

Different Names, Different Purposes

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Several names of people and places get mixed up. The ones of specific interest in this article are:

1. children of Abraham
2. Israel
3. Jerusalem (and Zion – as similar but a little different)
4. Zion
5. kingdom of God
6. Church

Children of Abraham

Jesus spoke many times about Abraham and being children of Abraham. The Jews made a big claim about being children of Abraham. John the Baptist contested this claim by mentioning that God could raise up children to Abraham from the stones. (Luke 3:8)

Jesus challenged their lineage again in John 8 (especially take note of John 8:39ff). Jesus was shown in John 8:44 to say that the audience had Satan as their father instead of Abraham.

An emphasis was made upon Abraham at least for the focus on Abraham's faith and his receipt of the promise without an additional requirement of a law dictated by God. Therefore Paul could encourage the Roman believers in the promise of Abraham (Rom 4:13-16) without making the Gentiles further bothered by the Law of Moses (for the Roman encounter with the Law left a bad taste in their mouth).

Note also that Romans 4:16 confirmed the Gentiles as having Abraham as a father. An apparent reason for this inclusion was to make the Gentiles feel like they were truly part of God's people. (Part of the situation in Romans 4 was that Paul actually wanted to play on the Gentiles' feeling of exclusion and inferiority before bringing them into confidence as being children of Abraham.)

Abraham's promises included the land he saw as well as him being father of many nations. The other side of the promise on nations is that the nations would be blessed through Abraham.

The mention of Abraham as father of those of faith and then describing the Gentiles as children of Abraham both stand in contrast to the lack of parallel passages to describe Gentiles as children of Israel or as having Israel as their father.

Israel

Paul spoke about Israel as being his kinsmen in Rom 9:1-6. The man Israel and the people named after that man all came after Abraham. A covenant and Law were given to the people through Moses.

Only the man Israel and the people called Israel needed to have certain actions performed as a fulfillment of the promises to Israel. Such promises did not include a blessing on the nations nor include the nations as a party to such promises. The promises to Israel then stand in stark contrast to the nation-oriented promises made to Abraham.

The scriptures tend to keep the nations out of the relationship between God and Israel. And Paul, at least in the letter to the Romans, does not speak of Gentiles as being descendants of Israel. And for the distinctions listed thus far, merely calling Gentiles as being children of Abraham isn't sufficient to say that they are children of Israel as well. Even worse is the idea of anyone saying that Gentiles would be obligated to the Law of Moses.

In Romans 5 Paul showed a transition that occurred with the introduction of the Law of Moses. This was a transition from the reign of death to the reign of Law. Yet the reign of Law could only apply to Jews since only Jews (or Israel) were the recipients of the Law of Moses. Then with the adding of Gentiles to the Church, Paul's arguments to the Gentiles was that the Gentiles were free from the Law.

Paul therefore purposely avoided encouragement or statements that the Gentiles were now Israel. Paul maintained a distinction between the two such that Gentiles would not have an excuse to see themselves as part of Israel and hence subject to the Laws of Israel.

Israel then had her own prophecies. These prophecies were largely separate from those prophecies about Jerusalem. Then prophecies about the kingdom required different chains of fulfillment from those to Israel. One caveat though in the study of Old Testament prophecy is that Israel was the the typical nation to whom and through which prophecies were made; So some effort must be applied to sort through prophecies that apply to Israel in contrast to prophecies more generally applied. (For example, Daniel 12 involved prophecies about Daniel's fellow countrymen, the Israelites. So the normal application of Daniel 12 only occurs upon the Israelites. Yet God could extend the events and meaning to apply to Gentiles too.)

Note that the prophecies about Israel could deal with different targets: Jacob himself, Jacob's descendants, and House of Israel. Then also the House of Jacob, as the southern kingdom, fits in under the designation of Jacob's descendants, to some degree.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem seems to be treated separately from Abraham by most Christians, though Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek was at Salem (Gen 14:18), which became Jerusalem. The stronger connection occurs between Israel (as Jacob's descendants) and Jerusalem.

