

# HAS THE CHURCH REPLACED ISRAEL IN GOD'S PURPOSES?

In 1948, against earlier expectation, and after nearly two thousand years of exile, the nation of Israel was reborn. In 1967 it regained its sovereignty over its ancient capital Jerusalem.

Over and over again the Old Testament prophets tell us that the history of the Jews will be unlike the history of any other people, and that towards the end of time, after great suffering, they will return to the Promised Land, where they will become the centre of hostility. This hostility will affect the whole world. Eventually God will reconcile them to their Messiah, cleanse them from their sin, judge the nations who have hated them, and make them a blessing to all peoples (Isaiah 43:49; Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 36-39; Zechariah 12-13, etc).

We shall see that the New Testament confirms this Old Testament promise. Events this century seem to be fulfilling these prophecies.

But many Christians have been taught that God's purposes for Israel were finished when they rejected Christ, so that the Church is now the true Israel.

A superficial reading of the New Testament has led many to give the answer 'Yes' to the question at the head of this article – *"HAS THE CHURCH REPLACED ISRAEL IN GOD'S PURPOSES?"*

They would rightly note the following New Testament teaching:

Through the preaching of the Apostles in the power of the Holy Spirit Gentiles were brought to Christ and so became **spiritual descendants of Abraham**. (Galatians 3:6-9). Even though they were not physically circumcised, they became what Paul calls the 'circumcision' (Philippians 3:2-3; Romans 2:25-29; Colossians 2:11, etc). By this Paul meant that the gospel had cut sin from the heart. This is the true "circumcision of the heart" that matters in God's eyes. Even the Hebrew Scriptures give the same teaching (Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 9:26; Ezekiel 44:7ff).

The Gentiles were **grafted into Israel** so that the Church began to inherit the many spiritual blessings that God had promised Israel of old. (Romans 11:17-19). The Apostle Peter uses the ancient titles given to Israel and applies them to the Church:

*You are a Chosen People, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation, a People belonging to God...*

1 Peter 2:9. (Compare these titles with: Isaiah 43:10&20; 44:1-2; 61:6; Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; 14:2 and many others.)

The New Testament, especially the Apostle Paul, makes it quite clear that the way of salvation is by 'faith' and not the works of the Jewish law. He tells us that this is also the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) and is not a new teaching that begins with the New Testament. (Romans 2-4 and the whole of the letter to the Galatians.)

### ***DOES ALL THIS MEAN THAT ISRAEL WHO REJECTED JESUS HAS LOST ITS PLACE IN GOD'S PURPOSES?***

This is the question that so exercised the mind of Paul in his letter to the Romans (Romans 2:28-3:4; 11:1, 11). Many Christian people give the answer "Yes" to this question. However, Paul's answer is a very definite "No". It is true that the Church, being grafted into Israel, does inherit much that was purposed for Israel **but that does not mean that Israel is now cast aside.**

#### ***WHY NOT?***

Paul's answer is two fold:

**FIRSTLY**, God cannot cast off the very people through whom His word and salvation have come to the world.

**SECONDLY**, it was Jewish rejection of Jesus that gave us the cross by which we are saved. **They were disobedient for our sake!**

It is precisely because the Gentile Church owes its salvation to the Jewish rejection of Jesus (**and this was God's foreordained purpose**) that God has not forgotten His promise to them. This is the overwhelming reason why Paul gives a resounding 'NO' to his question 'Has God cast them off?' Israel's rejection of Jesus was not an accident. One of the reasons God chose them was that their sin would represent all sin, so that God might bear the sins of the whole world in the Person of His Son Jesus.

Those who teach that God has forgotten His special purposes for Israel have failed to appreciate the nature of the atonement in God's eternal purposes. They only have a superficial understanding of the cross of Jesus.

