

## ZECHARIAH'S "SONS OF OIL" AND THE OLIVE TREES OF ROMANS 11:16–24<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study explicates the significance of the olive trees in Zechariah 4:1–14 and Paul's metaphorical illustration of the olive trees in Romans 11:16–24 and draws a comparison between the two. Both in Zechariah 4:1–14 and in Romans 11:16–24 the focused attention on two olive trees may indicate a common theological parallelism that may have been influential in crafting Paul's analogy. This study suggests the possibility that Zechariah's olive trees may have been at the forefront of Paul's categorical interpretation of the natural and wild olive trees of Romans 11.

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study will be narrowed to explicating the significance of the olive trees in Zechariah 4:1–14 and Paul's metaphorical illustration of the olive trees in Romans 11:16–24 and to draw a comparison between the two. Both in Zechariah 4:1–14 and in Romans 11:16–24 the focused attention on two olive trees may indicate a common theological parallelism<sup>2</sup> that may have been influential in crafting Paul's analogy. Bailey has done much to recognise and document the rhetorical style of Paul's letters that can be traced to the writing of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures (Bailey (2011; 1996:14–30). It should not be surprising if a common theological thread can be traced in Paul's writings which may demonstrate an influence from the Hebrew prophetic literature. This study will suggest the possibility that Zechariah's olive trees may have been at the forefront of Paul's categorical interpretation of the

<sup>1</sup> This article is a dissemination of part of a PhD thesis submitted in 2015 in the Department of Old Testaments Studies, University of Pretoria, under the supervision of Dirk J. Human.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to be equated with the type of parallelism scholars use to describe the apparent harmony of parallel lines in Hebrew poetry.

natural and wild olive trees of Romans 11. In this way, Zechariah's olive trees may function as an interpretative reference for Paul's teaching on Gentile inclusion in Yahweh's family. Like the olive trees of Zechariah 4, the natural and wild olive trees of Romans 11 are the anointed ones, established by God, and used as instruments of Messianic hope and restoration to the world.

## THE OLIVE IN ZECHARIAH 4:1–14

### The golden lampstand

The first six chapters of Zechariah contain variations between the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Old Greek (LXX/OG) that are worth examining. These variations are in part due to the nature of transmission, while other reasons may include distinctions made as a result of the worldview of the translator. On account of the orthodox nature of transmission in antiquity, the variation found in the LXX/OG is not a result of intentional manipulation. Kroll (2006:179) maintains that these differences instead result from the theological and historical assumptions of the translator.

In Zechariah 4, the prophet sees a golden lampstand with two olive trees standing on either side. Verse 14 includes the angel's explication of the identity of the two olive trees and reports the following according to the MT and OG:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים שְׁנֵי בְנֵי הַיְצִהָר הָעֹמְדִים עַל אֲדוֹן כָּל הָאָרֶץ

He said, "These (are the) two sons of oil who stand by the Lord of all the earth."

καὶ εἶπεν οὗτοι οἱ δύο υἱοὶ τῆς πίστεως παρεστήκασιν τῷ κυρίῳ πάσης τῆς γῆς

He said, "these two sons of prosperity stand by the Lord of all the earth."<sup>3</sup>

The primary difference in this verse is in the translation of the term יְצִהָר. According to Jerome, the early recensions included the following translations: στιλπνότητος (α'; "of brightness"), ἐλαίου (σ'; "of oil"), and λαμπρότης (θ'; "of splendour"). Aquila and Theodotion rely on a different translation of the Hebrew root יצהר, rendering it as "noon" (Koehler 2001: צהרים). However, the Symmachus recension retains the literal

<sup>3</sup> Hebrew and Greek translations are my own.

rendering. Kroll, drawing on the work of Zeigler, asserts “only the Akhmimic Coptic version and the Arabic versions deviate from *πιότης*, ‘oil, fat,’ and most likely found *καλλιελαιίου*, ‘of cultivated oil,’ in their Greek *Vorlagen*” (Kroll 2006:188).

In the LXX/OG, all the references to this oil are translated with *ἔλαιον*. To be consistent with the employment of *ἔλαιον*, the preferred translation of verse 14 would favour the Symmachus recension. Kroll points out a possible exception by noting the metaphorical usage of *יצהר*. She notes that *יצהר* is juxtaposed with *וְיִרְוּ* and *וְגַן* in all but one example in the MT from Joel 2:24. According to Kroll, this sequence denotes agricultural prosperity. She concludes “in this sense the appearance of *πιότης* in Zechariah 4:14 may refer to this general connotation of *יצהר*” (2006:188). *πιότης* is utilised throughout the Septuagint in reference to an abundance of food, and in this sense the term can best reflect the coming success of God’s appointed leaders, Zerubbabel and Joshua. This is the interpretation put forth by Carol and Eric Meyers who contend instead of Zerubbabel and Joshua described as “anointed ones” they are established by God as leaders who will restore the temple and security in the land, thus promising economic prosperity (Kroll 2006:188).

Whereas the outcome of their roles certainly would include economic prosperity, removing from them the title of anointed ones is unnecessary. A leader anointed by God for a task works through God’s power, hence the anointing, inaugurating blessing for a nation and land. Petersen reflects this in observing that the lampstand represents the presence of God. The “sons of oil” flanking the lampstand are inseparable from the lampstand and are thus elevated to a position with access to the deity (Petersen 1984:233–234). Further, Psalm 2:7 provides an instance where God coronates an Israelite King with the words “You are my son, today I have begotten you”. Petersen asserts, “The notion of the King as an adopted or ‘reborn’ son of Yahweh is elsewhere attested in the Hebrew Bible<sup>4</sup> ... The notion of the King being in filial relationship to the deity is a standard way of speaking about kingship in ancient Israel” (Petersen 1984:233). The immediate context surrounding these visions will also provide for a

<sup>4</sup> See 2 Sam 7:14, “I will be his father, and he shall be my son”; see also I Chr 28:6; Ps 89:26.

more accurate understanding of how to translate בני היצהר.

