel of God is not by flesh or by physical heredity (seed), but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. Jew and Gentile are all the Israel of God through this promised Deliverer, who is the true source Israel. So despite the irrational denials and much rhetoric about these truths being "Replacement Theology," it is clear that Gentiles are grafted in *among them* and enjoy the fatness *with them*, through the sustenance of their Root or Source. The Gentiles don't replace covenant Israel, they by promise joined with the Jews in Israel. Unambiguously, God does not separate the Jews and the Gentiles into two distinct or separate covenanted congregations. The Gentiles come into this very same relationship with God *among* them. In part, some branches are cut off from God's covenant in their unbelief and are separated from the Olive Tree. Thus despite claims to the contrary, they are no longer in this covenant Israel relationship with God. Romans chapter eleven simply continues in this theme of God's complete sovereignty in deciding who He will have as the Israel of God. In other words, it is only the remnant people for whom the promises actually pertained, rather than a whole nation.

Romans 11:5-7

- "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.
- And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.
- What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election

hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded."

God is arguing that He has not cast away His people Israel ([Romans 11:1](#)), because if He had, how is the Apostle Paul an Israelite and not cast off? But rather that the Olive Tree illustration is a portrait of a remnant of Jews and of Gentiles being covenanted Israel by His long standing promise. The remnant election of Jews and Gentiles are the Israel of God to whom the promise of the seed coming from many nations pertained. Namely, that they which were not God's people (the Gentiles), would become His people.

Romans 9:24-27

- "Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?
- As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.
- And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.
- Esaias also crieth concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved:"

This is God's fulfillment of the remnant of Israel being sustained, while the rest are cut off and blinded. Thus, the promise or covenant with Israel is in fact kept--not as some Theologians suppose, but as God always intended. Note the grafting in of the Gentile branches show the telescoping of covenanted Israel before the cross with covenanted Israel after the cross (*the old into the new*) illustrated in this Olive Tree. The Jewish people of Israel are represented as the branches that were growing out of this *very same* Olive Tree. We read that some of the branches of this tree (*Jews that were in unbelief*) were broken off, and the elect from the Gentile nations (*Symbolized by branches from a wild Olive Tree*) were then grafted into that same representation of covenanted Israel. This signifying the telescoping of the Old covenant congregation of God into the New, with the breaking off of the disbelieving.

Jeremiah 11:2-4

- "Hear ye the Words of this covenant, and speak unto the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem;
- And say thou unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel; Cursed be the man that obeyeth not the Words of this covenant,
- Which I commanded your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Obey my voice, and do them, according to all which I command you: so shall ye be my people, and I will be your God:"

In Romans chapter eleven God is referencing Old Testament Scriptures concerning a covenantal analogy that would be known by those comparing Scripture with Scripture. The wording "*so shall ye be my people, and I will be your God*" points to Christ the Deliverer out of Zion prophesied to save Israel. This is the analogy of the covenant Tree of Israel. From this illustration in Romans we see that there is no new

Israel, nor a double or separated Israel, as it is the exact same congregation that now has an inclusion of the Gentiles. We must be clear on what this imagery represents before we can have any chance of truly understanding what is being said here about the Olive Tree as the one people of God and Israel. For there is the distinction seen here between the natural Olive Tree branches, which are the Jewish people originally covenant Israel. The wild Olive Tree branches are the people of the Gentile nations who now become covenanted children of God also. Fulfilling the prophesy that *those who were not originally His covenanted people, are now brought into God's covenant relationship through Christ Israel*. Once separated and deemed foreigners from Israel, they now become children of God and heirs of this same promise to Israel.

Galatians 3:26-29

- ***"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.***
- For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.
- ***There is neither Jew nor Greek***, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.
- And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and ***heirs according to the Promise.***"

Jew and Gentile in Christ are now one family, one body of covenant Israel that is represented by the Olive Tree. God then anticipates the obvious objection ([Romans 11:1](#)) in that some might erroneously think this means the promise to Israel of a new covenant and an everlasting inheritance has been abrogated. God forbid! The promises, covenant and the Israel of God, shall be defined by God rather than the misguided, misinformed or mistaken. If we are in Christ, which is the only way anyone can be the true Israel ([Hosea 11:1](#); [Hosea 14:5-6](#); [Matthew 2:15](#); [Galatians 3:16-17](#)), then we are all Abraham's seed and inheritors or heirs of the same promises ([John 8:33](#); [Galatians 3:28-29](#)) to Israel. For Christ is the true Israel of promise that the Olive Tree represents.

