

THE PLACE OF ISRAEL

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January /78

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THE PLACE OF ISRAEL

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and even more so after the Seven-Day War of 1967, Israel has become the object of world attention. The capturing of Old Jerusalem was accompanied by the emotional words of General Dayan: "We have returned to our holiest of holy places, never to depart from it again."

Are we to see in these recent events a partial fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, with an expectancy of more to come, in which Israel as an ethnic state is to figure prominently? Is this that of which Ezekiel spoke so vividly and passionately, promising the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, to revive His people once again, saying:

"Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and done it, declares the Lord" (Ezek. 37:12-14).

And is the word of our Lord respecting Jerusalem coming to fulfillment:

"And Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24).

Even more basic and central, does the Bible encourage us to hope for a massive return of Jews to Jesus in the future, a return which would have worldwide effects in spiritual renewal and evangelism? That is to say, does ethnic Israel, according to the Scriptures, still have an important future role to play in the purposes of God in Christ, or was their rejection of Christ because of unbelief, final?

I. THE HOPES OF ISRAEL: THE OLD TESTAMENT

These questions can be answered only by taking into account God's purposes and plans as progressively unveiled and organically related in both the Old and New Testaments.

What lay at the centre of the purposes and hopes God had for Israel? If the exodus from Egypt constituted Israel as a people of God, then the following words expressed their mandate:

"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6).

The role of Israel in relationship to the peoples of the world was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Israel was to sanctify the Name of God in the eyes of the world; it was to represent the Kingship of God. The principle of unity lay not, therefore, in an ethnic identity, but in its covenant relationship to God. The emphasis in Israel's election was not on race or nationality, but on its religious, spiritual quality and its unique purpose and mission under God. Israel was a Qahal, a people called to assemble at Sinai in the presence of God, to be instrumental in a worldwide mission.

That role was pursuant to the earlier promise to Abraham. The exodus marked a continuity with, and a further expansion of, the purposes of God in Abraham's election. God's promise to make Abraham a great nation, to bless him, to make his name great and to make him a blessing, was integrally related to the final promise - "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This promise most certainly incorporated the proto-evangel of Gen. 3:15:

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise Him on the heel."

The victory of Eve's Seed over Satan's seed would spell salvation for the believing descendants of Eve. God had not turned His back on the peoples of the world. He was persistent in His desire that "all men be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Israel's election was to that end.

The prophets shed further light on God's great master plan and purpose. The Davidic dynasty was to exercise a key role. David united the kingdoms and established Jerusalem as a theocratic capital. The return of the ark symbolized the presence of God in the midst of His people. To David, Nathan communicated God's promise:

"And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam. 7:16).

Solomon, at the dedication of the temple, reveals not only a profound understanding of God as transcendent and immanent in the midst of His people, but also a clear understanding of God's purposes for His people in the midst of the nations. They

were so to live under the Lordship of God that other nations would be attracted to them and to the only true God. God's interest in the nations was beautifully and powerfully expressed in Solomon's prayer:

"Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Thy people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Thy Name's sake (for they will hear of Thy great Name and Thy mighty hand, and of Thine outstretched arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling place, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy Name, to fear Thee, as do Thy people Israel, and that they may know that this house which I have built is called by Thy Name" (1 Kings 8:41-43).

The failure of Israel to live up to her theocratic ^{mission} condition and her theocratic distinctions brought her under the judgment of God. Amos delineates Israel's social sins; it had violated God's covenant obligations to its neighbour, and had failed to seek justice. Hosea graphically illustrates Israel's departure from her loyalty and allegiance to the Lord. As a harlot it had run after other lovers. Israel would be judged by God; the Ammi (My people) became Lo Ammi (not My people). But it would be a judgment associated with mercy.

Increasingly the prophets announce and nurture hope for Israel. The eschatological perspectives which were present in the Old Testament from the beginning as part of God's master plan, receive increasing emphasis and elaboration. Hopes centred on the Messianic, Davidic Kingdom, the new Zion, the new covenant, the coming Suffering Servant, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the remnant of God. God had created man as a creature of hope. In the midst of the shambles of the old covenant, God sets before His believers a glorious destiny, couched frequently in paradisaical images, incorporating the new heavens and the new earth, and embracing men of all nations.