The basic concept of Jerusalem is that of being the city of God and His worship. In the Old Testament only Israelites worshiped God and they only properly worshiped Him with temple service in Jerusalem.

But Jerusalem can be detached from any connection with Israel since the city had origins even before Jacob was born.

The most pertinent point to note about Jerusalem must be the “restoration” of Jerusalem after her punishment and destruction in Isaiah 1-3. Then Isaiah 4 prophesies of the blessings of the purified Jerusalem, which seems to correspond to the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21-22.

So the Old Jerusalem had been destroyed in AD70 while the New Jerusalem descended from heaven. No connection between the two existed except in name and purpose. The New Jerusalem can exist wholly independent of Israel.

In the analysis of Jerusalem, there doesn't even appear to be any mention of Israel or Israelites (as found in Isaiah 1 to 4) which therefore suggests that these two entities have different destinies. This distinction of destinies may not be absolute since there may be similar results but having different paths and requirements for fulfillment.

I think also in the Old Testament there never were prophecies made to Jerusalem as like to a person. But in the New Testament Jesus spoke a prophecy to Jerusalem in Matt 23:37.

Zion

Zion seems to be partly used as a synonym for “Jerusalem” but also to have a more specific application to the place of God's throne and rule.

In representing Zion as a mountain there appears to be an analogy whereby the heavens are connected with the earth by mountains. So even though God exists in the heavens (with the heavens representing another analogy about God) and yet God interacts with the earth, so do the mountains “interact” between the heavens and earth. Maybe even an analogy exists in that water flows from the mountains; and then the Holy Spirit is described as rivers of living water – which can be seen to flow from the mountain of God.

Zion then shows the significance of God's rule on earth as would be realized through the kingdom of God. And the saints would reign as kings and priests during the millennial period of the kingdom of God.

Kingdom of God

Ideas under this topic will be far too sketchy. There's much to study and explain about the kingdom that just can't be given justice in summary analysis.

The kingdom of God was to be formed on earth (Matt 6:9-13) and was to also represent the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). In this manner, the kingdom couldn't be seen as being part of Israel, but rather external to Israel.

The kingdom of God also wasn't the Church since the kingdom was to start after the fall of the temple. (Luke 21:31-32) The New Testament saints, who are the Church, were to inherit the kingdom with the obvious implication that the kingdom is not the Church.

Church

Note that it seems at least a little bit helpful to use the word Ecclesia instead of Church, since the word “Church” gets too much confused with the earthly buildings and organizations. But the word “Ecclesia” maybe could be seen more as the invisible universal Church encompassing all believers. Alas for now, the discussion will use the word “Church.”

First idea to note is that the kingdom of God never equated to the Church within scriptures.

Now the Church was equated with Jerusalem but mainly in Revelation 21 to 22 after many events of prophecy had occurred.

Then also the Church may not be synonymous with the saints since the saints include believers (people of faith) before the existence of the Church.

Many people seem to make a close association between the Church and Israel, that the Church is Israel. Here they see Israel as being the assembly of God's people, which then seems similar to the Church as being the assembly of God's people. Yet a problem occurs with respect to God's faithfulness if it were said that the Church now assumes all the promises made to Israel. Such analysis is done more thoroughly when examining the Romans 11 Olive Tree analogy. The main gist goes to the requirement that a promise be fulfilled to the one to whom it was made. And the promises to Israel were made to Jacob and his descendants. There was no subsequent identification of Gentiles as being children of Jacob.

Maybe one association that works pretty well would be to say that the Church consists of the children of Abraham.

Conclusion

The different names and different places described in scripture seem to have distinct purposes rather than describing one thing, such as the Church. Each of the names and places listed above also showed different prophetic destinies. The evidence seen thus far actually makes a greater distinction between the items on the list given earlier.

So if any connections would be made between items just discussed, such connections would have to be made with strong evidence to overcome the initial survey that divides these items so distinctly.

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