

Truth for Today

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The Old is in the New Revealed: The Stone of Israel

In his poem entitled, "*Christ the Foundation of His Church*", Isaac Watts speaks about Christ as the sure foundation stone in the following way:

*Behold, the sure foundation-stone
Which God in Zion lays,
To build our heav'nly hopes upon,
And his eternal praise.*

*Chosen of God, to sinners dear,
And saints adore the name;
They trust their whole salvation here,
Nor shall they suffer shame.*

*The foolish builders, scribe and priest,
Reject it with disdain;
Yet, on this Rock the church shall rest,
And envy rage in vain.*

*What, though the gates of hell withstood,
Yet must this building rise;
'Tis thy own, Almighty God,
And wondrous in our eyes.*

He applies the metaphor of the foundation stone to Christ and Zion to the church built upon it. But how is this conclusion reached – after all, our subject today has the title, "The Stone of *Israel*"? Therefore, we will begin by examining the scriptural context to determine the origin of this stone and the meaning of the title itself. Then we will look at scriptures that relate to the Messiah of the Jews being such a stone.

Firstly, let's look at the scriptural context in which the phrase is found. It is set in the prophetic words of Jacob concerning Joseph in Genesis 49:22-26. We read: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall: the archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him: but his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel:) even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb: the blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren."

The words, "from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel", are found to be in brackets. It is something that Jacob has added by the way. So is the patriarch predicting that this stone of Israel would come from the line of Joseph? I venture to say, "No! *The Stone of Israel* would come from the hands of the mighty God of Jacob." God's chosen One was to be conceived by the Holy Spirit and not through the seed of a man at all (Matthew 1:20). This was God's doing. In this way a body was prepared for His own eternal Son (Hebrews 10:5). He would enter into this world by a virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23).

In the blessing, Jacob speaks of this stone as being the "shepherd" also. This specifically refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. In John 10:11, He is called the Good Shepherd, namely, the One who gave His life for the sheep. Then, in Hebrews 13:20, He is revealed as the "Great Shepherd" in resurrection. He it is who leads, tends and cares for Christians today. In 1 Peter 5:4, He is called the "Chief Shepherd". This looks on to the future when He shall appear as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will not only shepherd Israel in that day; but He will exercise His care and rule over all men.

Furthermore, we read an amazing prophecy in Zechariah 13:7: "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones." Here we see that a man would be God's fellow. As far as I know, this is the only place where the Hebrew word for "fellow" is used in scripture. If the translators of the Authorised Version are right in using it, we find here a man who is equal to God. This Shepherd is both man and God. David states the deity of the Shepherd in Psalm 23. There he writes; "The LORD is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1) Christ, God's fellow, was smitten! From this, we may conclude that God has experienced what death is like in the sacrifice of His own Son.

If the Shepherd is both God and man, then the Stone of Israel must be the same! He is the Son of God who "being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:6-8). As John 1:1-18 tells us, He was the eternal Word who was God, yet became flesh and dwelt among us and His glory was likened to that of the only begotten Son in the bosom of the father. Also, He was full of grace and truth!

After considering the context, let us now think about the title itself – "The Stone of Israel". The word "stone" comes from a Hebrew root word meaning "to build". It suggests a stone used in a building; but the actual Hebrew word itself is used as a noun for a variety of stones in the Old Testament scriptures.

One of the most interesting references to a stone in the Bible is found in Genesis 35 where we read: "And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel. And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins; and the land which I gave Abraham and Isaac, to thee I will give it, and to thy seed after thee will I give the land. And God went up from him in the place where he talked with him. And Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he talked with him, even a pillar of stone: and he poured a drink offering thereon, and he poured oil thereon. And Jacob called the name of the place where God spake with him, Bethel" (Genesis 35:10-15).

These verses were chosen because they link the Israel that sprang from Jacob with a pillar of stone at a place named Bethel. The latter means "house of God". It was the place where God had introduced Himself to Jacob. So we have a pillar and a house together. The pillar of stone is a witness to the fact that God had been there.

The house of God today, is the church. It is called the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). The foundation of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (1 Corinthians 3:11). He is also called the Chief Corner Stone of that foundation in Ephesians 2:20. As the foundation, He is the Son of God upon whom the house is built but, as the Corner Stone, He is also the One with whom the building is aligned or takes its shape. It reminds us of His own words in Matthew 16:16-18: "And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The "rock", in this context, is not Peter (which is a name meaning "a small rock" or "stone") but, rather, the statement of Peter in identifying Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God". So, those who believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, are part of the church for He died.

In 1 Timothy 3:15 we read: "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." Here we can see that the house of God and the church are two aspects of the same thing. Believers on the Son of God are classed as members of the church; but they are classed as living stones in the house of God. In 1 Peter 2:5 we read: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." Hence, the house of God is a spiritual house. The believers in it are priests because they form a holy priesthood. Through their Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, they are able to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Such sacrifices are explained by Hebrews 13:15 that says, "By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name."