The following discussion will explicate Zechariah's vision of the two olive trees according to its broader context within the visions. This text includes the fifth of eight visions recorded by the prophet Zechariah. In the house of the Lord, a lampstand was always present, illuminating the place of worship. The first occurrence of the lampstand comes through divine dictation to Moses in Exodus 25:31–40. The text indicates that a single golden lampstand provided light in the most holy place. Later, in 1 Kings 7:49, Solomon included ten lampstands made of pure gold, five on each side in front of the inner sanctuary. The next detailed instruction concerning a lampstand is in Zechariah 4 and though the descriptions are slightly different to those found in Exodus, similarities remain.<sup>5</sup> Klein accurately summarises, "In each instance, the light produced by the lampstands represents God's glory and his presence among his people" (Klein 2008:153). He also maintains that the lampstands are symbols of the people of God and of the role they are intended to play in being a light to the world.

While Zechariah's eight visions represent a literary unit, the overall structure and messages of those visions have incurred numerous interpretations. At the onset, the visions are concerned with Judah's desperate need for encouragement and deliverance. However, the messages of the visions are not confined to their immediate context alone. Eschatological prophecies and visions are often known to include both a present and future fulfilment. The language of the visions introduce the eschatological day when the Messiah will establish his eternal Kingdom and will reign with all those who have accepted his offer of salvation (Merrill 1994:25). From the premillennialist perspective, Unger argues that "all these visions have the same scope. They bridge the centuries and extend to the period of the restoration of the kingdom of Israel (Acts 1:6)" (Unger 1962:25). Mitchell maintains that visions 1 to 3 describe Judah's return from captivity, 4 to 5 describe the anointed of the Lord and 6 to 8 describe the seat of wickedness and its removal (Mitchell, Smith & Bewer 1912:115). Klaus Seybold (1974:100) and Baruch Halpern (1978:189) contend that the primary focus of the

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<sup>5</sup> See also Exod 37:17–24; Lev 24:2–4.

visions is the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Halpern argues that Zechariah stresses the temple reconstruction in chapters 1–6, which include the temple and other cultic imagery in the visions, and that the divine warrior theme demands a cultic context. Others have noted that the visions form a chiasmic structure. Baldwin asserts that the visions follow a pattern “a b b c c b b a” where the fourth and fifth visions hold the theological emphasis of the entire section (Baldwin 1972:80–81).

Meyers and Meyers offer another chiasmic interpretation, holding to “a b c d c b a,” yet they exclude the priestly vision (3:1–10) on account of the divergent introduction from the usual pattern of the visions (1987:179–180). Klein argues that Meyers and Meyers’ omission of 3:1–10 is unwarranted and adopts their structure but includes the vision they left out. The following is the chiasmic structure that emerges (Klein 2008:91):

A Vision One: The Man on a Red Horse (1:7–17)

B Vision Two: Four Horns and Four Craftsmen (1:18–21)

C Vision Three: The Surveyor (2:1–13)

D Vision Four: The Cleansing of the High Priest (3:1–10)

D Vision Five: The Lampstand and Two Olive Trees (4:1–14)

C Vision Six: The Flying Scroll (5:1–4)

B Vision Seven: The Woman in the Basket (5:5–11)

A Vision Eight: The Four Chariots (6:1–8)

As mentioned earlier, there is a thematic unity among the visions, and the vision of “The Cleansing of the High Priest” complements “The Lampstand and Two Olive Trees”. Klein observes a ring pattern in the chiasm where the outermost ring (visions 1 and 8) demonstrates a universal perspective concerning the Lord’s omniscience. The next inner ring (visions 2 and 7) is concerned with international matters and Judah’s relationship to the empires. The next ring (vision 3 and 6) is concerned with national issues, especially in Jerusalem. The final innermost ring (vision 4 and 5) expresses the prophet’s primary focus by pointing to the temple and the leadership (Klein 2008:91). The following analysis will focus on the content of vision 5 with special attention given to the olive trees.

The fifth vision records an encouraging account to Zerubbabel and Zechariah (and likely Joshua) through the proclamation that Zerubbabel will complete the temple. Merrill summarises several similarities that the fourth vision shares with the fifth: “both deal with the cultic persons or objects (the high priest and the menorah respectively), both may reference historical person’s contemporary to the prophet (Joshua and Zerubbabel, though Joshua is not mentioned by name), both refer to temple building, and both reach their climax on a strong messianic note” (Merrill 1994:145). Both the visions are indicative of the Lord’s presence with his people and in the temple. While the fourth vision involves the ceremony of the high priest, the fifth vision involves the ceremony of the governor (Conrad 1999:106).

