

## The Church and Israel

One of the most controversial issues in the church today is that of the relationship between the church and Israel, that is, a majority Gentile *ekklesia* and the ethnic Jew. Are the Jews still God's chosen people, even as they were in the pre-Christian era? Or has the church become the "New Israel" and the heirs of the Old Covenant promises? A further consideration is what our attitude should be concerning the country of Israel, the Israeli state as a political body? Do we stand with them, no matter what? Or, are they simply a civic institution and have no covenant standing with God? What are we to think?

### Replacement Theology

There is a school of thinking that asserts that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God. This view acknowledges that God did make promises to Abraham and his descendants. But these were fulfilled in the Person and finished work of the Messiah. Therefore, they are now part of the New Covenant, and the church is the spiritual recipient of these promises. Essentially, the church has replaced Israel as the people of God. Of course, the physical descendants of Abraham, the Jews, may become part of this New Israel by accepting Yeshua as Messiah and being reborn into the family of God, but they are no longer God's chosen race and no longer have a special role in His plans.

Several passages in the New Testament are used to substantiate this viewpoint. One of the strongest arguments for this view is found in Romans 9:6-8:

6 But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, 7 nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." 8 That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Note that Paul states that "they are not all Israel who are of Israel." It is argued that there is, in fact, a new Israel, a spiritual Israel, comprising the people of God. Those who are the physical descendants of Abraham are no longer necessarily part of the spiritual people of God. This body is the church, not physical Israel. It is not the "children of the flesh" (v. 8) who are the people of God, but the "children of the promise," i.e., the church.

Paul goes on to illustrate this by referring to Isaac as the child of promise (Romans 9:9-12), emphasizing God's right to make sovereign choices in dealing with people (Romans 9:15-24), and the declaration of Hosea that God will choose for himself a people who were once not his people (Romans 9:25-26).

At first glance, this seems to be a strong argument. It is understandable why many Christians accept this position regarding Israel. However, I believe that this is only part of the picture—one glimpse of a larger reality.

## **Israel: God’s Chosen People**

A careful study of the Scriptures, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, will demonstrate that while the church is indeed the heir to the spiritual promises given to Abraham, the Jewish people are still the Chosen People of Yahweh. Let’s see what the Bible says about Israel, and why I advocate for this position.

### **1.     *The “New Israel”***

While Replacement theology seems credible on the surface, it in fact overlooks some of the nuances of the New Testament teaching about the Jewish people and the term “Israel.” A careful reading of Paul’s writings, for example, will show that he uses the term “Israel” with two different connotations. There are times when he speaks of “Israel,” and he does mean the New Covenant people of God. In Galatians, he refers to the “Israel of God,” meaning the entire community of faith, Jew and Gentile. In Romans 9:6, he states, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” Clearly, here his first use of “Israel” refers to the body of Christ, the church, while observing that not all of “Israel,” the Jewish people, are part of this spiritual body.

In the same way that Paul uses “Israel” in two ways, he also uses “circumcision” with two connotations. Circumcision is such a significant feature of the Hebrew community that it is used in Scripture as a synonym for the Jewish people themselves (cf. Ephesians 2:11, Colossians 4:11). However, Paul notes that not all who are of the physical circumcision (i.e., are Jewish) are of the spiritual circumcision, e.g., those who have “circumcised hearts,” a new birth experience in the Lord (see Romans 2:29, Colossians 2:11, Philippians 3:3).

Those who are true followers of the Messiah make up one new body, one new man in Christ (Ephesians 2:13-15). It is this one body of Christ which constitutes the “New Israel.” It is this unified community of faith that is represented by the single olive tree of Romans 11:17-24. The cultivated olive tree represents the true people of God. Originally, this was only the Jewish people (and any Gentiles who might convert to following the Hebrew faith). However, branches from a wild olive tree (Gentiles, non-believers) were grafted into the cultivated olive tree upon their acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Together, the natural branches and grafted branches comprise the one tree that represents God’s people. In a sense, because the tree is made up of both natural and grafted branches, it is the “New Israel.”

In discussing Christ’s followers, Paul asserts, “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29). Thus, they are spiritually counted as part of Abraham’s lineage, i.e., Israel. Christians also are the “children of promise” (Galatians 4:28), again a reference to God’s promise to Abraham. Christians are all “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26), and “one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). These passages all point to a spiritual “Israel.”