This truth has special meaning to Jewish Christians (to whom Peter's epistle was written) because God had originally wanted the whole nation of Israel to form the priesthood. However, owing to their failure, the responsibility fell to Aaron and his family. Now, in Christ, God's original purpose has been fulfilled in the house of God today, namely, all true Christians are priests. Their prayers and praises are acceptable to God, not through specially selected people on earth, but through the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He is the only mediator between God and man. Christians may, with boldness, enter the very presence of God through Him. In Hebrews 10:19-22 we read: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." What an awe-inspiring privilege Christians have!

In this, we can see that old law is ended for a person when faith in the Son of God is exercised, as it is written: "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Romans 10:4). So the Aaronic priesthood has passed. We have a High Priest who lives after the power of an endless life. His name is Jesus! Psalm 110 opens with the words: "The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalm 110:1). David, its author, is speaking of the Lord Jesus taking His place at the right hand of the majesty on high. It goes on to say, "The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4). Here is a new and everlasting priesthood. Its high priest is the Son of God. He is King of righteousness! He is the King of peace! Jewish Christians, as well as all other Christians, can rejoice that they form a "holy" and "royal priesthood". The holy aspect involves activities Godward. The royal aspect is to show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into his marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9). In other words they are both worshippers and witnesses.

All this has come about through the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Psalm 118:22-23 we find this prophecy: "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD'S doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." When the Messiah came into this world, He came to His own people and they would not receive Him. The Lord Jesus speaks of this Himself in Mark 12:1-12. There he spoke of a man who owned a vineyard and let it out to farmers while he went on a long journey. At harvest time, he sent a servant back to the farmers to request samples of the grapes. The servant was beaten by them and sent away with nothing. The owner sent more servants who were also abused and some even killed. Therefore, he decided to send his own son thinking that his tenants would honour him. They didn't. Recognising him as the heir of the vineyard, they killed him thinking that the vineyard would become their own.

In the parable, the owner of the vineyard represents God the Father; The vineyard the nation of Israel. The servants represent the prophets that He had previously sent to Israel. The fruit represents the aspects of love they should have shown as the people of God. The son represents the Messiah, the Son of God. Instead of accepting Him, they took Him by wicked hands and crucified Him. The parable finishes with the owner of the vineyard destroying those wicked tenants. So, in a day to come, God will judge those who rejected His Son and were unrepentant.

On the other hand, God is merciful. In Isaiah 28:16 we find these words: "Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." Here the Lord Jesus is described as a *foundation* stone, a tried stone a precious corner stone and a *sure foundation*. So the Messiah is not only presented as the foundation stone; but as a sure foundation. In a day to come, He, the Son of God will exercise His omnipotence and will be entirely trustworthy. He will be unmoveable, yet just. He will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords!

He is a *tried* Stone because, as Isaiah 53 states that He was despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and the people hid their faces from him. Yet, He bore their griefs, and carried their sorrows; but the nation in general rejected Him. He was stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. He was wounded for the people's transgressions. He was bruised for their iniquities. The chastisement of their peace fell upon him. He was brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment. He was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of the people He was stricken. His soul was made an offering for sin. All these sufferings fit Him out to be our Saviour and our Great High Priest in glory! (Isaiah 53:3-5, 7-10)

He is the *precious* Corner-Stone because He was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. For this reason, God has highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11)

So in a sense, Christians have part with Him and know these things now. The words in Hebrews 12:22 state this. The author is speaking to Christians (particularly Jewish ones): "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels..." As members of the church, the house of God, they have been brought into the blessedness of these things, and more besides.

Furthermore, we read in 1 Peter 2:6-8: "Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner..."

We can, therefore, see how the hymn of Wesley, with which we began, comes together with a summary of this doctrine. However, there is a prophetic aspect of this Stone that must be emphasised. In Daniel 2 we find Daniel, God's prophet in captivity in Babylon coming before King Nebuchadnezzar. The king had dreamed of a terrible image

and wanted to know its meaning. However, he refused to describe the dream. In this way, he was testing the wise men of the land and their gods. The God of Daniel had revealed the dream to his prophet and we find Daniel speaking of the image in these terms: "This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth". Daniel 2:32-35

Daniel then explained the meaning of the image to the king. Each part of it represented a kingdom beginning with that of Babylon. We know these kingdoms to refer to the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman Empires. They are described as the "Times of the Gentiles" by Jesus in Luke 21:24. They are periods where Israel was downtrodden by these Gentile kingdoms. However, the Stone cut without human hands represents the Lord Jesus Christ who will one day appear with power and great glory and destroy all previous empires (including a revived Roman one). He will set up a kingdom that shall never be superseded. It will be a kingdom that lasts for a thousand years before He, the Son of God, hands it with a purged world back to God. We read of this in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28: "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith, all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." During that time, Jerusalem will be the metropolis of the world and Christ will indeed be "The Stone of Israel".

In all this there is a warning. Those who accept the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God who loves them and gave His life for them at Calvary's cross, are blessed and saved. They recognise how precious He is. But, in Luke 20:17-18, we read: "And he [Jesus] beheld them, and said, What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder." Those who do not believe in Him will, one day, be dashed to pieces. Those whom He falls upon in judgment will be ground to powder! Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!

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