Before we go on I must ask a similar question to that asked by the Apostle Paul. Does not the Old Testament teach that God's promises are **conditional** on Israel's obedience? Well what was God's initial promise? It was that Abraham's descendants would be a blessing for the entire world. Only if they were obedient would they enjoy the full **advantages** of God's

covenant. But even if they were disobedient God would still fulfil His **purposes** through them and would never let them disappear until the end of the world.

Indeed, it was only in the context of the **disobedience** of Israel that God was able to reveal, through His prophets, His heart of justice and mercy for all mankind, who like Israel, were sinful. The cross – the great climax of this process – was, as we have seen, His way of saving the world.

### **WHAT ABOUT THE LAND: DOES GOD STILL HAVE A PURPOSE FOR THAT?**

As we have said, the Old Testament prophets tell us many, many times that Israel will be restored to its land. Those who deny any continuing significance for Israel claim that all these prophecies were fulfilled when, long before the time of Christ, Israel returned from exile in Babylon under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. They conclude that these prophecies have nothing to do with the regathering of the Jews to the land that we are witnessing this century. How are we to respond to this?

First a few preliminary points:

No doubt the prophets were thinking of a return that would soon take place, but that does not mean that their words do not apply to the distant future. Very much of what they say simply could not be fulfilled in the return from Babylon because the prophecies speak of a regathering from North, South, East and West. This has been fulfilled (and is still being fulfilled) in our time.

Secondly, many of the prophets connect the regathering of Israel with God's purpose for the **end times** of this world's history. Clearly the return from Babylon – thousands of years ago – cannot be fitted into this kind of plan.

But to be even more convinced let us consider the **principles** that Moses gives Israel even before they enter the Promised Land for the first time.

(a) God's Judgement against Israel's sin means that her people will be scattered from the land.

*Then the Lord will scatter you among the nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods – gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both day and night, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, 'If only it were evening!' and*

*in the evening, 'If only it were morning!' –because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. (Deuteronomy 28:64-67 NIV)*

(Anyone who knows anything about Jewish history – especially in the last 1,000 years – will recognise these words as striking indeed. They were spoken by Moses 3,300 years ago and have been remarkably fulfilled throughout Jewish history until this present day. Even liberal Bible scholars, who deny that Moses himself spoke these words, recognise that they are at least 2,500 years old).

(b) God's forgiveness to Israel will mean that God will restore its people to the land.

*Then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant lands under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. (Deuteronomy 30:3-5 NIV)*

These are the **principles** laid down in the book of the Law and therefore do not refer only to this or that event in the history of Israel. They describe God's dealing with Israel **in all its history**. They are expounded and applied over and over again in the Hebrew prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Zechariah, etc.). Indeed, they are a **major** theme of most of the prophets.

It may be objected that this principle of regathering is usually linked, in the prophetic writings, to Israel's repentance and spiritual return to the Lord. Indeed, just before the words of Moses quoted above, Moses tells the Israelites that the restoration to the Land is bound up with their return to the Lord. It is true one cannot separate the return to the Land from the return to the Lord. Some Christians interpret this to mean that the Jews must accept Christ before God will restore them to their land.

They conclude then that the present restoration to their ancient country is purely of man's doing and has nothing to do with God's special purposes for Israel. How are we to respond to this?

Firstly, we need to know that in the past 1,500 years, Christendom has been guilty of the terrible persecution and murder of millions of Jews. This has surely hidden the real Jesus from them.

Secondly, although Israel's return to the land is usually linked to their return to the Lord it must not be interpreted to mean that God's purposes are conditional on good behaviour. (If they were there would be no hope for any part of the world, or any hope for any of us personally – it is by grace that we are saved.) Jeremiah 31 is one of those many marvellous

passages that speak of Israel's restoration and then towards the end of the chapter we read these words:

***Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject the descendants of Israel because of all they have done, declares the LORD.*** (Verse 37)

It is true, as we have seen, that the full blessings of the covenant were dependent upon Israel's behaviour but the fulfilment of His **purposes** through them and their land is not dependent upon them at all. These purposes extend **to the end of time** and belong to God's sovereign purposes that cannot be thwarted by man's folly. (Romans 3:3-4)

Thirdly, in the prophetic writings, repentance does not always precede restoration to the land. In some passages it appears as if repentance precedes restoration to the land (e.g. Deuteronomy 30), but in other passages (e.g. Ezekiel 36) repentance appears to **follow** restoration to the land. The truth is that return to the Lord and return to the Land belong to one great movement in God's sovereign purposes. We cannot say that one must come before the other.

