

WHY PRAY FOR ISRAEL?

Bible readers are told to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and it obviously needs prayer today.

Testimony. I was an adult convert to Christ, and I began going to the parish church in the English village where I was then living. As I learnt more I became increasingly astonished that the people that 2/3 of the Bible was about were back in the land where it happened thousands of years ago, yet nobody saw any significance in that; seemingly it was just an accident of history.

Then, on the early internet, I found a sentence on a Christian website that hit me like a hammer: *There are prophecies in the Old Testament that haven't been fulfilled yet.*

I needed examples, but if somebody had mentioned the golden age prophesied for Jerusalem, which obviously hasn't occurred yet, I would have waffled, "It's fulfilled in Christ, but spiritually, I expect." I had assumed that all Old Testament prophecies which were still outstanding 21 centuries ago were fulfilled by Christ during his life on earth, or by the church he founded. But perhaps some of those prophecies were about Christ's *second* coming? And why should prophecies about the nation of Israel be applied to the church, which is a kingdom *not* of this world (John 18:36)? How can one know if a prophecy has been fulfilled 'spiritually'? How to interpret its physical details spiritually?

Covenants. I understood that Christians are not under the Law of Moses. The Mosaic covenant is fulfilled in Christ's first coming, as the Letter to the Hebrews affirms. But what is the status, after the Crucifixion, of the other covenants in the Old Testament? Christians generally affirm that no second Flood is possible, because of God's guarantee (in Genesis 9:15) in his covenant with Noah. (If they don't affirm it, should they worry when it rains?) What of God's promises to Abraham, *through you all the peoples of the world will be blessed* (Genesis 12:3) and *the whole land of Canaan where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your seed* (Genesis 17:8)? Is this covenant with Abraham like the covenant with Moses, fulfilled in Christ's first coming 2000 years ago? Or is it like the covenant with Noah and still in force? Genesis 12:3 obviously refers to Jesus, but Genesis 17:8 is still in force according to Paul. Even as he claimed freedom from the Mosaic covenant and its laws (Romans 6:14), Paul wrote that *as far as the gospel is concerned, they [Jews who reject Jesus] are enemies on your account, but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable* (Romans 11:28-29).

The church should, therefore, recognise that Jewish occupation of Canaan is the rule, and exile – warned of in Leviticus 26:33 – is the exception. This pattern has nothing to do with the length of any exile. Even the 18 centuries between the 20th century and the Romans laying waste to Judea, as they put down the bar-Kochba rebellion (132-5AD), are an exception to the rule. The continuing validity of the Abrahamic covenant explains why the Jews kept their identity during those 18 centuries without political self-determination. Every other exiled people has undergone genocide, assimilation or both on a much shorter timescale. This raises the question of what misbehaviour led to such a lengthy exile, since the exile to Babylon for the idolatry and immorality denounced by prophets lasted a single lifetime. Also, what prophet warned of this greater exile? Only one answer convinces: this lengthy exile was for rejection of God's son, Messiah Yeshua, exactly as he had warned – they did not 'recognise the time they were visited' (Luke 19:44). There is no reason to suppose, after Genesis 3, any other race would have done better.

Prophecies. Many Christians argue that God would not let the Jews back into the Holy Land while they still reject Jesus. But Ezekiel (36:24-26) spoke of a return without faith followed by a spiritual cleansing. God is not going to let the Jews sit still in the land in their current spiritual state. Ezekiel was not referring to the return from Babylon, as that was led by the most zealous Jews. The nation did not, moreover, receive a new heart at that time, which Ezekiel also prophesied, for Malachi and (of course) Jesus himself made clear that the Jews needed a new heart. In the 20th century the Jews returned to the Holy Land. Although most were secular Zionists, the numbers there who follow Jesus

have risen from a low of a dozen or so families at independence in 1948. (Most Jewish believers in Jesus took the British offer of ship to Liverpool – ‘Operation Mercy’ – days before the British Mandate ended as Arab armies gathered on the borders in May 1948.) Today there are tens of thousands of Jewish believers in Jesus there, according to a 2017 survey by the Israel College of the Bible. So the present era matches Ezekiel’s prophecy beginning to come true. There is also the prophecy of Isaiah (11:11-12) that *God’s hand will a second time recover a remnant of his people... he will... gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth*. The return in the last 150 years could not be described better in one sentence even after it has happened: Jews have come back to the Holy Land from all parts of the world, whereas the first return of a remnant was from Babylon. Included among places from which Jews return in Isaiah 11:11-12 are areas in the Middle East which match the flight from Islamic nations of Jews facing reprisal for Israel’s victory in the 1948/9 war. Many Christians suppose that all of the prophecies of exile and return in the Old Testament refer to the Babylonian exile, but Isaiah’s prophecy cannot, and others are ambiguous. Isaiah’s prophecy came true 2500 years later. Amos (9:15) spoke of a return after which the people would never again be uprooted: not therefore the return from Babylon, but consistent with the present.

