

# Rabbinic Perspectives on Being Grafted In

Paul did not invent the idea of Gentiles being grafted into the olive tree of Israel.

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The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, 'I have two goodly shoots to engraft on you: Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess.' (b. *Yevamot* 63a)

It is always fascinating to me when I come across a rabbinic teaching parallel to one found in the New Testament. It should not be surprising. The Master and the apostles were all Jewish people, working with Jewish methods of interpreting Scripture. Scholars attempt to determine who is copying whom, but to me this is like trying to figure out the precedence of the chicken or the egg. Both the rabbis and the apostles were immersed in the Judaism of their day. There are similarities between apostolic literature and rabbinic literature because they both draw upon the same well of tradition.

Such a parallel exists alongside the Apostle Paul's teachings about Gentile disciples of Yeshua being grafted into Israel. As surprising as it sounds, we find a similar teaching in the Talmud. The Talmudic parallel sheds light on from where the apostle is drawing his interpretation. Additionally, an eighteenth-century rabbi later picks up on this theme again and expands upon it. Despite the distance of time between these later writings and Paul's, both texts can help illuminate the apostle's thoughts in Romans 11.

## Romans 11

In the eleventh chapter of his epistle to the Roman believing community, the Apostle Paul seeks to clear up the seeming contradiction that although much of Israel has not recognized Yeshua as the Messiah, the Jewish people are still God's elect nation. He explains that the Jewish people's rejection of Messiah has opened the way for the Gentiles to come to Yeshua, but when Israel does turn to Messiah, it will mean life from the dead. He writes that "a partial hardening has come upon Israel,

until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” but that in the end “all Israel will be saved.”<sup>1</sup>

Amidst this argument, Paul begins to speak of Israel using the metaphor of a tree:

*But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” (Romans 11:17–19)*

Gentiles hearing this should be humbled to know that it was only because some branches were removed that they were able to be added on. They in turn should not become arrogant toward the root, that is, the Jewish people: “So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you” (Romans 11:20–21).

Paul assures the Gentile believers that if it were not for God’s continued kindness, they themselves would be cut off.<sup>2</sup> In the same manner, God will show kindness to those of Israel who have rejected Messiah by grafting them back into the tree “if they do not continue in their unbelief:”

*And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree. (Romans 11:23–24)*

Paul’s analogy of the olive tree and the image of being grafted in is one of the most popular in all the New Testament for explaining the inclusion of Gentile believers within Israel. Its picturesque imagery paints a picture of how

non-Jews are brought into the commonwealth of Israel through Messiah. But from where does Paul get this metaphor? Is this something he is making up himself, or is he drawing on the rich traditions of Judaism?

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### **Grafted Into Abraham**

My colleague D. Thomas Lancaster, in his book *Grafted In: Israel, Gentiles, and the Mystery of the Gospel*, points to a similar grafted-in metaphor in the Talmud:<sup>3</sup>

*Rabbi Eleazar expounded, “What is meant by the verse, ‘In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’? The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham, ‘I have two goodly shoots to engraft on you: Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess.’ All the families of the earth, even the other families who live on the earth are blessed only for Israel’s sake. All the nations of the earth, even the ships that go from Gaul to Spain are blessed only for Israel’s sake.” (b. Yevamot 63a)*

Rabbi Eleazar in the above dialogue is musing on God’s promise to Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). In Hebrew the phrase “shall be blessed” is the word *venivrechu* (ונברכו). It is related to the Mishnaic Hebrew word *mavrich* (מבריד), which means “to intermingle, to graft.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Rabbi Eleazar midrashically reads

the verse as, “Into you all the families of the earth shall be grafted in.”

This passage from the Talmud deals with the difficulty of the Torah’s injunction, “No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD” (Deuteronomy 23:3) and the fact that Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess are mothers in the line of the Davidic kings.<sup>5</sup> To answer this contradiction Rabbi Eleazar comes up with a midrash that sets forth the thought that through the process of being removed from their ancestral trees and grafted into the nation of Israel, Ruth is no longer a Moabite and Naamah no longer an Ammonite, which removes all seeming contradiction.

In the mind of the Ramchal, future generations would benefit from the godly stature of their forefathers, that is, the roots.