In saying all of the above, you might think that I am defending the position of Replacement theologians. It may seem that I am saying that the church has, indeed, replaced the Jewish race as God’s people. Yet, in this, you would be wrong. I am not advocating for Replacement theory

at all. I am saying that in speaking of this new body, the new “Israel,” we are only seeing one view of what the Scriptures mean by “Israel.” For the term Israel still refers to that group of people who are the literal and physical descendants of Abraham. This is the other connotation used for Israel in Scripture, those who are still heirs of God’s promises and about whom many unfulfilled prophecies are still awaiting fulfillment. But we will address these matters below.

There are a few other matters, though, that we must address before moving on to discuss the Jewish people as the Chosen People of God. First of all, it is important to take note of what Paul says about the natural and grafted branches in Romans 11. The Apostle stresses that the original tree (God’s people) was comprised of Jews. It is the wild olive branches (Gentiles) who are grafted into the tree that is Israel. Here, it is evident that Gentile Christians (who are the majority constituents of the church) do not replace Israel; rather, they are adopted into the family tree. In this divine act, God is not doing away with the old; instead, he is fulfilling and completing his plan. However, this idea also warrants some attention.

Here again, some nuances must be considered. There are many things in the Christian faith that are more “both-and” rather than “either-or.” The nature of what constitutes Israel is one of them. Parallel to this are certain items in the Old Covenant as they relate to the New Covenant. There is a sense in which the old has passed away. For example, we are no longer under the Mosaic Law regarding its ceremonies, rituals, and sacrificial requirements for atonement. The old way of doing things is now “obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). However, there are also things that are not done away with, but should be looked upon as completed, finished, or even perfected. As Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). This is true in the matter of who makes up the Body of Christ, the true people of God. The picture of the cultivated olive tree in Romans 11 is the image of a body of believers who follow the promised Messiah of the Old Covenant and live a transformed life under the New Covenant. They are placed in a tree rooted in the lineage of Abraham. Their placement in this family tree does not signal the destruction of the tree, nor the replacement of the tree. Rather, it is a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Covenant, which foreshadowed the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God (see Genesis 22:18, Isaiah 2:2-3, Zechariah 2:11, Hosea 2:23, and many others).

One other matter concerns the present status of the Jewish people as regards salvation. As we shall see in a moment, the Jews are God’s Chosen People as regards his promises and prophecies. However, the body of Christ (the cultivated olive tree) is made up of all who are believers in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. The natural branches that remain on the tree of “Israel” are the Jews who have chosen to follow Yeshua as Messiah. The unnatural branches that are grafted in are those Gentiles who have also chosen to follow the Christ. The natural branches (Jews) who reject Yeshua as Messiah are broken off (Romans 11:20). This is an important point. I have heard some Christians say that the Jewish people, being the Chosen People of God, are automatically saved. However, the New Testament is clear that this is not true. For anyone to be part of the body of Christ (the tree that is spiritual Israel), they must accept Jesus as Savior, repent of their sins, and be born again. Jesus himself was clear—to be part of God’s kingdom requires a spiritual rebirth. Natural birth is not enough (John 3:3-7). Jews are naturally born as part of the family of Abraham. But this is not enough to be justified in God’s sight. Justification is not by the Law of Moses, nor by natural birth as a Hebrew (see Romans 3:20, 28-30). The

requirement to be just and righteous in God's sight is the same for both Jew and Gentile: repentance, faith in Christ, salvation by his grace alone. Romans 11:7 speaks of some Jews who have obtained eternal life through Christ, but others who have not because of their unbelief. This is why Peter, Paul, and the other Apostles went to the Jews preaching the Gospel. They needed to be saved. This is why Paul cried out in anguish that the great desire of his heart was that his own people, the Jews, would be saved (Romans 10:1). What is true for the Gentile is also true for the Jew; it is only through Jesus that men experience salvation (John 14:6, Acts 4:12).

## 2. *The Covenant People*

As we established previously, when the New Testament writers, such as Paul, speak of "Israel," the term may have one of two connotations. One connotation refers to Israel as the body of Christ, the "Israel of God," which consists of the entire Christian community of faith. The second use of the term refers to the lineal, physical descendants of Abraham. The former group consists of all true believers in the Messiah, those who are born again and heirs of the spiritual heritage of Abraham. The latter group is made up of those who are chosen by God to fulfill a unique role in human history, and are heirs of God's promises concerning the inheritance of the Promised Land and the coming kingdom of God ruled over by the Son of David.