After being awakened by an angelic messenger (from vision four), Zechariah is asked what he sees, to which he replies *מנורת זהב*, or “golden lampstand” (4:2). Some scholars would argue that although modern English translations render *מנורת* as “lampstand”, the translation may not fit the context.<sup>6</sup> Part of the support for this reasoning is that modern Jewish iconography depicts the lampstand in a manner that most likely did not resemble the lampstand of Zechariah’s vision.<sup>7</sup> However, citing a modern depiction of what the lampstand may have looked like is not a strong argument, unless further substantiated. Klein (2008:155) notes that the style of menorah seen today was rare in the postexilic era and does not exactly match the description of lights and bowls that Zechariah sees. Baldwin (1972:119) asserts that contemporary styles of the menorah were unknown prior to the first century B.C. However, Keel provides an isolated example of a lamp from Zechariah’s era that resembles the modern styles seen today (Keel 1997:165–166). The Hebrew text describes the design with ambiguity to the modern reader as *שבעה ושבעה מוצקות לגרות* (“seven and seven pipes to the lamps”).

This description is problematic for obvious reasons in that the reader is left to interpret what “seven and seven pipes” might look like. Many suggestions have been offered, and due to the scope of this discussion they will be omitted. Yet what remains

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of Zechariah’s lampstand see North (1970:183–206); Meyers and Meyers (1987:229–240); Petersen (1984:217–224).

<sup>7</sup> For suggested reconstructions of Zechariah’s menorah, see Hachlili (2001).

constant, irrespective of what we make of the description, is that Zechariah's vision of the lampstand provides information that no other verses in the Hebrew Scriptures provide. Klein (2008:156) notes that "in addition to the spectacle of light such an unusual configuration produced, the solid gold lampstand made it dazzling to behold". On account of its position in the midst of the olive trees, the theological significance of the lampstand will be explained together with that of the olive trees.

Zechariah's vision of the lampstand stands in unison with his vision of שנים זיתים, or "two olive trees". The olive trees stand beside the lampstand, one on the right of the receptacle and one on the left. In ancient Israel, olive oil fuelled lamps, and the presence of the two trees here probably symbolises, as Klein observes, the continual supply of oil to keep the lamp burning. The lamp did not require human agency to maintain its supply (Klein 2008:156). Mitchell asserts that the olive trees represent "diminutive images of the things they were intended to represent" (Mitchell, Smith & Bewer 1912:162). Given the high prevalence of olive trees in Israel, Zechariah's apparent confusion over the identity of the trees is cleared up after the angel's response to his question "What are these, my Lord?". Klein (2008:157) maintains that the angel's response makes it clear that the question is over the symbolism of the olive trees and not their identity. The angel's response in verse 5 ("don't you know?") serves to emphasise the importance of the items Zechariah is seeing in the vision. The delay in the angel's response serves to further enhance the importance of the question. One important textual feature that must be examined is the identification of מַה אֵלֶּה, "what are these?". The identification of "these" has been suggested by many scholars to be only the two olive trees (Baldwin 1972:120; Meyers and Meyers 1987:240). However the text does not clearly indicate the objects in Zechariah's question as exclusively the two olive trees. Another possibility is to take the entire vision as in question, specifically the two olive trees together with the lampstand. Perhaps this is a more complete explanation since the description of the lampstand is far more obscure than the familiar olive trees. It may be possible then, that together they are in question as one, unified sight of inquiry.

One of the most well-known verses in Zechariah is the angel's response in 4:6.

Though the response is not a direct answer to Zechariah's question in 4:5, and though it does not specifically mention the olive trees, it is part of the answer. The angel responds saying,

זה דבר יהוה אל זרובבל לאמר לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי אמר יהוה צבאות

This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel saying, 'Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts.

Klein (2008:158) aptly contends that the angel's response to Zechariah indicates that the olive oil which supplied the lampstand in vv. 2–3 is symbolic of "the Spirit of the Lord and continues the theme of the Lord's provision for the ongoing reconstruction of the temple". In similar manner, Barker (1983:629) asserts, "Zechariah's work on the temple and in the lives of the people was to be completed, not by human might or power, but by divine power-constant and sufficient". This vision is closely related to the previous vision given to Joshua in 3:1–10. The two visions are unified in that they serve to encourage the two most important leaders in the postexilic community, the spiritual leader-Joshua and political leader-Zerubbabel. As a result of God's blessing and his sovereign work among them, the visions would serve to strengthen the resolve of these leaders, Judah, and the nation as a whole. The angel's statement declares that only the Lord's power will have lasting achievement. With the rebuilding of the temple in mind, the Lord is guaranteeing that Zerubbabel and his people will succeed in the face of hopelessness and hardship. Further, the repetition of the negative particle *לֹא* reinforces the futility of relying on human strength to accomplish what only God can.

The two words that are negated, "might" and "power", are combined, communicating to the hearer that not all of the resources available to mankind, including military and political, will be enough to affect God's sovereignty. Genesis 11:1–9, which records the account of the tower of Babel incident, bears a similar theological message – that pride and human invention over God's will is trivial. Regardless of the reader or intended audience the message is a timeless one, that salvation is not the result of human achievement, but from the grace of God. The last phrase of verse 6, "by my Spirit", indicates that the Spirit of God (symbolised by the

olive oil) will be the active agent involved in the restoration of God's people. Feinberg (1975:59) also asserts that "everywhere in Scripture (olive) oil is seen as the type of the Holy Spirit". In this context the restoration of the temple will be contingent upon God's Spirit standing behind their effort. With similar intentions, Psalm 33:16 advises "No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his strength", then concludes in verse 20 with the corrective: "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield".

The verse closes with the angel attributing verse 6 to the "Lord of Hosts". The Hebrew word *צבאות* has been translated "Almighty" or "Hosts" or "Who rules over all". The word can include military imagery or angelic imagery, which further indicates the authority with which God commands and accomplishes his will. All authority and power belongs to the Lord who is sovereign over earthly and heavenly entities acting through his agent, *רוח*, the Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord is a phrase that occurs frequently in the Hebrew Scriptures. Baldwin (1972:121) reviews some of the roles the Spirit of the Lord fulfilled in the Hebrew Scriptures which included completing creation (Gen 1:2), parting the red sea (Exod 15:8), and reviving the dead bones in Ezekiel's vision (37:1).