Although Rabbi Eleazar has taken this passage out of context, his metaphor does prove to be a worthy one to explain how all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham. Lancaster writes:

*In his efforts to turn the world to faith in God, Abraham could be likened unto a tree of faith. As people leave the pagan religious systems and idolatry of the world, they are likened to branches removed from trees of other faiths. They are cut from those trees and grafted into the tree of Abraham’s faith. As the peoples of the world turn to faith in the God of Abraham, they are, in a metaphorical sense, grafted into Abraham. This engrafting process is a blessing to the peoples of the earth, for only in Abraham’s*

*faith can they find truth. Thus, we may read “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” as “All peoples on earth will be grafted into you.”<sup>6</sup>*

Rabbi Eleazar was a contemporary of the Apostle Paul, and it indeed appears as if both men were either drawing on a similar source that has this deliberate misreading of Genesis 12:3 or approaching the text with the same Jewish hermeneutic and arriving at similar conclusions. Paul later used this very text from Genesis 12:3 to describe “those of faith” as “sons of Abraham:”

*The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” (Galatians 3:7–8)*

Both Rabbi Eleazar and the Apostle Paul saw the nations being blessed through Abraham by being grafted into Israel. Yet there is one sharp contrast between their views. Whereas Paul saw this happening through Messiah Yeshua, Rabbi Eleazar and his colleagues would have viewed this as taking place through a Gentile’s legal conversion to Judaism.

### **Moshe Chaim Luzzatto**

Fast-forward eighteen hundred years, and we find this discussion continued in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto. Rabbi Luzzatto, affectionately known as the Ramchal, was an eighteenth-century Italian rabbi famous for his writings on Jewish philosophy, mysticism, and ethical living. He was a prolific writer who wrote over forty books.

One of his most famous works, *Derech HaShem (The Way of God)*, lays out the fundamentals of Jewish faith. In section two Ramchal has a chapter entitled “Israel and the Nations” in which he attempts to mystically explain God’s selection of Israel from the nations. In

this section he elaborates fully on Rabbi El-eazar's musings about Gentiles being grafted into Abraham.

He begins by stating that "before Adam sinned, he was on a much higher level than contemporary man" and that if Adam had not sinned "all future generations would have then shared this good with Adam."<sup>7</sup> Then he begins to bring in the metaphor of the tree:

*God also determined that all these generations that would have been born of Adam should exist on various determined levels. Some of the generations would be thus primary, while others would be secondary, like roots and branches. Later generations would stem from earlier ones [and share their characteristics], like branches stemming from a tree. The number of trees and branches, however, was determined from the very beginning with utmost precision.<sup>8</sup>*

The earlier generations would establish the roots, and then the later generations would become the branches. The roots would therefore set the spiritual tone for the branches. In the mind of the Ramchal, future generations would benefit from the godly stature of their forefathers, that is, the roots.

As we know from the story of Genesis, it was not long after creation before Adam sinned. According to Ramchal, Adam "fell from his original level, and brought upon himself a great degree of darkness and insensitivity." This had widespread ramifications, affecting all mankind, who would now remain on a "degraded level," unable to reach the spiritual heights for which they had originally been destined.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Period of the Roots**

According to Ramchal, HaShem gave the people of the earth a set time period in which they had the ability to raise themselves from this lowered position back to the elevated status

of creation. He called this "the period for the roots."<sup>10</sup> This went from the time of Adam to the Tower of Babel:

*During this period, the gate was open for any individual to properly prepare himself and permanently become a good and worthy root. He would then be prepared for a high degree of excellence, appropriate for man in his original state, rather than that of man in his fallen state.<sup>11</sup>*

**And these roots would then  
"bear future generations."**

After this period of time was over, HaShem needed to assess the deeds of mankind and the progress they had made in returning to the level of spirituality in the Garden of Eden. Whatever they had accomplished would become "a permanent part of their nature in the aspects of their roots," and these roots would then "bear future generations [i.e., branches], all possessing the qualities that were deemed appropriate for their root master."<sup>12</sup>

The Ramchal then states that at the end of the period, unfortunately, no one had made any progress. No one "deserved to rise above the degraded level to which Adam and his children had fallen as a result of their sin."<sup>13</sup> The only exception was Abraham:<sup>14</sup>

*He had succeeded in elevating himself, and as a result of his deeds was chosen by God. Avraham was therefore permanently made into a superior excellent Tree, conforming to man's highest level. It was further provided that he would be able to produce branches [and father a nation] possessing his characteristics.<sup>15</sup>*

According to Ramchal, only Abraham made strides in rectifying the fallen state of man. In turn, he was blessed by having his offspring (branches) fed from the high spiritual root that he had created.

## The Ramchal's teaching on the "age of the roots" and the "age of the branches" offers one attempt at explaining God's selection of Israel and the importance of the conversion process.

