

Toward an Understanding of Present Day Israel and Her Claims to the Land

“but he who takes refuge in Me shall possess the land
And shall inherit my holy mountain”
Isaiah 57: 13

“Thus says the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD’. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless, or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever”
Jeremiah 7:3-7

Psalm 37

This paper is not a comprehensive study on Israel's purpose and destiny in history, but is rather a presentation of certain essential ingredients necessary for today's Christian in understanding the *theological dimensions of the present state of Israel*. The Israeli and Palestinian crisis provided the catalyst for the paper (which was written late last year). Its goal is to aid us in formulating a Christian response to the ongoing ferment in the Middle East. The paper expects the reader to have: an interest in the recent crisis; an incurable desire to understand God's thoughts; and, a determination to 'examine the Scriptures *daily* to see whether these things are so' (Acts 17:11).

We will look at three issues:

1. How should we perceive the **Jewish people**? Are they the 'people of God'?
2. Does Israel have a **right** to the land?
3. What is to be **our stance** on the present crisis?

1. The Jewish people.

• Israel in the purposes of God – the divine viewpoint

If we begin with the end in view, we must surely affirm that God does reserve a place in His future plans for Israel 'after the flesh' - Romans 9-11 is incontestable evidence. The fulfillment of Israel still lies in the future, when 'a Redeemer will come from Zion'. Those who are now hardened will yet be corporately grafted in. It is in the light of this conviction that the apostle can declare: "God has not rejected *His people*" (Rom 11:1). This *nationalistic hope* for Israel is unpacked in Romans 11:7-32. It hinges though on a corporate turning of the Jews to the Messiah when their stumbling (v11) will cease and they will accept Jesus (v15), being grafted in once again. The verse of Romans 11: 26 - that in the future 'all Israel shall be saved' - can thus refer to this *corporate* group who are saved at the coming of the Redeemer. Of contemporary importance for us, we can note that Paul never looks to his present day Israel or places any hope in them. When he speaks of the present, he mentions their corporate hardening and the *remnant of individual Israelites who have found the Messiah in the church*. His main objective here seems to be his concern to counter any Gentile pride that asserts that the Jewish people have no

more destiny as a nation. He does this by speaking of the mystery of their *future* national regeneration *at the return of* Messiah. God has not finished with the ethnic descendants of Israel.

Yet what of their present status before God? Clearly, God has preserved a *remnant*. There are those who, like Paul, keep the continuity and are true Jews. The remnant continues *within the church* and not outside of it. Paul, a Jew, had found fulfillment in Jesus within a new body that is called the church. He is the test case and specimen of his own argument. This is not a Gentile church or a Jewish Messianic church, but a NEW BODY IN CHRIST (Eph. 2:11-22). The church is neither Jewish nor Gentile, but a new reality and humanity in Christ. This new humanity takes precedence in the New Testament. The remnant is found in the church now. The church is now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” – a collection of Old Testament verses that in their original setting applied to ethnic Israel. In this new body - consisting of both Jew and Gentile and all the ethnic races of the world – are now found the people of God.

Romans 11:28 declares that the Jewish people, as an ethnic people group, are ‘beloved because of the fathers’. This elective love of God simply secures for Israel a present preservation and future existence as a nation to be restored under the Messiah. It does not mean that God loves the individual Jews any differently from His love for the Arabs or the Right Wing Germans. We must be careful not to anoint an unregenerate generation with the words ‘beloved by God’. They refer to God’s commitment to uphold His promise to the *fathers* rather than God’s partiality for the Jews. Paul is probably referring to the covenantal term *hesed*, which refers to the unflagging loyalty of one covenant partner. God has continued with the nation and will continue solely because of His *hesed*, not because they are a special people in themselves.

- **Israel in rebellion toward God - the human perspective**

As a corporate body, the genetic descendents of Abraham are now, as then, a people in disobedience. They are now broken off from the rich root of the patriarchs (Romans 11:17-24). They are not a nation in covenant with God, for they have rejected the mediator of the covenant, the Messiah (Isaiah 49:8ff). Their “house has been left to them desolate” until they say “blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mthw 23:38-39). Their present rejection of the gospel as a nation brings a curse and judgment on them. This dark and ugly reality must not be eclipsed by a romantic view of Israel. There is nothing *in them* or their *religious practices* that is praise worthy! To the contrary, even within the Old Testament God called His people “Sodom” and “Gomorrhah”, and their nauseating religious practices were seen as a mere “trampling of My courts” (Isaiah 1:10-15). Any romantic idealization of Israel and her Judaistic religion is biblically and spiritually inconsistent. Ponder the following Scriptures, remembering that Paul wrote prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 when a specious ‘glory’ of Judaism and of her temple was still conspicuous.