The place of Israel cannot be understood apart from the relationship of God's master plan in seed form in Gen. 3:15, in the promise to Abraham, and in His purposes for Israel as the kingdom of priests. It is, therefore, understandable that in the future Messianic hopes, the worldwide redemptive intents of God were central:

(1) The future Davidic Kingdom included Israel and the nations:

"In that day I will raise up the fallen booth of David, and will wall up its breaches. I will also raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations that are called by My Name" (Amos 9:11-12).

Referring to God's covenant with David, and in the context of offering the Gospel freely to men, Isaiah writes:

"Behold, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you, because of the Lord your God, even the Holy One of Israel, for He has glorified you" (Isa. 55:4-5).

And Daniel in his vision sees a future kingdom of God which spreads victoriously over the whole earth (Daniel 2). That kingdom is associated with "One like a Son of Man"...."And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him" (Dan. 7:13,14).

(2) The Davidic King assumed attributes of deity (Isa. 9:6), was to be richly endowed with the Spirit of God (Isa. 11:2), was to be called Immanuel (Isa. 7:14) and a righteous Branch (Jer. 23:5). He would establish a reign of peace, righteousness, and unprecedented unity. He would stand as a "signal for the peoples", to whom nations would resort (Isa. 11:10).

(3) The new Zion was to be a transformed, purified Jerusalem (Isa. 1). This remnant would become the centre of a worldwide missionary movement, creating a pilgrimage of nations.

"In the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways, and that we may walk in His paths.' For the law will go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2-3).

Ezekiel saw a new temple (Ezek. 40ff), and Jeremiah saw a perpetual Levitical priesthood (Jer. 33:18).

(4) The New Everlasting Covenant would create a radically redeemed people with new hearts, based on a radical forgiveness of sins:

"Behold, days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put My law

within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbour and each man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31: 31-34).

(5) The Suffering Servant, at times identified as Israel and at times an individual called to redeem Israel, would bring justice and be a light - to the nations:

"It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6).

(6) A Prophet like unto Moses would come, to be the supreme mouthpiece of God (Deut. 18:15).

(7) The Holy Spirit was not only to revive Israel (Ezek. 37), but also to be poured out on all mankind (Joel 2).

(8) In association with many of these hopes, there was the promise of a return to the land (Jer. 30:3, Ezek. 37:14).

These and other promises shaped the hope of Israel. In the midst of apostasy and judgment there was hope for the remnant faithful to God. There would come a day of restoration for Israel! The context of most of the prophecies is national Israel or Judah. The language of prophecy is shaped by prevailing institutions, such as the monarchy, the priesthood, the temple, and the sacrifices.

However, the purposes of God which formed the background of Israel's history are also abundantly clear. God was interested in creating a people for Himself, drawn from all the peoples of the earth. Man was to glory, not in his riches, nor in his wisdom, nor in his power, but in this: "that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord Who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on the earth; for I delight in these things, declares the Lord" (Jer. 9:24). The hopes for Israel were rooted in the grand design of God - the design which incorporated Israel and the nations, redeemed and subjected to the Lordship of the one true and living God!

II. THE FULFILLMENT IN THE REMNANT AND THE ONE NEW MAN

A. The New Testament Theme of Fulfillment

The theme of fulfillment pervades the New Testament, finding its central focus in the Word made flesh. Paul sums it up in the words, "But when the fulness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). Jesus ushered in His public ministry by saying, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15).

To John's question, "Are you the coming One, or shall we look for someone else?", Jesus points to His credentials: "Go and report to John the things that you hear and see: the blind receive sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them" (Matthew 11). And when the disciples were slow to understand Christ's life and death as a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, He gave them a brilliant lesson in Biblical theology - "And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Appearing to the disciples after His resurrection, He again said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets, and the Psalms, must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

It is in keeping with this interpretation of the Old Testament promises, initiated by our Lord and carried on by His disciples, that events during the New Testament times were seen as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel.

The Day of Pentecost Peter declares to be the fulfillment of Joel's promises: "But this is what is spoken of through the Prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days, God says, that I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind....And it shall be that everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Acts 2: 16-21). James speaking at the Jerusalem Council in the wake of Gentile conversions, sees this gracious action of God, "taking from among the Gentiles a people for His Name", as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Amos:

"After these things I will return, and I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which is fallen, and I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My Name" (Acts 15:16-18).