### The Age of the Branches

At this point, Ramchal says, humanity divided into seventy nations.<sup>16</sup> All seventy nations remained "on the level of man in his fallen state, while only Israel was in the elevated state." The "era of the roots" came to an end, and "a new age began ... the age of branches, which still exists."<sup>17</sup>

But Ramchal states that HaShem did not give up on the nations. He still wanted them to have a chance to reach the full potential of Eden. Ramchal alludes to the teaching of Rabbi Eleazar:

*God's great love and goodness decreed that the branches of other nations still be given a chance. If they so desired, they still had the free choice to tear themselves loose from their own roots, and through their own actions include themselves among the branches of Avraham's family. This is what God meant when He told Avraham (Bereshis 12:3), "All the families of the earth will be blessed through you." Avraham was*

*thus the father of many converts. [This, however, would require effort on the part of the individuals concerned.] Without such effort, they would remain attached to their own roots and retain their natural characteristics.<sup>18</sup>*

Individual Gentiles have the opportunity to rectify their situation by removing themselves from their national roots and becoming grafted into Abraham's root, that is, the nation of Israel. This was done, according to the Ramchal, through their own effort. He is referring here, as in the talmudic midrash, to going through a formal conversion to Judaism. Only then could an individual from the nations attain the spiritual heights that Adam and all mankind had once been destined for.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

Rabbi Eleazar's talmudic midrash on being grafted into Abraham and the Ramchal's mystical interpretations on the roots and branches of Israel and on the seventy nations provide some interesting perspectives on the discussion in Romans 11. Paul and the sages seem to have been drawing on a similar tradition, and even the Ramchal, who lived almost two millennia after the others, had some affinities with the grafted-in theology of Romans 11. The Ramchal's teaching on the "age of the roots" and the "age of the branches" offers one attempt at explaining God's selection of Israel and the importance of the conversion process.

The Talmud and Ramchal maintain that this grafting into Abraham (Israel) takes place through human effort. A person can only accomplish it by going through a legal conversion to Judaism. The individual must remove himself from the tainted root he came from and, as a disconnected branch, be grafted into the tree of Israel.

Paul used the same metaphor, but he did not have legal conversion in view. According to Paul, Gentile believers have been grafted

into the tree of Israel by the work of Messiah. They attain this status by submitting to Yeshua. The conversion that takes place is spiritual, not physical or legal. Paul states, “In him also you were circumcised [converted] with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11).

Additionally, according to Paul, Gentile believers in Messiah who have been grafted into Israel spiritually join Israel but legally remain non-Jews. In the Talmud and in the ideas of the Ramchal, the person grafted into Israel has completely left his root nation behind and is no longer connected to it. In apostolic thought, however, the Gentile remains still physically connected to his root nation in order to help rectify it from within, spreading the knowledge of Yeshua and the gospel of the kingdom.

Comparing apostolic and rabbinic thought demonstrates that the Master and his first disciples were thoroughly Jewish, immersed in Judaism and Jewish thought. While they sometimes arrive at different conclusions than do the rabbis, they reached those conclusions working with the same hermeneutical and exegetical tools. 

## Endnotes

- 1 Romans 11:25–26.
- 2 Romans 11:21.
- 3 For his full discussion see D. Thomas Lancaster, *Grafted In: Israel, Gentiles, and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2009), 28–30.
- 4 Lancaster has in a footnote on page 176 of *Grafted In*: “This opinion is based on a grammatical anomaly in Genesis 12:3. Nowhere else in the Torah does the verb “bless” (*barach*) appear in the form (*niphal*) that it appears in Genesis 12:3. The same verbal root, however, is commonly found in this form in regard to “grafting” of plants (Scherman and Zlotowitz, *Bereishis*, 432).”
- 5 “Ruth and Naamah are referred to as *good* shoots because they were progenitors of prominent kings and prophets; Ruth was the forebearer of King

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David (Ruth 4:13–22), and Naamah was the mother of King Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21), who was in turn the ancestor of the virtuous kings of the Davidic Dynasty, e.g., Hezekiah, Asa, and Jehosaphat, as well as the prophet Isaiah (See *Megillah* 10b, where the Gemara comments that Amotz [Isaiah’s father] and Amatziah [a Davidic King] were brothers) (*Rashi*)” (Rabbi Menachem Davis, *Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud: Yevamos Volume 2 [Folios 41a–84a]* [Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll, 2000], 63a<sup>2</sup>).

- 6 Lancaster, *Grafted In*, 29.
- 7 Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Derech HaShem: The Way of God* (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, trans.; New York, NY: Feldheim, 1997), 133.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 133–135.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 135.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 136.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 14 According to the sages, Abraham would have been forty-eight years old at the time of the Tower of Babel. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 64:4.
- 15 Rabbi Luzzatto, *Derech HaShem*, 139.
- 16 It is a rabbinic tradition that there are seventy nations of the world based upon the genealogy of Genesis chapter 10.
- 17 Rabbi Luzzatto, *Derech HaShem*, 139. Ramchal states that the nations were actually given one last chance with the giving of the Torah, which is said to have gone out to the seventy nations of the world, but in the end they refused it (141).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 139–141.