### **The two olive trees**

Zechariah 4:11–12 revisits the question Zechariah asked in verses 4–5. Two questions are asked, the first concerning the olive trees and the second one more specifically, "What are the two olive branches which are beside the two golden pipes, which empty the golden oil from themselves?" Both of these questions are asking for clarification to the vision seen in verses 1–3. Klein (2008:163) argues that verse 12 draws the reader to Zechariah's point in this vision "like concentric circles draw the eye toward the inner circle". Merrill (1994:154) translates the branches of the olive trees as "extensions". Modern translations maintain the translation "branches" from the Hebrew *שבלי*. Regardless of the translation, the image portrayed includes some type of extension from the branches that allow olive oil to freely flow into the burning lampstand, without any need for human involvement. Another possible translation of

שבלִי is “ears of corn” (see *HALOT* 2001:1394; *BDB*:987). In this context the ears of corn would refer to the fruit of the olive trees. Klein (2008:164) suggests that this view would stress the “fertility and the restoration of prosperity throughout the land once the temple resumes its role as the place for worshipping the Lord”.

Zechariah’s vision of the olive trees explains to the reader that these “branches” or “extensions” served as conduits (המריקים) by which the golden oil flowed to the lampstand. Although the image remains obscure, the purpose serves the flow of the golden oil, which is supplied by God, through the two golden pipes. The Hebrew word צנתרות, translated “pipes”, is used nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures. The constant flow of golden oil into the golden lampstand reinforces the golden imagery which symbolises the purity and pristine quality of the oil. The continuous flow of this golden oil symbolises God’s unending חסד love and provision for his people realised in this case through the regal and priestly offices. Hosea 2:8 and Joel 2:19, 24 illustrate God’s continued blessing indicating abundant olive oil as evidence.

The final verses, 13–14, include the angel’s response to Zechariah’s confusion over the olive trees. The angels respond first with a question, “do you not know what these are?” Zechariah’s puzzlement is answered directly with the angel identifying the two trees as שני בני היצהר, which translates as “the two sons of freshly pressed oil”. They are said to be the ones “who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth”. Since olive oil was used to anoint Israelite priests and kings, the translation “the two anointed ones” is rendered in most translations.

The symbolism of the olive trees, the golden lampstand, and the golden olive oil carry with themselves a rich theological meaning. The term for oil in verse 14 is a term that departs from the usual term for oil, שמן. Instead the term יצהר is employed. This word is used to describe unmanufactured, freshly pressed oil and represents a fresh crops’ produce (see *HALOT* 2001:427). The Hebrew Scriptures use this word in Deuteronomy 7:12–13,

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your ancestors. He will love you and bless you and increase your

numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of your land—  
your grain, new wine and olive oil ... (NIV)

The postexilic community would have been reminded of the agricultural blessing among others that would be theirs should they keep God's laws. Klein makes a keen observation: "Theologically, the fresh oil's unrefined state further deemphasises human agency in God's supernatural provision for Israel. The oil flows directly from the trees into the lampstand without human hands to refill their oil reservoirs" (Klein 2008:165). The olive trees and the free flowing pure oil further substantiate the theme of the fifth vision which promotes God's protection and provision over against human debility. It should also be recognised that human agents are not unnecessary altogether, but rather do not constitute the source of blessing.

The identity of the two anointed ones symbolised by the olive tree is not clear, but it seems to refer to Joshua and Zerubbabel – God's chosen leaders. The primary support for this conclusion is that only the priests and kings of Israel were anointed with oil. Joshua would have been anointed at his ordination to high priest. Zerubbabel never served in the role of king, but only as a Persian vassal (Baldwin 1972:124). This would exclude him from receiving a royal anointing, however his Davidic lineage ascribes him royal status. Further, Haggai 2:23 states that the Lord Almighty will choose and give Zerubbabel a royal signet ring. 1 Chronicles 3:17–19 identifies Zerubbabel as grandson of king Jehoiachin. The imagery that emerges regardless of the identity of the two anointed ones is that the political and religious life of the people will continue to prosper with leadership that has been established by God. Cohen makes an appropriate observation concerning the olive tree symbolism: "The allusion is clearly to Joshua and Zerubbabel, the representative of the priestly and regal offices. They are the channels by which Israel (symbolized by the lamps) is kept supplied with the Divine spirit (symbolized by the oil)" (Cohen 1994:286). The last phrase of verse 14 ends with a statement that reinforces the theme of God's sovereignty, not only in the lives of Israel but over "all the earth".

The lampstand has received less attention in the interpretation of the vision than anything else and various interpretations have been offered. Baldwin suggests that the

lampstand symbolises the temple and the Jewish people as a witness to God (1972:124). Others maintain that the lampstand symbolises God. Petersen (1984:234) refers to it as the “divine presence”. Unger (1962:82) asserts that “the golden lampstand thus portrays the messiah as both Light and Lord of the whole earth in the kingdom age revealed to and through his restored nation Israel”. Although the exact identification is not easily discerned, the purpose is best summarised by Klein who describes the golden lampstand in stating, “The Lord’s presence in the temple provides the unending source of light to all nations, drawing all to Jerusalem to worship” (Klein 2008:167). The prophet Isaiah presents a similar picture in 60:1–3:

1 “Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

2 “For behold, darkness will cover the earth  
And deep darkness the peoples;  
But the Lord will rise upon you  
And His glory will appear upon you.