Isaiah 49:2-3

- And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me;
- And said unto me, ***Thou art my servant, O Israel***, in whom I will be glorified."

This passage prophesies of Christ, the Only Israel of God with a mouth like a sharp sword in whom our God will be glorified. So it's very important to understand that distinction being made ([Romans 11:16-17](#)) of those coming into the Olive Tree partaking of the source with the Jews, and how this is representing covenant Israel. Because the symbolism in this Olive Tree 'proves' that this tree in the Old Testament is now telescoped into the New Testament era. It is a congregation made up of Jews and Gentile now brought together in one body. We cannot bifurcate this Olive Tree, negating its one body and one Root. It represents one undivided covenanted children of God.

Symbolism such as this is normative within God's Word, and using objects like trees to illustrate these things is a mainstay of Scripture. Thus it cannot be subject to our

own private interpretations when its meaning is abundantly clear. To say anything less is to dabble in absurdity considering God's defining of the branches broken off and grafted in. The elect from the nations have forsaken the world and have entered into the covenanted Jews so that they are now heirs of the same promises made to them.

Romans 4:14-18

- "For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect:
- Because the law worketh wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.
- Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,
- (As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were.
- Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be."

All followers of Christ today, whether Jew or Gentile, are part of covenant Israel, which this Olive Tree represents. By the same token, those branches broken off (*Jewish people who were blinded*) are no longer covenant Israel in God's eyes. In the Biblical vernacular, they have been *cut off* from their people ([1st Kings 9:7](#)). That is the illustration in Romans chapter nine where God makes it clear that, "*they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.*" Some in Israel have no Root and without source sustenance cannot live. They are those who are branches broken off from the tree (*covenant Israel*) and are thus made spiritually blind. Just as the Gentiles who were once spiritually blind, have now been made to see in being grafted into Israel. All rhetoric aside, this is not only consistent, biblical and logical, it is the only rational conclusion conscientious Christians can come to. There is only one ([1st Corinthians 12:13](#)) Godly tree. There are not two bodies, nor two covenanted Israelites (one Jew and one Gentile). There is one children of God ([Romans 9:26](#)), one Israel of God ([Galatians 6:16](#)), one people of God ([Romans 9:25](#)) and one Jew of God ([Romans 2:28-29](#)). This is exactly as the passage of Ephesians chapter two so unambiguously declares:

Ephesians 2:11-20

- "Wherefore remember, that ye being *in time past Gentiles* in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;
- That *at that time* ye were without Christ, *being Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel*, and *strangers from the covenants of promise*, having no hope, and without God in the world:
- But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.
- For he is our peace, *who hath made both one*, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;

- Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to *make in himself of twain one new man*, so making peace;
- And that he might *reconcile both unto God in one body* by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
- And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.
- For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.
- Now therefore *ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints*, and of the household of God;
- And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;"

It can't get any clearer than this plain unambiguous language that God has inspired. Where once we were Gentiles, being strangers and aliens (*non-citizens or foreigners*) of the commonwealth of Israel (*God's covenanted people*), now we are fellow-citizens of Israel. We can either listen to all the theological tap dancing and rhetoric that proliferates the modern church, or we can listen to the unadulterated Word of God concerning this matter. If we won't accept God's plain declarations on who Israel is, then indeed what will we accept? When God's Word says that we are no longer foreigners and strangers from covenant Israel, but are made fellow saints with them, what further witness does a faithful servant need? Being a follower of Christ makes us one family, all bound together as one as the Israel of God. We are "*made nigh by the blood of Christ*" who were once "*aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise.*" Those are God's Words. There can be no mistaking God's truths unless we are brainwashed to be predisposed to doing so. The Olive Tree is clearly representing this sanctified corporate congregation of God. It is man's ego, fear, pride, political agenda or church tradition that promotes the idea that God has two separate salvation plans for two distinct people. The false dichotomy between Israel and the church has been the stumbling block for so many Christians for a very long time. Yet from Scripture itself there is obviously one tree, one body, one Israel, and one deliverance of this Israel in Christ. This deliverance and restoration is not a future event, but one that has occurred at the time of the cross.

Hebrews 8:9-10

- "Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.
- For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:"

The Mystery is revealed. This is the covenant with Israel that includes the Gentiles. This Olive Tree of Romans chapter eleven simply cannot represent the literal or physical nation of Israel. Because if it did, that would mean Gentiles were leaving their physical nations from the time of the Cross unto today to go live physically

(grafted) in the Middle Eastern nation. Likewise, the requirement for being part of the physical nation of Israel is not faith, but descendants. So we clearly understand that this good Olive Tree cannot possibly be representing that nation. We're not being grafted into the literal earthly nation of Israel and we're (Gentiles) not descendants, *apart from the adoption in Christ*. We are being grafted into a "covenant Israel," which is not a physical nation but a covenanted spiritual nation of God that was ***once represented by that physical nation***. By Grace we understand the nation of Israel no longer *represents* the Kingdom of God. This too is written unambiguously for those who are not blinded.