The Abrahamic covenant. Every Jew needs to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved from his or her sins, just like every gentile. But the Abrahamic covenant gives the Jews (alone) a *national* covenant with God. In the promise of the land to Abraham and his seed in Genesis 17:8 (above), God called for faith in Abraham and his descendants, but He did not make faith a condition of the gift of Canaan; he said only that uncircumcised descendants would be cut off from the blessings of that covenant (Genesis 17:13-14). So the promise to Abraham’s circumcised descendants is not related to their faith (and even secular Jews circumcise their sons!) This promise runs through Abraham’s son Isaac with his wife Sarah, not Ishmael born to his servant girl Hagar (Genesis 17:19-21):

Your wife Sarah will bear you a son and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael... I will surely bless him... and make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac.

Then to Isaac, in Canaan (Genesis 26:3-4):

To you and your seed I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and give them all these lands, and through your seed all nations on earth will be blessed.

And to Isaac’s son Jacob/Israel, in Canaan (Genesis 28:13-14):

I will give you and your seed the land on which you are lying. Your seed will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out.

If God denied the Holy Land to the Jews forever then he would be breaking his promise to Abraham. As God does not break promises, the Jews are still entitled, whenever God permits, to live in and govern the Holy Land. The covenant area is specified in (mainly) Numbers 34; it includes Gaza and the ‘West Bank’ (Judea and Samaria). It corresponds fairly closely to interwar Mandatory Palestine.¹

Two points are important here:

1. ***Governing the land.*** The Jews are back in the land today under the Abrahamic covenant, not the Mosaic covenant. So, although they have divine right to enforce law and order, they have no free hand to drive out peaceable inhabitants on pain of death and take their property, as under the Mosaic covenant. (The Arab community living in the land in 1948 comprised a

¹ It is not larger; the promise to Abraham of ‘land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates’ (Genesis 15:18) need not imply *all* land between those rivers. It cannot, for in the Exodus, the Israelites are portrayed as trekking to the Promised Land but not yet in it even though they are between those rivers.

mixture of peaceable persons and fighters, leading to tragedy.) Interestingly almost no Jews in the land today believe they are there on Mosaic terms, for secular Jews don't believe in God, and the ultra-Orthodox believe that Messiah must come first to lead them into the land, so they regard their present occupation as illegitimate! Secular Jews generally accept that their government should not maltreat peaceful individuals or confiscate their privately owned land and property. Between ownership and jurisdiction there is a key distinction; I own a house in Britain but it is under the jurisdiction of the British government. Hard ethical questions arise when the Jews enforce law and order on an Arab community to which they are outsiders, and which includes numbers of armed militants.²

2. **Christians are ingrafted.** Paul says in Romans 11 that gentile believers enter spiritually into Israel. We are 'grafted in' because we are in Christ and Christ is an Israelite. This view can be termed Enlargement Theology – God's covenant people are increased and encompass gentile believers in Christ *as well as* the Jews, not 'instead of'; this is *both-and*, not *either/or*. The 'instead of' view is labelled Supersessionism or Replacement Theology, the notion that the church replaced the Jews at the Crucifixion as the sole people of God, and that God has thrown the Jews on the scrapheap of history for rejecting His Son. This view was forged during the 1500-year era of Jewish exile and institutional church anti-semitism (stirred up by John Chrysostom, the mediaeval papacy and Martin Luther); it holds implicitly that the Mosaic covenant replaced – rather than filled out – the Abrahamic covenant, and is now just the 'old covenant'. But salvation is not necessarily God's only concern today, and supersessionism contradicts Paul's statement that *God's gifts and his call are irrevocable*. It implies that God knowingly deceived Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who would have understood a physical meaning of their descendants being as numerous as the stars. Christians are grafted into the Abrahamic covenant but Jews are not cast out of it. (The Jewish branches broken off in Romans 11:19 refers to salvation.) In Romans, Paul speaks of Israel co-existing with the church. Nowhere in scripture is the church called the new Israel. Replacement theology often leads to replacement geopolitics. But replacement theology has been in crisis since May 1948.

Christian attitudes. Most persons who pray for Israel hold the 'as well as' view, and have a warm heart toward the Jewish people. Jesus Christ loved the Jews and we should too. To say the Jews got Jesus crucified is to see only one side of the picture, for Jews also led the first church. Jesus Christ divides every race into believers and unbelievers, starting with the Jews. Let me correct some misconceptions: gentiles who hold the view advocated here are not trying to put the church under Mosaic Law; we are not the 'Judaisers' whom Paul warned the Galatians against. We study Mosaic Law for what it tells us about God. We are against the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, because Christ's crucifixion made animal sacrifice redundant (Hebrews 10). We are painfully aware that 1500 years of church anti-semitism have done nothing to bring the Jews to their Messiah. We were told to make them jealous (Romans 11:11), which means showing love, not hate.³ The greatest blindness in the church is the failure of many Christians to grasp that the return of the Jews is of great significance to God. If much of Israel is blind to Christ today, much of His church is blind to Israel.