Galatians 4:21-26:

"Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh and the son of the freewoman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking, for the woman are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and *corresponds to the present Jerusalem*,

for she is in slavery with her children. But Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother."

1 Thess. 2:14-16:

"... you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen even as they [the churches in Judea] did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. *They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,* hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost."

The above Scripture is essential to understand. The Holy Spirit is revealing how their hostility to the gospel frustrates the purposes of God, resulting in the wrath of God always abiding on them (see the curses Deuteronomy 27 – to be lifted when they accept Messiah, Zechariah 14:11). Remember that present day Jewish nationalism is still implacably *opposed* to the gospel and follows a religion based on the *Talmud* rather than the Bible. [Note: when most of the NT letters were written, national Israel was still ‘up and running’ (see 1 Cor 10:18). Yet nowhere does Paul obligate any other stance toward the nation as normative evangelism)

The apostle John penetrates deep into the cause of sin and rebellion and exposes it as of Satanic origin. John chapter 8 exposes this Satanic inspiration most clearly. Here is Jesus speaking to Jewish people, descendants of Abraham, to those who are “loved by God because of the fathers”. Not only are they in the privileged position of being Jewish, but they had also “believed Him” (8:31). Here Jesus strips away any false religious confidence with these arresting words:

“I know that you are Abraham’s descendants, yet you seek to kill Me... They answered, “Abraham is our father”. Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham.... You are doing the deeds of your father....*You are of your father the devil* and want to do the desires of your father”

This verse is not mentioned to ‘demonize’ the Jewish people, but rather to highlight that even the most religious people – whether ‘Christians’, Jew, Hindu’s etc, – can actually become the *total antithesis* of their own claims to godliness. For this reason, both Paul and Jesus stress that a spiritual renewal is indicative of an authentic spiritual identity. (see Romans 1:29 “he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit..”). The ‘stones’ have as much claim on spirituality as any claim based merely on religious pedigree !! (Mthw 3:9).

So, with John 8 as background, we can understand Revelation 2:9:

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are *a synagogue of Satan*"

Conclusion: How then should we view them?

The ‘seed of Abraham’ are special to God, they are His people (Rom. 11:1), yet they are also our enemies in the gospel - this reality is what is most conspicuous in their relationship to us, the

church of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul says in Romans 11:28 “from the standpoint of the gospel, they are enemies for your sake”. They are still opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any romance with them is a misplaced delusion. Unfortunately, many sincere believers, seeking their 'Jewish roots', have slipped into a sentimental emotionalism that idealizes the Jewish nation and ignores the bleak realities of the Old Testament. In this regard, Ezekiel 22 is an astonishing exposé of the corrupt nature of Jerusalem, the ‘bloody city’. Chapter 20 lifts the lid on Israel’s congenital idolatry – not a rosy picture at all! The prophet also declares that any future restoration will not be because of Israel, but only for the vindication of Yahweh’s Name (36:22). They are loved ‘for the sake of the fathers’. (Even the Old Testament feasts should not be elevated *in themselves* for we have the *reality in Jesus* of which those feasts were merely a *shadow* (Colossians 2:17). Compared to the reality in Christ, they are like a candle before the noonday sun!)

2. Does Israel have a right to the land?

- **The land as gift**

As we begin to formulate an answer, it is axiomatic to realise that land is God’s (Lev25:23) and that it is His to give as a gift. It is theologically inadmissible to simply state that ‘the land belongs Israel’. It was hers *only as a gift from the LORD*. It was therefore distributed by lot, God could get a tithe and His Sabbath had to be kept. It was the Lord’s possession. Remember, it never originally belonged to Israel, but to the Canaanites. God dispossessed the Canaanites to give it to His people - thus the refrain in Deuteronomy, “the land the LORD your God *is giving you*”. They were to be *stewards* more than owners. If they neglected the land and defiled it, their privilege would be revoked. Leviticus 18 24-30 graphically warns the Israelites that if they do not obey God’s laws and turn rather to other gods, the land will become nauseated and vomit them out!