How could the Gentile conversions be seen as a restoration of the House of David? This should not seem strange in the light of our examination of the Old Testament

promises. From the beginning the hopes of Israel embraced the nations. The Davidic Kingdom was to absorb streams of Gentile believers. James did not appear to see what was happening before his eyes as a "gap" or a "parenthesis" in the plan and design of God. With this happening - God taking from among the Gentiles a people for His Name - "the words of the prophets agree". This is not a "spiritualizing hermeneutic" as over against a "literal hermeneutic"; nor is this a "sensus-plenior hermeneutic" which suggests that the prophets' words had a deeper meaning than they realized, which only the New Testament revealed. Rather James sees the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled in continuity with God's plan to include Gentiles in His hopes for Abraham and David. This is giving recognition to the missionary consciousness which pervades the Old Testament, finding consistent, eloquent expression in the prophets.

The new covenant of which Jeremiah spoke was mediated through Christ (Hebrews 8). In Him the prefiguration or shadows of the Old Testament found their reality. He is the final and only sacrifice which takes away the sins of the world; He is the Priest Who qualifies preeminently through suffering, obedience and death to make perpetual intercession for us.

The Old Testament promises have thus found their focus in Christ. He is the New David, inaugurating His Kingdom; He is the Prophet par excellence, Immanuel, God with us; He is the Suffering Servant Who predicted, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32); He is the Son of Man Who as resurrected Lord received the Name above every name, before Whom every knee must bow (Phil. 2).

B. Fulfillment in the Remnant

What has then happened to the promises to the Israelites (Romans 9:4)? Has the Word of God come to nought, asks Paul (Romans 9:6)? No, indeed, he counters. The word of promise has been fulfilled in the "true Israel": "For they are not all Israel that are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). The thought of Paul is that there exists an "Israel" within ethnic Israel, just as he could say that not all are circumcized who are of the circumcision (Romans 2:28-29). Paul uses other phrases when he speaks of an Israel "according to the Spirit" (Gal. 4:29), and "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), although in this latter phrase he would appear to include believers from among the Gentiles.

Paul argues that the unbelief and rejection of ethnic Israel as a whole did not prevent God from fulfilling His promises. God had not totally cast off His

people - a remnant remained. Paul puts it this way:

"In the same way then there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice....What then? That which Israel is seeking for it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened" (Romans 11:5-7).

Paul distinguishes between an elected remnant and a mass of ethnic Israel which was hardened and which persisted in unbelief. Hardened Israel is also spoken of as the branches broken off (Romans 11:17). To the remnant of Israel were added believing Gentiles. Paul speaks of a grafting of the wild olive, the believing Gentiles, among the believing Israelites. These become partakers of "the rich root of the olive tree" (Romans 11:17).

This "ingrafting" is also not a strange happening. It is part of the Old Testament promises that the nations or the Gentiles should participate in the blessings of Zion.

In the Gospels our Lord spoke along similar lines. The Kingdom which He inaugurated would prevail, even though the Jews rejected Him. In the parable of the vineyard our Lord indicates that "the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (Matt. 21:43). The parable of the wedding feast likewise suggests that even if the invited guests (Israel) refuse to come, the feast goes on, inviting those who come from the highways and streets (Matt. 22:9-10). During our Lord's earthly ministry He was astounded by the unbelief of the Jews and the faith of the Gentiles. Those who believed in Him, like the centurion, had prospects of entering upon the promises to Israel:

"And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven; but the sons of the Kingdom shall be cast out in the outer darkness" (Matt. 8:11-12).

The believing Jewish remnant was small. But our Lord gave to them and to those who would join them, the promises of His presence: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Like a small mustard seed, the Kingdom would grow into a big tree.

C. Fulfillment in the One New Man

In Ephesians 2 Paul sees in the death of Christ a redemptive act which created a wonderful, unprecedented unity among all who believe - both Jew and Gentile. What was suggested in principle in the Old Testament has taken on a concrete form beyond Old Testament language. The new wine required new wine skins. The Old

Testament theocratic kingdom gave way to a New Man in Whom there is absolute equality:

"Remember that you (Gentiles) were at that time separated from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ....that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through Christ....So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household" (Eph. 2:12-19).

The middle wall of partition has been broken down; believing Gentiles with believing Israelites form a new household of God; this is the new temple of God, "a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22).

The descriptive language used in the New Testament for this body, this ecclesia of Christ, is analagous to the description of Israel when God first created a people for Himself following exodus (Exodus 19). Peter's words are:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him Who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light; for you once were not a people, but now are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10). (Cf. Rom. 9:24-26.)