That the physical seed of Abraham may still be indicated by the name "Israel" is clearly seen even where Paul is talking about the "New Israel." In the passage previously cited, Romans 9-11, Paul speaks of the "children of the flesh" as well as the "children of the promise" (v. 9:8). Thus, pointing out that there are two groups. He speaks of a true spiritual Israel (9:6), but also of a nation of Israel that needs to be saved (10:1). He writes about the Israel that is seeking the righteousness of God (11:7). He states that there is an Israel who are "partially hardened" against the truth of the Gospel (11:25). Obviously, these references to Israel do not refer to the present body of Christ. Rather, these people are the physical descendants of Abraham and the Patriarchs.

That this group, called "Israel," is the Jewish people is clear. This is a group that Paul prays for and longs to see come to the Messiah (Romans 10:1). They are a people that God still loves and reaches out to (10:21). They have not obtained what they seek (11:7) due to their spiritual blindness, but they are still a distinct people who will one day experience salvation *in toto* (11:26-27). They are a covenant people, still loved by God and heirs of the promises of God. God has not cast them away as his people (Romans 11:1). Take careful note of this verse. God still views them as *his people*. They are still beloved on account of their descent from the Patriarchs (Romans 11:28). Their calling by God is irrevocable (Romans 11:29). God still has a purpose for them. If there is any doubt about this at all, it is totally negated by Romans 11:2, where Paul writes, "God did not reject his people." Nothing could be clearer.

Even though the majority of these people are not now believers in Jesus as Messiah, they are still chosen by God for a special purpose. Paul makes this point in Romans 11:2-5. He uses the example of Elijah, where the prophet complained to God that he alone was still faithfully serving the Lord (1 Kings 19:10). God corrected Elijah, and pointed out that the Lord had retained a remnant of Israelites who were serving him (1 Kings 19:18). Using this historical reference as an analogy to the Israelites of his day, the Apostles declares, "Even so then, at this present time

there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:6). Our modern mindset overemphasizes the importance of the majority. God doesn't see things the same way we do. He often works through a minority, the remnant. Indeed, the principle of the remnant is consistently present throughout the Scriptures. So, just because a minority (remnant) of Jews today are followers of Yeshua as Messiah, it does not negate Israel's status as the Chosen People of God.

This Chosen Race has a unique role in God's economy. Speaking of the power of the Gospel, Paul emphasized that it was "to the Jew first" and then to the "Greek," i.e., Gentile (Romans 1:16). It was for this reason that though he was the Apostle to the Gentiles, when he went to a new city to preach, he invariably first went to the synagogue to proclaim the Gospel to the Jews. In considering the Jews' role in God's plans, Paul asserts that the Jews are "my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Romans 9:4-5). The Jewish people were the ones "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). That is to say, the Holy Scriptures came through them. Considering all of this together points to the past and continuing role that the Jews had in God's economy. No wonder Jesus himself declared that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22).

Their unique role is based on the sovereign decree of God. He chose them, and then based on his own choice, he established a covenant relationship with them. Consider the biblical declarations of Israel's covenant relationship with God as his own Chosen People:

- This relationship was rooted in the call of Abraham, and God's promise to bless all nations through his seed (Genesis 12:2-3, see Psalm 105 below).
- The Lord declared that he chose Israel based on his love for them, and the promises made to the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).
- The Lord chose them as his own covenant people (Deuteronomy 29:12-13).
- The Scriptures declare that God chose the Children of Israel to be his people for the sake of his own name and for his glory (1 Samuel 12:23, Isaiah 49:3).

Thus, it is abundantly clear that the Jews, the Children of Israel, are a people uniquely chosen by the Lord Almighty himself (Isaiah 41:8-10, Psalm 135:4).

This covenantal relationship is not temporary or transitory. This is a very important fact to consider in our discussion. The Scriptures clearly indicate that Yahweh's covenant with the Children of Israel is eternal and inviolate. Consider the words of the Psalmist:

He remembers His covenant forever, the word which He commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the allotment of your inheritance" (Psalm 105:8-11).

