

Israel is both a modern political entity, the Middle East's only democracy, while also the people whom God established out of his covenant with Abraham, into which he brought his Son Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior. The reasons for Christian support of either the political entity Israel or covenantal people Israel differ. First, consider the covenantal people Israel.

History confirms the extraordinary fact of God promising Abraham, who was from Ur of the Chaldeans, likely the Babylonian Mesopotamia or modern-day Iraq, that God would make of Abraham's offspring a chosen people. God led Abraham from Ur to the promised land, where in their old age Abraham and Sarah had Isaac, who fathered Jacob, whom God later renamed Israel, meaning to struggle with God. Israel had twelve sons, each of whom established one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The family moved from the promised land to Egypt in a severe famine, joining Israel's favorite son Joseph, whom Pharaoh had put in charge of preparing for the famine.

The family Israel grew to nation size within Egypt, becoming its own nation Israel when Moses drew the people out of Egypt. The Old Testament records the number of Israelites within each of the twelve tribes and each tribe's principal figures. Forty years of desert wandering, during which God gave Israel its laws, preceded Israel's return to the promised land. Israel remained in its promised land, except for a seventy-year captivity in Babylon, for a millennium and a half, until not long after Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. The story of Israel is thus significant as world history alone, for its extraordinary, indeed unique, nature.

Christ was born and raised a Jew, from the Israelite tribe of Judah, descended from the patriarch Abraham and Israel's greatest king David. Two of the four New Testament gospels record Christ's precise lineage, from generation to generation, although in reverse order. Christ taught in fulfillment of Jewish laws, not the strict legalism the religious leaders followed, but in the manner God intended. As Jesus said, recorded in Matthew 5:18, not the smallest mark would pass from the law, without its fulfillment. Jesus himself fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, as he announced in his hometown Nazareth, although his own people rejected him. Thus, Israel is far more significant to Christians, indeed to all people, as the uniquely

founded, shepherded, and set-apart nation, from which God drew the world's Savior.

Why, though, would Christians especially, or anyone else, care about Israel today, from a spiritual standpoint? Old Testament promises and New Testament reassurances both make clear that God is not done with Israel. For example, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 11:11 that God forbid that the Israelites, who have plainly stumbled over Jesus, should fall. Again, in Romans 11:28-29, Paul wrote that although Israel rejected its Messiah, God yet loves them for their forefathers' sake. Nothing revokes God's gifts and call. Again, in Romans 9:4, Paul wrote that the Israelites, though rejecting Jesus, are not beyond recovery because theirs are the promises, covenants, law, worship, and glory.

Christians thus rightly respect and honor Jews as God's original chosen. The analogy that Paul uses in Romans 11 is that the Jews remain the original olive tree, into which God grafts Christian as wild olive shoots. Though Jews lost the root, like broken-off branches, when stumbling over Jesus, God can graft them back in, just as he grafted in the wild-shoot Christians. Indeed, Paul writes that God grafts in Jews more easily than Christians because Jews are of the original stock.

These spiritual truths do not necessarily mean that Christians follow and approve of every decision of the modern political nation Israel. That nation has much to recommend it to Christians and others, for its democratic form, military stability, and relative religious and other freedoms, granting access to religious sites. Israel governs Jerusalem, for instance, in a manner that respects the rights of multiple faiths to worship there. As previously mentioned, a Muslim mosque sits atop the historic Jewish temple site, with Islam a major religion within Israel. Christians freely venerate their own sites and celebrate their own religious calendar in Israel, while Jews also worship.

Yet unlike within some other faiths, Christians are not overtly political in their doctrine and spirituality. Jesus declined political power. John 6:15 records that when rebels came to try to make him king, he withdrew to a mountain by himself. He refused to incite the people against their oppressor Rome, not even to dispute paying Rome's excessive taxes. Jesus frequently told his disciples and those whom he healed not to tell others about him. He even told Peter, James, and John not to

tell of his spectacular transfiguration. The book of Acts contrasts the apolitical Jesus to rebels Theudas, Judas of Galilee, and an Egyptian, each of whom led revolts. Jesus himself said to Pontius Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world but of his Father's realm.

Christians have every right and responsibility to participate fully in matters of the day, including international affairs. From a political, military, or religious- and personal-liberty standpoint, Israel may indeed be the best Middle East partner for certain democratic nations including nations having substantial Christian populations. When Christians take those political positions, they may even be reflecting related, deeply held faith commitments, as one would hope. But to say that Christ would himself have formed or authorized one alliance over another likely goes beyond scripture's record. Christians certainly differ on political alliances, while not differing in their unity in the faith.