Matthew 21:42-43

- "Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes?"
- Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

So what does the Olive Tree Symbolize? It is an illustration of the anointed promise of God to Israel. The physical nation no longer represents the Kingdom of covenanted children of God. Likewise, the tree cannot be the spiritual or the indivisible Israel of God that many Christians believe it is either. Because in that true spiritual Israel from above, all within it are saved and thus none could have ever been broken off if it was true indivisible Israel. It's important for us to understand that this imagery represents *corporate Israel*, the outward/external covenanted congregation through both the Old and New Testament era. We should not lose sight of the fact that this is the *same* old era tree (how else could these Old Testament branches be broken off), but telescoping into the New Testament Israel dispensation. In the New dispensation ([Ephesians 1:10; 3:2-6](#); [Colossians 1:25-27](#)) Gentiles are being grafted into covenant Israel. As indeed we did read in Ephesians chapter two. Am I being redundant? Maybe, but it is so important for us to understand what it cannot represent, so that we may better comprehend what it "must" represent, which is an external covenanted congregation of Israel relationship. A congregation where people who are in unbelief, but still calling themselves of God, may be cut off in their sins. Where any Jewish person who should come to belief in the Messiah, may be grafted back in--that no one may boast. The Olive Tree symbolizes the blessings of the covenant relationship with God through Christ.

Psalms 128:1-6

- "Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways.
- For thou shalt eat the labour of thine hands: happy shalt thou be, and it shall be well with thee.
- Thy wife shall be as a fruitful vine by the sides of thine house: thy children like olive plants round about thy table.
- Behold, that thus shall the man be blessed that feareth the LORD.
- The LORD shall bless thee out of Zion: and thou shalt see the good of Jerusalem all the days of thy life.

- Yea, thou shalt see thy children's children, and peace upon Israel."

So in closing may I say that many of God's congregation today (*as many were in the nation of Israel, past*) are not truly of God and they will be cut off from covenant Israel in unbelief. Indeed, in verse eighteen of Romans 11, God warns the Gentiles not to boast for being allowed in covenant Israel while many Jews were broken off, because if they do, they are deluding themselves. In thinking that they are somehow better, or that by their works they are the ones responsible for their inclusion, they are deceived. For by Grace we are included, and that not of ourselves, it is a gift of God. God assures the Gentiles, they didn't bear the Root, but the Root bore them. We'd all do well to remember that. Thus we should understand that we are privileged, and all benefits and blessings are by Grace of God alone. In other words, we have nothing to boast about, for Christ (the Root) is our sustainer, our strength and the author and finisher of our faith. We cannot take one ounce of credit, thinking we are somehow better than any Jewish person who was broken off. Such ego, arrogance and pride brings about the same fall that old congregation Israel suffered. It brings about a breaking off of branches from the Olive Tree.

There are three things that we all should receive and take careful note of regarding the olive tree.

First, the Gentiles who come to Christ are now become part of the covenant with Israel and are full heirs of God's covenant or promise to them. It is important that both Jewish Christians and their supporters acknowledge that.

Second, Gentile Christians are spiritual Jews and should not consider themselves to be better or superior to the physical Jews because many were broken or cut off from God's covenant with Israel. For while they are not automatically saved or included by flesh or genetics, they are the natural heirs of the covenant and as such can easily be grafted back into the covenant. It is important that Gentile Christians and their supporters acknowledge that.

Third, the Olive Tree of Romans chapter eleven symbolizes the harmony of both Jew and Gentile being reconciled to God, through one covenanted household in Christ. Which is what we read about in Ephesians chapter two declaring both having been reconciled to God in one house. This is the true portrait of the Olive Tree that has both natural branches and wild olive branches in one tree, both being supported by the Root Holiness that sustains them. The Israel of God is in Christ and upon Him rests the foundation of the Jewish prophets and people of God, and thus we should not become puffed up with feelings of any superiority with respect to our Jewish brethren. It is by the Root that we have our standing, and not of ourselves. Serve God and give earnest diligence to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you shall never fall.

May the Lord continue to richly bless and enlighten our lives through the reading of His most Holy Word.

Amen!

Peace,

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