As we know, Israel suffered exile as a result of God's judgment. In their exile, they felt forsaken by God. But the Lord strongly declared that they were not forsaken or forgotten, and never would be (see Isaiah 49:14-16). While exiled, the Lord repeatedly promised that he would return them to the land (Jeremiah 23:7-8, etc.), and then re-establish an everlasting covenant with them: "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me" (Jeremiah 32:40). This promise is echoed in other places, e.g. Isaiah 60:15, 61:8, Jeremiah 33:25-26. Jeremiah 50:4-5 says that Israel will seek the way to Zion, to return to their own land and enter into "an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten." This covenant with the Jewish people is so certain that it is compared with the fixed nature of the sun, moon, and stars, and the immovable nature of the mountains (see Isaiah 54:10, Jeremiah 31:35-37).

God's promise of this everlasting covenant being as enduring as the sun and the mountains is important. The Hebrew for everlasting covenant is *olam berith*. Some Replacement theorists point out that *olam* (eternal) can mean for a long period of time, of lengthy duration, instead of everlasting. However, it is obvious from the above texts in Isaiah and Jeremiah that God considers his covenant to be everlasting. Even if we were to assume that *olam* only refers to this age, and not eternity itself (which I do not believe to be the case here), it would not negate the fact that God's covenant with the Jewish people is still in force. Is the sun shining? Is the moon beaming? Do the stars still twinkle? Then God's *olam berith* with the Children of Israel did not end with the establishment of the New Covenant. Rather, the New Covenant, founded on Christ's atoning work, provides the means for God's everlasting covenant with Israel to be brought to complete fulfillment and culmination.

Obviously, the Scriptures indicate that God has established an eternal covenant with Israel. Again, some may object that this no longer applies to the Jewish race, but is fulfilled in the New Covenant in Christ. The eternal covenant is now applicable to the New Israel, the church. I do agree that the eternal covenant is fulfilled and completed in the work of Christ and the New Covenant. However, I disagree that there is no longer an application to Israel as the Chosen Race, to the Jewish people as an ethnic group. There are several reasons for this position. First, the language of the covenant promise overtly refers to a people who are the lineal descendants of the Patriarchs. The eternal covenant is with "Jacob," and God promised to have a ruler from the Davidic line rule over "the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Jeremiah 33:25-26). Also, God's promises are for the descendants of the two ancient kingdoms, the "sons of Israel" and the "sons of Judah" (Jeremiah 50:4-5). The covenant was made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as to Israel forever (Psalm 105:8-10). It is obvious that the Holy Scriptures indicate that God made an eternal covenant with the physical descendants of the Patriarchs.

### 3. The Land Covenant

Another aspect of God's eternal covenant with the nation of Israel involves their possession of and residence in the Holy Land. The importance of *Eretz Yisrael*, the physical land itself, is a concept largely lost on contemporary minds. Living in a highly mobile, transient society, the significance of possessing ancestral property is not something many people think about anymore. But this is not the case with Scripture, or God's covenant race. For them, the everlasting

covenant of God with Israel is directly and irrevocably tied to the Land of Israel itself. Part of this reality involves a biblical truth: the land belongs to God himself (Leviticus 25:23, cf. Hosea 9:3, Zechariah 9:16). It is the Lord's land, and does not belong to anyone else. Israel was chosen by God to inhabit the land, living as stewards on the very parcel of earth that he had picked for his own. Israel lived with God on His personal property. In any discussion about the Holy Land, this fact must be kept in mind. It is not up to any human government or agency to determine who lives in the land. It is God's land, and it is his decision about who should live there.

God entered into an everlasting covenant with the Children of Israel, and he desired to permanently establish them in His land. Consider the following texts:

- The first establishment of the everlasting land covenant was with Abraham, and then his seed: "Then Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, 'To your seed I will give this land'" (Genesis 12:7).
- This was later reaffirmed: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your seed after you. And I will give to you and to your seed after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Genesis 17:7-8).
- The promise of the land was later repeated to Isaac (Genesis 26:3-4) and Jacob (Genesis 28:13-14).
- God even promised that if he brought judgment on Israel because of their sinfulness and sent them into exile, he would return them to the land he swore to give to the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 30:4-5). He further says that in such a situation, when they repent, then the Lord would remember the people of Israel and the land of Israel (Leviticus 26:42). Both the nation and the land are precious to the Lord.
- The prophet Ezekiel makes a powerful declaration concerning the Lord's promise concerning the land: "And I will cut a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will give them the land and multiply them and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever" (Ezekiel 37:26). The phrase "cut a covenant" refers to the literal meaning of the Hebrew word for covenant, *berith* (cf. Genesis 15).
- Jerusalem was chosen as an eternal habitation for God's presence (Psalm 132:13-14).
- God promises in the future that he will dwell in the land: "'Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,'" declares Yahweh. 'And many nations will join themselves to Yahweh in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me to you. Then Yahweh will inherit Judah as His portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem'" (Zechariah 2:10-12).