This is in perfect agreement with God's original intent, to create a people for Himself who would be in covenant relationship with Him, and who would fulfil their mission as a royal priesthood and a holy nation, and proclaim the excellencies of God in the world. Here is a "new Israel". In Paul's own words we read, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation; and those who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them and upon the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

III. HOPE FOR THE "BROKEN BRANCHES"

If God's Old Testament promises and the hopes of Israel have come to fulfillment (though not exhaustively) in the remnant and in the new unity in Christ, is there any future role or place for hardened Israel, for the broken branches?

There is much in the New Testament that appears to suggest a finality to their rejection. The centurion story suggests a non-participation in the ultimate

fellowship with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when our Lord says, "The sons of the Kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 8:12).

It is also clear in the parable of the vineyard that hardened Israel is no longer the organ through which God fulfills His purposes in the world: "The Kingdom of God will be taken from you, and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (Matt. 21:43).

Is there then no hope for Israel? Not apart from a return in faith to Jesus Christ. Not apart from a re-ingrafting into the tree, the people of God.

Paul is very precise on this question in his Letter to the Romans. He writes:

"Behold then the kindness and the severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again" (Romans 11:22-23).

To that end Paul magnified his ministry among the heathen in order that he might provoke his fellow-countrymen to jealousy and save some of them (Romans 11:14). To this day there has only been a trickling of Jews back to Christ.

Does Paul hold out a greater hope for a massive return of the hardened Jews? I believe he does. Paul introduces the question in Romans 11:11: "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be!"

Israel's stumbling was not to lead to a final fall or an irretrievable fall. In the overriding purposes of God, their unbelief brought salvation to the Gentiles. That salvation is to provoke Israel to jealousy, and Paul continues to imply hope for a massive return. If their stumbling brought riches to the world, how much greater riches will be brought to the world if they come to faith, to "fulfillment" (Romans 11:12), and "acceptance" (Romans 11:15). The possibility of their ingrafting is further suggested in Paul's words:

"For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree" (Romans 11:24)?

This line of argument then leads up to the critical passage of Romans 11:25-26. It concerns a "mystery" - something revealed, and something great and precious. The mystery is that a "partial hardening" has happened to Israel "until the

fulness of the Gentiles has come in". The hardening of Israel is to be partial and temporary. The restoration implied in verse 24 is clearly stated in verses 25 and 26. There will be an end to the hardening of Israel. The termination point will be, "until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in". This must refer to a measure of God's blessings upon the Gentiles now, and very likely is associated with a certain number of believers.

Following the coming in of the fulness of the Gentiles, "all Israel shall be saved". The context suggests ethnic Israel, the Israel partially hardened (verse 25), is here in mind. Paul has, in a sustained manner, been contrasting ethnic Israel and the Gentiles. The suggestion is that more Jews are to be saved than those contemplated in the remnant. There will be a mass of Israel, that is, Israel as a whole, turning to their Saviour. Paul applies the hopes of Isaiah 59:20-21 and Jeremiah 31:21 to this prospect.

This salvation of Israel consists of "removing their ungodliness" and "taking away their sins". It consists of a removal of unbelief and effects a grafting in. There is no mention of any special status. The effect of this ingrafting will be worldwide. It is contrasted to the effects of their earlier transgression, suggesting "greater riches for the Gentiles" and "life from the dead" (Romans 11:15). The return of hardened Israel will be analagous to the first evangelization of the world, only much greater. Isaiah's hope (Isaiah 2) would appear to come to its culmination.

In the light of Paul's hopes for ethnic Israel, our Lord's words suggest a similar anticipation when He says, "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (Luke 21:24). (Cf. Luke 13:35 - "Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, Ye shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord".)

What about the promises of Israel's return to the land? Paul is silent on that subject. Our Lord mentioned Jerusalem. If there is a mass return of ethnic Israel, one would expect it to occur all over the world. Today only about 2-1/2 million Jews, out of 11 million, are in Palestine. Because the Biblical, Old Testament hopes for Israel associate radical renewal and turning to God with a return to the land, we should be hesitant to see in the recent events in Palestine the fulfillment of prophecy. However, we must not discount God's providential ordering of the affairs of the nations, including the recent creation of the State of Israel.

Because the New Testament makes little of the "land-question", we should regard it as secondary. Of greater significance is the hope of a massive return to faith in Christ and the resulting extraordinary impact of Israel's return on the world. God's concern is creating a people for Himself from all the peoples of the earth. To this end we too must dedicate our minds and our hearts in faith, love and hope!