Jews are indeed coming to Christ in numbers now they are back in the land. Growth continues, and only part of it is due to migration there of Jews who already believe in Jesus. The growth of a Jewish church has not been seen since the Roman Empire observed that gentiles were turning to Christ and reclassified Christianity as a distinct religion instead of a Jewish sect. Praise God that he is turning his

² The main religion of the Arabs is Islam. Islam is, like Judaism, a political religion associated with an earthly kingdom, but Judaism lays claim to a single plot of land whereas Islam lays claim to the whole world. Islam also calls for the retaking of land that it has once held but has lost (Quran 2:191). A religious clash in the only land where these claims overlap is unavoidable.

³ It also implies that gentiles know who the Jews are, implicitly debunking the 'Khazar theory' that European-diaspora (Ashkenazi) Jews are not ethnic Jews. Scripture does not warn of an impostor people taking over the Holy Land and bringing the Hebrew language back. The language of the Ashkenazi Jews, Yiddish, contains no loan-words from the Khazar or any other Turkic language (but borrows multiple words from German).

covenant people back to himself through his son Jesus Christ, Messiah Yeshua! Given that Christ was sent specifically to Israel (Matthew 15:24), it would be extraordinarily arrogant of gentile believers to suppose they can settle these questions without listening to his Jewish followers today who live in what scripture calls the land of Israel.

Eschatology. Some of us believe that the return of the Jews to their land is a big step forward on God's clock toward the return in power to this world of Jesus Christ. Where will he come back to, and why then and there? It is not necessary to hold any particular view of eschatology in order to pray for Israel, but I believe (e.g. Zechariah 14) that an army of many nations will someday be sent against Israel, where believers in Jesus are holding out and giving their nation leadership; they cry to Him for help, and their cry trigger his return to this world in power at Jerusalem. (*O Jerusalem... you will not see me again until you say "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord"* – Matthew 23.) For that to happen, the Jews must be based in the Holy Land. Nobody knows the year, but globalisation must occur for an army of nations to be assembled, and globalisation is gaining momentum as students travel round the world in their gap year and we chat online routinely to friends on other continents. Those things were unthinkable just a few decades ago. Political globalisation will take time to catch up with globalisation of media and finance, but globalisation of those things was unforeseen in the 18th century – just 1/8th of the church age ago – and already an organisation exists called the United Nations. Man is trying to undo the division that God prudently instituted at Babel. Globalisation has been made possible by the Industrial Revolution, which began in England, at Ironbridge. Much water has to flow under that bridge before the coming of the evil world government foreseen in the Book of Revelation, but it is significantly nearer than three centuries ago.

Ancient Israel had three annual festivals for which a man was to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Passover was fulfilled in Christ's Crucifixion, and First-fruits in Pentecost, but the third festival – Tabernacles – has yet to find fulfilment in Christ. The festival of Tabernacles is when the Jews expect their Messiah to appear; that is why Jesus' doubting brothers taunted him about going to it in John 7. Tabernacles is also the main harvest festival, bringing to mind Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares facing harvest at the end of the age (Matthew 13). One autumn, God's Son will return to Jerusalem in glory at this festival. That is why Tabernacles is preceded by the Festival of Trumpets.

Please do not suppose I am an 'endtimes nut' who reads only the Book of Revelation, Daniel and other apocalyptic prophets, plus Jesus' words on the Mount of Olives. I have studied these passages closely, but I integrated what I learnt with the rest of scripture. We are to heed these things *as well as* preach the gospel. Nevertheless the development of weapons of mass destruction by sinful man makes it obvious that fulfilment of these prophecies is not far away. Jesus Christ was born on a specific date 2000 years ago and he will come again in glory on a particular date in our calendar. He will come down from heaven to this earth at Jerusalem; Acts 1:9-11 is explicit that his return looks like a videotape of his ascent played backwards. Those who doubt this meaning of the scriptures should ask themselves: What causes him to return, and why there?

Pray for peace and justice! Men may seek peace in the Holy Land, but the Jewish nation will not find it so long as they reject Jesus. Conversely the Jews will not be dislodged from the land this time. So pray for our brothers in Christ among Jews and Arabs in the Holy Land, and pray for reconciliation in Christ. Pray for Israel's leaders, that they shall lead wisely. Pray for just laws and for their impartial administration. Pray that nominal Arab Christians shall commit to Christ. Pray for the conversion of the Jews, their leaders, and all in the land. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Come, Lord Jesus!