3 “Nations will come to your light,  
And kings to the brightness of your rising.

Whereas Klein noted that the Lord’s presence in the temple provides the light for the nations, the author adds that the Spirit-filled leadership of Israel is symbolised by the olive trees and by the olive oil. The leaders led by the Spirit are the means by which the light for the nations burns continuously.

The implications of the contextual factors mentioned above would indicate that Zerubbabel and Joshua are the two leaders appointed by God, having been anointed through his Spirit. Kroll aptly observes that there is a clear hope in the Davidic restoration that is seen in the usage of the term *צמח* in 3:8 and 6:12. She maintains that *בני היצחק* most likely reinforces the messianic hope of restoration. In the same way that Joshua was clothed with “pure vestments” and a “turban,” conjuring images of Aaron’s ordination, so the “sons of oil” bring to mind images of Davidic and Aaronic leadership. Kroll rightly concludes in stating that the Greek rendering “sons of *πίστης*” detracts and weakens the association to the Davidic and Aaronic institutions and

instead "ascribes a new role for the descendants of a royal and priestly past" (Kroll 2006:189).

בני היצוהר is best understood as connoting a Davidic (messianic) and priestly overtone, as if reading "sons of שמן". The following section will now turn to the identity of the two olive trees in Romans 11 together with what has previously been discussed regarding Zechariah 4. Though intertextuality can broadly refer to the study of a set of relationships that may exist between biblical texts and or non/biblical texts, it may also have a more specific interest such as interbiblical exegesis to which this study does not venture.<sup>8</sup> However, Fishbane (2000:39–44) notes that later rabbinic midrash viewed all of Scripture as a cohesive whole – where any given part has the potential to invite reflection on another.<sup>9</sup> In this way, Romans 11 will be treated as rabbinic midrash.

## THE OLIVE TREES OF ROMANS 11:16–24

Though Paul's illustration and commentary on the olive tree is found in his letter to an assembly in first century Rome, his theological argument regarding the nation of Israel and the Gentile relationship between Yahweh, Abraham, and the Israelite community has ancient roots in the Pentateuch. Educated under renowned rabbi Gamaliel, grandson of Hillel, a Pharisee and former persecutor of the followers of Yeshua of Nazareth, Paul calls upon the ancient symbolism of the olive tree among his Israelite brothers to bring new light upon the Israelite-Gentile relations in the first century. In offering a rabbinic midrash, he appeals to the Torah and to Abraham to make his case in an image which has already been seen in this study to be uniquely Israelite and Yahwistic. Verses 16–24 read,

<sup>16b</sup>If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

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<sup>8</sup> For more on theories and approaches to intertextuality see Koptak (2008).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed approach to intertextuality in Zechariah, see Stead (2009), especially p. 19 for a discussion on defining intertextuality.

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” <sup>20</sup>That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. <sup>21</sup>For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. <sup>22</sup>Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.<sup>10</sup>

In agreement with Esler (2003:103), it may be recognised that the text stresses the importance of the image of the olive tree in Romans 11:16b–24, and understands it as a key interpretative consideration in extracting the meaning of the passage. Further, Esler (2003:103) comments on the lack of scholarly attention given to the field of New Testament imagery in Paul’s letters: “The current concentration on cognitive, dianoetic analysis of biblical texts has resulted in critics and commentators devoting insufficient attention to interpreting imagery such as that of Paul’s olive tree.” He goes on to stress the importance of interpreting images and pictures within appropriate interpretive frameworks to which he suggests would be primarily ancient Graeco-Roman oleiculture. However, with this understanding, it would not be difficult to see why Dodd (1932:180) would come to the hasty conclusion that Paul “had not the curiosity to inquire what went on in the olive-yards which fringed every road he walked!” The author argues the starting point is found in the Hebrew Scriptures and

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<sup>10</sup> See also the larger context of Romans 9–11.

ANE background, despite the first century horticultural relevance which is secondary in importance. Paul's employment of the olive tree metaphor is not to be interpreted in its broad cultural context in the first century Mediterranean world alone, but rather together with its biblical context. Paul's appeal to Abraham and to Torah at the start of Romans 11 (in context, he gives Abraham considerable space in Chapter 4) directs us to the appropriate interpretive framework. Esler (2003:123) does however make an apt observation in stating "Paul was deliberately turning the tables on the non-Judeans, reminding them of their own innate non-productivity and their need to be grafted onto the cultivated olive that was Israel".

Havemann comments on the importance of asking why Paul has used the olive tree and not the vine, which appears more frequently in the New Testament documents. He goes on to suggest the reason is two-fold, "Firstly he is able to explain the mystery of Israel's apparent rejection of the Messiah, and secondly, it provides an opportunity to the Gentile Christians not to boast about their new undeserved status" (Havemann 1997:87–106). However, his conclusion remains unable to address why the olive tree was chosen to illustrate his point. It is the intent of this present research to illuminate the answer, even if only in part, and to aid the reader in a greater appreciation for the ancient roots of this imagery.

For the people of Israel, the olive tree stands as a representative image of Israel's spiritual heritage. Among the nations, Israel is anointed by Yahweh in the manner of an Israelite Priest and King (with olive oil) and to whom from Yahweh as Messiah will usher in the remaining covenant promises.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, the olive tree would have been the most appropriate symbol available, heightened by its historical significance in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the larger passage (Ch. 11), Paul makes the case that Israel's sin and unbelief has made possible the inclusion of gentile believers into the Abrahamic covenant. He further argues that the inclusion of gentile believers into the family of Israel will in God's providence turn the hearts of the Jewish people back to Him and in this way "all

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<sup>11</sup> See Isa 2; 11; 25–27; 40:1–5; 42:1; 49; 56; 60–62; 65:17–25; 66:7–24; Jer 31:31–40; Ezek 20:33–49, 34–39; Hos 2:18; Zech 14 (not exhaustive).