Actually there is in Israel today a great searching of the Scriptures and a growing expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Also, for the first time in 1900 years, there is a rapidly growing group of Jews who **do** believe in Jesus. Although they are still a relatively small group, and many are persecuted by some members of the ultra-orthodox community, they can no longer be ignored as insignificant.

But now to a very important question: does the New Testament have anything to say about the principles of scattering and regathering that Moses spoke of or do these principles apply only to Old Testament times? In Luke 21:20-24 we read:

***When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains and let those in the city get out... FOR THIS IS THE TIME OF PUNISHMENT IN FULFILMENT OF ALL THAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN... They will fall by the sword and be taken as prisoners to all nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles UNTIL THE TIMES OF THE GENTILES ARE FULFILLED.***

This passage tells us that the **coming** scattering of Israel is the true fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies. We therefore conclude that these Old Testament prophecies **cannot** have referred only to the Babylonian exile hundreds of years before Christ! That means that the Old Testament prophecies about the **restoration after exile** must also refer to events **after** Christ as well as events before His time on earth. This is confirmed by the last words in the above quote which show us that the coming Jewish exile from Jerusalem is **not forever**.

There is also another very interesting word from our Lord found in Matthew 24:34-35:

***I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.***

What does ‘generation’ mean in this passage? To answer this let us consider what Old Testament passage this seems to be based on. We have already referred to part of it above. Jeremiah 31 is one of the many great passages that speak of the restoration of Israel to its land in the last days. In verse 36 and 37 the LORD says:

***Only if these decrees* (the decrees that govern the heavens and the earth) *vanish from my sight will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me. Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject the descendants of Israel because of all they have done.***

The Greek version of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint, and it was widely used by the Jews at the time of Jesus. The Septuagint word for ‘descendants’ in Jeremiah 31 is the very same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 24, and which in the New Testament is translated ‘generation’ from the Greek. In the Greek it is the word ‘*genea*’ and literally means ‘family’, ‘race’ or ‘generation’. It seems to me that Jesus is doing what He does over and over again in His teaching, namely quoting or paraphrasing the Old Testament Scriptures.

In this particular case in saying, “this generation will not pass away”, He is confirming the promise given through Jeremiah, that in spite of all the Jews have done wrong, God will preserve them to the end of the world. Jeremiah makes this prophecy in the context of God’s pledge to bring the Jews back to the Promised Land near the end of the age and Jesus sets His seal on it.

**BUT WHY SHOULD THE LAND BE SIGNIFICANT IN GOD’S PURPOSES?** In the original creation, God placed man in a particular relationship with nature. Man’s sin not only broke the relationship between himself and God, but also between himself and the land. “Cursed be the ground because of you”. Man was expelled from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life. At the end of the Bible in Revelation 22 we read of Man restored to the Tree of Life.

Surely the process of Israel’s expulsion from, and restoration, to the Promised Land are signs of God’s final purposes in redemption. These include His purpose to redeem nature from the curse brought upon it. Genesis 3:17-19 tells us of the severed connection between man and nature which God wishes to heal. (See Romans 8:19-22)

As we said earlier, this means that God not only needs a Chosen People to represent in special intensity, all mankind, but also a Promised Land to show His concern for all lands.

Over and over again the Scriptures teach us that when the Jews are away from their land it will turn into a wasteland but when they return the desert will bloom again, bearing witness to that great re-creation of nature at the end of the age!