With the gift went the obligation. If the obligation was not honored, the gift would be removed and they would forfeit their ‘right’ to the land. Deuteronomy 4:25-6:

"When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you will surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess. You shall not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed".

Resting upon this reality, we can conclude that Israel’s relationship to the land is contingent upon their corporate obedience to God. God removed them from the land *because of their rebellion*, not because the Babylonians or Romans ousted them. It is thus logical to see their repossession of the land *as a gift back from God based on their obedience*. With the above Scriptures, we can see that the title of the Jews to the land is not inalienable but rather alienable.

- **The land and politics**

For the above reason, politics per se can carry no weight in Israel’s theological relationship to the

land. It is hers as a gift from God based on her **relationship to YHWH**. The books of Joshua and Judges plainly link Israel's faith and trust in Yahweh with her inheriting the land. They would not be able to possess the land without a vital and dynamic relationship with God. Faith was crucial. Let us remember that: **THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE LAND**. This Psalm (37) expresses the 'faith of Israel'. It is a waiting on the LORD, and trusting in the LORD, with the promise that if they do this, the LORD (not through military might) will cause the faithful to inherit the land. In one sense, present day Israel should give the best land to the heathen of Sodom and Gomorrah, they should be like Abraham who gave Lot whatever he wanted. Yet they can only do that if they are acting in the faith of Abraham which believed that God Himself would fulfill the promises. It is hard to believe that will Israel's military power and ability they can be meek and trust the Lord. As our Lord said, 'the meek will inherit the earth'.

Let us look at how this principle worked out in the past. Although the land was the inheritance of Abraham, Israel's inheritance of it was conditioned upon the *present occupants' status*. The conquest and the inheriting of their inheritance were conditioned by the moral status of the inhabitants. In Genesis 15 – the crucial text in this matter - God promises the land to Abraham but says to him that he can only possess it "in the fourth generation... for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete". Although it was Abraham's land as a gift from God, the present occupants were only disenfranchised of their land when they were guilty enough to be dispossessed. Abraham, in Genesis 23, didn't presume upon the promise or arrogate the possession of the land to himself. The promise gave him no right to claim the land from its current owners. His whole spirit in the matter is so Christ-like. When his wife died and he sought a plot of land to bury Sarah, *he refused to accept the cave from the sons of Heth without paying for it*. He did not wield his 'divine right'. Yahweh and Abraham respected the present occupants even though the land was promised to Abraham. God has territorial integrity and respects the legitimate rights of all people. Naboth's (1 Kings 21) disenfranchisement forever stands as a warning to the repercussions of evicting someone from their land based upon avarice and territorial greed.

The 'divine right' of the Jews to the land is *part* of the covenant with Abraham. The land gift is set within the context of the promise to make Abraham into a great nation, the promise to be His God and the promise of him being a blessing to all nations. The land was not to be an end in itself, but a vehicle for the blessing of all nations. It cannot be isolated from these other issues, particularly from the *faith* of Abraham (a theme so characteristic of Paul).

Those who see present day Israel as having a divine right to territorial acquisition and who use this divine sanction to throw their weight around on the debating table must remember this: The whole land of Israel's inheritance includes "Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates". The Transjordan was also Israel's; it belonged to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. Beware oh Jordan! It is understandable that the Muslim countries bordering Israel today should feel somewhat uneasy over the real intentions of some Israelis! Yet this is a consistent application of the 'divine right' to the land.

- **Future renewal**

The renewing of the land is also dependent upon Israel's response to Yahweh. Hosea 3:5 and 2:14-23 mention this: "I will sow her for myself in the land" (2:23). The renewal of the land seems to be a *work of God in a spiritually renovated Israel* and cannot refer to Israel's present agricultural resourcefulness (14:1-7). Isaiah 49:8 connects the Messiah's activity with the

restoration of the land:

"And I will keep You and give You as a covenant of the people, to restore the land, and to make them inherit the desolate heritages"

Isaiah 60:21 links the moral state of the Israelites with the land:

"Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified"

So many wrench the Old Testament promises out of their spiritual context and apply it to the modern state of Israel. Such selective textual manipulation ignores the fact that at present God has suspended His covenant with the *nation* and will only renew it when she says "blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord".