Israel will be saved” (v. 26). For Paul, God is entirely faithful and reliable, and the thought of God rejecting his own covenant people was unthinkable as evidenced by the strong negation in 11:11, με γενοιτο (by no means!). He then goes on to remind the recipients of his letter of his Israelite credentials. Paul identifies himself as both a Jew and a believer in Yeshua as the Messiah. The idea of God rejecting his own people, amongst whom Paul would have to include himself, was preposterous. Paul, as a Jew, was God’s chosen messenger to the Gentiles and it was through his ministry to the Gentiles that Israel’s national ministry was to be fulfilled.

Paul then appeals to the Torah in establishing his Israelite credentials. He refers to himself as being of the seed of Abraham, and more specifically of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1). It was to Abram that the covenant blessings of Israel were first promised but also through Abram that these covenant blessings would be extended to the Gentiles as well, making him the Patriarch of many nations. His name was changed to Abraham, to reflect this covenant reality. Genesis 12:1–3 records this promise:

Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ (ESV)

It was through Abraham, the greatest figure of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures, that the promise was to be fulfilled and extended to all the families of the earth. The covenant promise would also be reiterated to Isaac and Jacob. Regarding Isaac, the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time saying,

By myself I have sworn, declares Yahweh, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of

his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice (Gen 22:15–18).

Again, the Lord would repeat to Isaac as a warning and reminder of his promise when Isaac sought refuge from a famine among the Philistine leader Abimelech:

And the Lord appeared to him and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you. Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws' (Gen 26: 1–5).

The Lord would later remind Jacob in a dream at a place he would then name Bethel:

I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed (Gen 28:13–14).

Paul sees this promise being fulfilled in his day not only with Israel as an ethnicity but also with the promised Gentile nations to which he was sent as a messenger. Paul had argued that uncircumcised Gentiles could make their way by adoption into the family of God by faith in the Jewish messiah (Keener 2012:437). Both as an Israelite and as an heir of Abraham's promise, he would, like Abraham, usher in the covenant promises among the Gentile communities in fulfilment of the Scriptures already mentioned. He will later use the olive tree analogy as representative of this prophecy being fulfilled through Israel. Morris (1988:398) notes concerning Paul's appeal to his Israelite tribe, that Benjamin was the only son of Jacob born in the land of Israel. This would have identified Benjamin's tribe occupying the land of Israel's holiest site, the

temple in Jerusalem. Benjamin was also historically the only tribe that remained faithful to Judah. This is significant because the covenant promise of the coming of the Messiah would also be prophesied in Genesis 49 as coming from Judah.

Scripture records Jacob prophesying over the twelve tribes (his sons), and concerning Judah he says, “the Sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples” (Gen 49:10). Judah’s prophecy would foretell of the Davidic Kingdom that would soon come and of the future Davidic kingdom that would come at the advent of the Davidic Messiah. The next verse records, “Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey’s colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine and his vesture in the blood of grapes” (Gen 49:11). For Paul, now a follower of Yeshua the messiah, this prophecy was fulfilled to which the gospel writer Matthew records concerning Yeshua’s entrance into Jerusalem on the Passover,

Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord needs them,’ and he will send them at once. This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ‘Say to the daughter of Zion,’ Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden” (Matt 21:2–5).

Important to note regarding this source is that he records this taking place on the Mount of Olives, the very place where Zechariah’s prophecy concerning the Messiah would come to pass (see Zech 14:4).

The certainty of Israel’s future salvation is reinforced with several illustrations from the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul writes “If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump” (Romans 11:16).<sup>12</sup> Morris (1988:411) maintains that Paul has in mind Numbers 15 which makes reference to “the first of your ground meal” from which a cake is to be presented as an offering to the Lord. The firstfruits are holy and

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<sup>12</sup> For references to firstfruits in the Hebrew Scriptures see Exod 23:19; 34:22; Lev 2:12, 14; 23:10, 17, 20; Num 15:20–21; 18:12; 28:26; Deut 26:2, 10.

therefore according to Paul, the cakes made from the firstfruits are holy as well. He then goes on to heighten this illustration by saying that “if the root is holy, then so are the branches.” Morris notes that ancient religions had concepts of a holy tree, and in this analogy, Paul appeals to the root who is Abraham as the Patriarch. It is possible that he had in mind all the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) nevertheless the point he makes is that the patriarch(s) is holy and this has benefits for his descendants. If the root of Israel is holy then so must be its branches (Morris 1988:411). The same concept is portrayed with the first illustration of the firstfruits and now Paul turns to the olive tree to finish the illustration. Others have proposed identifications of the root as the Messiah or even God (Wall, Sampley & Wright 2002:684). Both are likely to be in view and the distinction between Yahweh and Messiah is unnecessary, as they are only distinct in function while remaining ontologically one. Paul quotes Isaiah 11:10 in Chapter 15 as well, mentioning “the root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the gentiles; in Him will the gentiles hope” (see Rom 15:12). This messianic figure completes the work of Yahweh’s prophecies to Israel and to the nations.