### ***WHAT ABOUT JUSTICE FOR THE PALESTINIAN ARABS?***

Have not the Jews, coming from Europe, expelled many native Arabs from the Land that is rightfully theirs?

Many people find it difficult to believe that God's hand is in the restoration of Israel because we are led to believe that they have unjustly displaced Arabs from their land. To respond to this one cannot avoid politics, so I make the following brief points:

1. The Middle East conflict is not just between Israel and the Palestinians, but has always been between Israel and the vast Muslim world, i.e. before there was a problem of "occupied territories" or refugees.
2. The majority of Israeli Jews are of Middle Eastern, not European descent.
3. Arab Nationalism and the PLO have always claimed that the Palestinians belong to the one 'Arab Nation' that covers the whole Middle East. (See the PLO Covenant)
4. The Arabs have 20 states of their own. It is absurd then to claim that the Jews are to blame for the fact that the Palestinians have no homeland. All the Jews have ever wanted is just one little one for themselves. (Most Arab nations remain violently hostile to Israel's very existence).
5. The Arab nations are much larger than even the USA and have long-term oil supplies. Israel is as small as one of the small states of America. It is about the size of Wales and has had no oil.
6. The cause of the Palestinian refugee problem was war. The wars were started by the vast and wealthy Arab nations with the sole intention of wiping Israel off the map. During these wars some Palestinians Arabs suffered, but it was Arab nations which initiated the wars.
7. There is no other nation in world history that has survived such overwhelming danger and hatred as Israel today. Even though they may react violently and unjustly towards the Arab rioters in their midst, I doubt whether any other nation would act with more restraint, given only a fraction of the danger to its very existence. (If it were to withdraw to its pre-1967 boundaries it would be only nine miles wide at its middle populated area.)

8. Although God may indeed judge unjust Israeli actions, other nations will have to face similar judgement for far, far greater injustices committed with much, much less excuse. (One has only to consider Israel's neighbours to realise this, never mind much of the rest of the world.)

## ***POSTSCRIPT***

There are two types of Christian theology which are naturally hostile to Israel.

### ***1. LIBERAL THEOLOGY***

The extraordinary history of Israel challenges the liberal belief that the Bible is simply an ancient source book of religious attitudes. In the history of Israel we are brought face to face with the Living God who really does act within the history of nations, sifting the consciences of all peoples.

### ***2. TRIUMPHALIST THEOLOGIES***

These see a particular 'Christian' group as having special light so that it is not just another humble denomination but God's specially favoured group. The continuing remarkable history of the Jews demonstrates that God is working His purposes out in other ways as well, and their group is not as special as they like to think.

When, as the Bible promises us, Israel does eventually return to its Messiah it will not only mean a great repentance for them but also for the whole Church. We have failed to heed the warning that Paul gives us in Romans 11 when he tells us we must not be conceited about Jewish unbelief. In fact he tells us that we must make them envious.

Our failure to listen to Paul's warning is due to our shallow understanding of the very nature of the Atonement in God's eternal purposes. It is this more than anything else that puts a barrier between Jesus and His ancient people Israel. However, God is surely working His purposes out in most wonderful ways. With or without the Church He will bring Israel back to Himself.

When that great day comes may we be those who will be found, not working against Him, but with Him. His glorious plan is to re-unite heaven and earth through His unworthy, but chosen people Israel when they are brought back to the Messiah, and so, in union with a renewed Church, finally fulfil their destiny.

**CFI Communications, PO Box 2687, Eastbourne, BN22 7LZ**

Tel: 0845 230 3067 (local rate) or 01323 410810 • Fax: 01323 410211

Prayerline: 0845 230 3068 (local rate) or 01323 439840

email. [info@cfi.org.uk](mailto:info@cfi.org.uk) • website. [www.cfi.org.uk](http://www.cfi.org.uk)

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