THE KEY FACTOR: Those who see the events surrounding the repatriation and 'renewal' of Israel in the last century as direct fulfillments of prophetic Scripture seem to have missed the key factor: Israel's relationship to the Messiah. The promises of the Old Testament relating to Israel's restoration *cannot refer to any unilateral activities of an unregenerate Israel*. To think that the promises - the plans the Lord has for the Jewish people (Jeremiah 29:11) - will be fulfilled *without* their spiritual renewal (29:12-14) is diametrically opposed to the spirit of the prophets. **The promises of God to the patriarchs find their fulfillment only in the Messiah.** (Romans 15:8). Restoration, covenant renewal, exilic return, agricultural regeneration etc, are all *inextricably tied up with the nation's relationship with the Messiah*. **He** will restore the land, **He** will set the captives free, **He** will fulfill the promises given to the patriarchs.

[the importance of the conditional promise of the land..Gen 17:1. the land does not unconditionally belong to Israel, not matter how she behaves. This was the thinking that Jeremiah and the prophets confronted.

2. What should our attitude be during the present crisis?

- 1 Realism.** We must not fall victim to uncritical alarmist conclusions. We should also remember that we are seeing a replay of the many political altercations and military reprisals that characterized the inceptive stages of Israel's statehood from 1948 onwards. Things have been worse. Things will get worse. We can expect a cycle of violence and counter-violence > political policy > specious peace > unrests > flare ups > fighting > international pressure > violence etc.
- 2 Impartiality.** Amidst the accusations of policy flouting, bullying tactics, reprehensible reprisals, aggressive right-wing atrocities and the like, we are to remain free from prejudice, whether theological, racial or political. Impartiality is a prerequisite for peace making, for the peacemaker looks on both parties as valuable and in need of reconciliation. A biased and prejudiced reconciler is a contradiction in terms! We must be pro-Jewish and pro-Palestinian, and should take cognizance of the rights and interests of both parties. With increasing polarization, it is all too easy to become aware of the plight and sufferings of one party that we become wholly identified with them (remember, both Israeli and Palestinian parties seek to enlist support for their cause. Any nation that is biased towards one nation at the expense of another is surely culpable in God's sight. The aggressor is always to be condemned, regardless of their religious convictions. I also believe that for the Christian to be partial abets Muslim antagonism to Christianity and hinders Muslim evangelism. How

can we enforce Israelite state support - which is anti-Christian, anti-Muslim - and still preach the Good News to all mankind?

- 3 **Inclusivism** All form of exclusivism need to be repudiated. This exclusivism takes on many forms: “It’s an all or nothing approach”, “You’re either for us or you’re against us”, “ If you’re Muslim, by default, you support Hamas”, “If we side with God we must side with Israel”, “If you don’t support Israel, you are Anti-Semitic”. Forcing people into either/or factions vitiates peace and reconciliation. We must have solidarity for both parties. This also implies being impartial in criticism, for we all are inclined toward greed and hatred by nature.
- 4 **Moderation** Extremism of any kind, whether political or religious, will not expedite peace. Moral accountability cannot be suspended on religious grounds. Religious claims, or *divine rights*, should not be used to justify inhumane and unjust practices. We must not be uncritical of incriminating media reports. The situation calls for ruthless intellectual honesty that presses through the barriers of emotionalism (the “oppressed” Palestinians and the “poor” Israelis), sentimentality, tradition and nationality. It is so easy to fall prey to selective indignation, ignoring our own sins.
- 5 **Consolidation** The Balfour Declaration (1917) upheld the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people, on condition that nothing should be done which would prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine. We must somehow uphold this declaration, recognizing the legitimate native status of the Palestinians and the repatriation of the Jewish people on their ancestral homeland. Yet to navigate through the Middle Eastern landscape – so fraught with religious prejudice and tradition – using western ‘spectator’ proposals will be insufficient. The very inhabitants themselves must somehow come to a solution. We must pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

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26 November 2000