In an effort to warn the Gentile believers from presuming their position, Paul draws on the richness of the olive tree image to illustrate what Yahweh is working out through his covenant people. He has already alluded to Abraham as the root from which covenant blessings are transferred to his offspring and now Paul alludes to how the fullness of the Abrahamic promise would be extended to the Gentiles. For Paul, the Torah records Abrahams covenant as having not only a promise to his seed, but also to Gentile believers who would become his own seed. Though in former times this would have been a mystery hidden in the Scriptures, Paul now declares that it has been made known.

Verse 17 mentions a common practice called grafting, though the way he describes it seems improbable. The usual practice involved taking a healthy olive shoot and grafting it onto a wild olive stock which did not bear much fruit. The result would produce a revitalised and strong olive tree that bore good fruit. However, Paul intentionally describes this process in the reverse to explain how in the providence of God, the Abrahamic promise was extended to the gentiles. He begins by referring to

gentiles as the “wild olive shoots grafted in among the others”. They now share in the nourishing root (Abraham) of the olive tree. Here the olive tree is representative of Israel as a covenant community. In light of the olive tree symbolism already seen in this study, the image Paul uses has priestly overtones similar to Zechariah’s olive trees. The wild olive shoot is grafted into the natural olive shoot. Paul then mentions the possibility of the natural branches, which were cut off, being grafted back into the tree.

Verse 24 makes clear that Paul is describing a process that is “contrary to nature”. Paul would have been surrounded by olive orchards in the first century Roman world and the process he has in mind is not one he would have likely observed. However, some commentators have suggested that the practice Paul describes as unnatural was practiced. An olive tree that was failing to bear fruit would have been pruned by breaking off the failing branches and grafting in wild olive shoots. The result would have yielded a reinvigorated tree (Ramsay 1906:223). Philo uses a similar analogy in describing the Israelites with the Gentile converts, “That God welcomes the virtue which springs from ignoble birth, that He takes no account of the roots but accepts the full-grown stem, because it has been changed from a weed into fruitfulness” (Colson 1999:152). The Talmud refers to Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess as “two godly shoots” engrafted into Israel:

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. Yebam.* 63a).

Paul seems to use this illustration with some similarity to Philo and the Talmud, which would have been understood without difficulty to the first-century reader. Morris (1988:413) recognises the olive tree as emblematic of the nation of Israel citing Jeremiah 11:16 “The Lord called you a thriving olive tree with fruit beautiful in form

... But with the roar of a mighty storm he will set it on fire, and its branches will be broken." Like Jeremiah, Paul visualises some of the olive branches as broken off.

In contrast to the natural olive tree representing Israel, the wild olive tree mentioned in verse 17 represents the Gentile believers. The wild olive tree is known to produce very little fruit and in this case is said to have been ἐνκεντρισιθήσονται (engrafted) among the natural branches. Commenting on the word, συνκοινωνός, Morris refers to the wild olive as becoming a sharer or partner with the branches that remain. The branches that remained would have referred to believing national Israel. The end of verse 17 reads τῆς ρίζης τῆς πύκτου τῆς ἐλαίας (of the root of the fatness of the olive tree). Gentiles then are co-sharers, together with ethnic believing Israel in the root (Abraham). In this way they become heirs of the covenant promises to Abraham's descendants. Morris emphasises Dodd's point, "The illustration shows clearly how complete, in Paul's thought, was the continuity between the Christian Church and the Israel of the Old Testament. The Church is not a new society; it is 'the Israel of God'" (Morris 1988:414). However, this interpretation falls into the same error replacement theology and supersessionism made centuries before Dodd. Paul is not teaching that Gentile believers in Yeshua replace ethnic and national Israel as the new Israel of God, but rather, Gentile believers become co-heirs together with believing Israel. What Paul envisages is a co-regency and not a theological coup d'état. Together, Gentile believers and Jewish believers form the "Israel of God".<sup>13</sup> There is not a replacement in mind in the language nor in the theology of Paul, but rather an inclusion with Israel as the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12:3 foreshadows:

ונברכו בכ כל משפחת האדמה

(in you, *all* the families of the earth will be blessed.)

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the supercessionist argument/replacement theology see Vlach (2010). For a more in-depth treatment, see Saucy (1993).

## CONCLUSION

There are only two places in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament where two olive trees appear together: the olive trees of Zechariah 4, and Paul's olive trees in Romans 11. Zechariah's two olive trees are biblical types of Israel's leaders whom Yahweh would use to ensure the continuance and future blessings of the Abrahamic promise and in turn bless the nations. Most scholars are in general agreement that Zechariah's two olive trees refer to Joshua and Zerubbabel. As was already discussed in the previous section, Zerubbabel and Joshua occupied the priestly and regal offices and served as the channels by which Yahweh kept the lamp of Israel alive (burning). The common understanding is that Zerubbabel and Joshua were anointed by God and the olive tree represented the divine  $\text{אֱלֹהִים}$ . However, this understanding is not without complication. Zerubbabel was excluded from receiving the kingly Israelite anointing. As a Persian vassal he held political leadership but was not an Israelite king. He did, however, maintain Davidic lineage. Jeremiah 22:30 records the curse on Jechoniah's line that would exclude him from sitting on the throne as a Davidic king. The peculiarity then, is in assessing whether or not there would be something or someone else who could qualify Zerubbabel to receive an Israelite anointing. Zechariah 4 indicates that only Yahweh could do this. What then is the significance bearing on Paul's metaphor of the olive trees in Romans 11?

The common theological thread in these olive tree images is that they are representative of Yahweh's covenant people. More specifically they represent those whom Yahweh has anointed by his Spirit (Zech 4:7) even if contrary to normal standards since Zerubbabel's line had been cut off and later restored. Likewise, Israel had been cut off, Gentiles grafted in, and Israel will be later restored according to Romans 9–11. A similarity can be drawn between two different groups of people represented by both Zechariah's olive trees and those of Paul. The two groups are those who qualify as Yahweh's people as priests (Israelite priests) and those who qualify as Yahweh's covenant people by some other means (Zerubbabel and the Gentiles-wild olive shoot). The natural olive tree will be considered first followed by the unnatural.

Joshua was an Israelite high priest who had received the priestly anointing. As a Levite and descendant of Aaron he fulfilled what the law required from an Israelite high priest. The natural olive tree of Romans 11 was also of Israelite origin to which Paul uses to refer to Abraham's descendants, as the Holy dough of the firstfruits, and as the root that is holy. Zerubbabel, if represented in Zechariah's vision as the other olive tree, did not meet the qualifications to receive the anointing like Joshua did. Zerubbabel did not sit on the Davidic throne perhaps because of the curse spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah (22:24–30):

As I live, declares the Lord, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, were the signet ring on my right hand, yet I would tear you off <sup>25...</sup>  
<sup>30</sup> Thus says the Lord: Write this man down as childless, a man who shall not succeed in his days, for none of his offspring shall succeed in sitting on the throne of David and ruling again in Judah. (ESV)

However, Haggai 2:23 mentions the reversal of that curse: “On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, ‘I will take you, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, My servant,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will make you like a signet *ring*, for I have chosen you,’” declares the Lord of hosts” (NASB) The signet ring appears to be restored in Haggai's prophecy and therefore the interpretation of the curse on Coniah's descendants may have only been applicable to his lifetime. Rabbinic sources are in agreement that God had removed the curse on Coniah's line as result of Jeconiah's repentance.<sup>14</sup>

Like the wild olive tree of Romans 11, Zerubbabel was cut-off from the Davidic throne, though not permanently. Zerubbabel would be grafted back in and his line restored. There is no wild olive tree in Zechariah's vision and this fits well with Paul's teaching on the wild olive joining together with the natural olive tree and together becoming one Israel of God. Although Zerubbabel was not a Gentile, his appointment as an Israelite leader was unnatural. The kind of grafting taking place in Romans 11 indicates the properties of the unnatural taking on the properties of the natural and not the reverse. In both cases, Zerubbabel and the wild olive tree are restored by

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<sup>14</sup> See *b. Sanh.* 37b-38a (Epstein 1961); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* (Braude and Kapstein 1975:376–77); *Lev. Rab.* XIX:6, Freedman and Simon 1983/4:249; Braude (1968/2:797).

something only God's Spirit and anointing could accomplish. For Paul, God's anointing would literally be the anointed one— Messiah, who would make possible Gentile inclusion in the family of God. Rabbinic sources likewise indicate a connection between Zerubbabel and the ministry of the Messiah:

### **Tanhuma Genesis, Toledot**

Scripture alludes here to the verse *Who art thou, O great mountain before Zerubbabel? Thou shalt become a plain* (Zech. 4:7). This verse refers to the Messiah, the descendant of David. . . .From whom will the Messiah descend? From Zerubbabel (see Berman 1996:182).

### **Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg on Jeremiah 22:24**

*Malbim* calls to our attention that in the prophecy of Haggai (2:23), God says, "On that day I will take you, Zerubbabel, and I will make you like a signet," for the King Messiah will be like a signet ring on God's right hand, so to speak. Just as the name of the owner of the ring is engraved on his signet ring, through which he makes himself known, so will God's name be known in the world through the King Messiah, through whom His miracles will be known. He says here that, though, in the future, Coniah will be the signet on My right hand, for the Messiah will spring from his seed, now I will remove him from there (see Berman 1986:183).

Immediately following the curse on Jeconiah's house as recorded in Jeremiah 22, the next chapter records a time of restoration ushered in by the Messiah who is referred to as the Branch (root of David):

<sup>5</sup> Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a *righteous Branch*, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>6</sup> In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' (ESV)

The same Branch is referred to in Zechariah 3 and in context says,

<sup>8</sup>Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men who are a sign: behold, I will bring my servant *the Branch*.<sup>9</sup>For behold, on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day.<sup>10</sup>In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree. (ESV)

Paul refers to the same “branch” as a person in Romans 11:16 and calls him “holy” like Zechariah’s description (righteous branch). Did Paul have Zechariah’s vision of the two olive trees in mind when writing Romans 11? Paul would have had most of the Torah and the Prophets memorised (see Gerhardsson 1991:*passim*). As a Pharisee and instructor of the Tanak, it would not be unlikely to see how they may have been at the forefront of his mind especially given their unique role and selection in both passages. Regardless, both passages seem to have a focus on the work of Yahweh’s Spirit and the work of the Anointed one. Messianic deliverance makes holy what is unholy, and acceptable what is unacceptable, and God’s people who were not God’s people.

In the larger context of Romans 11 which begins in Chapter 9, Paul quotes Hosea 2:23 and 1:10: “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’ “And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”(Rom 9:25–26, ESV). In the original context Hosea addresses, these verses refer to Yahweh’s restoration of ethnic Israel in the last days. However, Paul’s use of Hosea’s prophecy is in reference to Gentiles, precisely the point he is making in Rom 11:16–24 – that the Israel of God would include but not be limited to ethnic Israel. Stated another way, Paul’s teaching on ethnic Israel would not be limited to Abrahamic DNA but rather Abrahamic faith. This is something he will argue was promised from the beginning and Paul brings the reader back to the Abrahamic narrative and to Torah to explain.

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