- Isaiah says that Jerusalem will be called “the City of Yahweh, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel” and that Israel “will possess the land forever” (Isaiah 60:14, 21).

Once again, some might argue that the promises of a “land covenant” with Israel are now only a metaphor for our spiritual blessings in Christ. It is a symbol of our spiritual inheritance as the adopted seed of Abraham. However, this is inconsistent with the many promises that the Lord gave to Israel that deal specifically with the *Eretz Yisrael*, the actual land of Israel. This is abundantly clear in the very pointed references to the physical nature of the covenant. Abraham was told that his seed would inherit the “land of the Canaanites,” the very soil that Abraham walked on (Genesis 17:8). The land given to the Children of Israel was the literal earth their feet trod upon (Deuteronomy 11:24, Joshua 1:3). Its physical dimensions were delineated by the Lord himself (Genesis 15:18, Exodus 23:31, Deuteronomy 11:24). Do these promises of God apply to the church? Of course not! There is no provision in the New Covenant for Gentile believers in the Messiah to possess any tract of land. This covenant, and these promises, are obviously directed to the physical descendants of Abraham.

#### **4. Israel in Prophecy**

There is another way in which we know that the everlasting covenant applies to the physical descendants of Abraham. There are many prophecies about the Children of Israel that have not yet been fulfilled. The Hebrew Bible is full of such revelations. The Lord, being a God of his word, faithful and trustworthy in all he declares and decrees, cannot fail to fulfill what he has prophesied for both the Children of Israel and the Land of Israel.

One of these promises is that Israel will possess the Promised Land within its divinely ordained boundaries. These boundaries define the borders of the Holy Land as being from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River, and from the Mediterranean Sea to the land east of the Jordan River (Genesis 15:18, Exodus 23:31, Joshua 1:4). The prophet Ezekiel defines Israel’s future borders in detail in Ezekiel 47:13-23. This area encompasses the region known as the Levant, and is much larger than Israel’s current borders. There has never been a time when this entire area has been under the rule of Israel. The closest that Israel ever came to possessing its entire promised area was under the reigns of David and Solomon. Obviously, for the Lord to be faithful to his work, there is a future fulfillment that is yet to come. Sometime in the future, Israel will receive their complete inheritance in the land.

Not only will they dwell in the land, but the Chosen People will abide in a land that is free of danger and harm (Ezekiel 34:25-30). The very beasts of the forest will live peaceably with mankind. There will be “showers of blessings.” Israel will live in harmony with its neighbors and former enemies. This will be a time of abundance and great blessing (also see Amos 9:11-15, Ezekiel 36:8-12).

Then, they will inherit all the blessings of God, and the glory of the Lord will be in their midst (see Ezekiel 37:24-28). In their future glory, God will abide in their midst, and he will cause the nations to bring tribute and wealth to Israel to bless them in the land (Isaiah 60).

Jerusalem will especially be the focus of God's blessing. The Scriptures plainly declare that the Lord has chosen Jerusalem for his own, as the place where his presence and glory will rest forever (see Psalm 132:13-14, Psalm 48:2-3, Isaiah 60:14). Zechariah 2:10-13 paints a beautiful picture of Israel as the site of God's abiding presence and glory. Isaiah 62 portrays Jerusalem as "a crown of glory in the hand of the Lord (v. 3), as "married" to Yahweh (vv. 4-5), a "praise in the earth" (v. 7), sought by God and the "City Not Forsaken" (v. 12). In the future, the city of God will enjoy the blessings of forgiven sin and God's salvation; and the Lord will manifest his glory over Jerusalem in the same way he was revealed over the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, in fire and in a cloud, the Shekinah presence of Yahweh himself (Isaiah 4:3-6). What a wonderful picture of the future glory of Zion. A glory that will come to Israel, the Chosen People, the chosen land. And these are only a few of the multitude of such promises for the future of Israel, in general, and Jerusalem, in particular.

## 5. The State of Israel

One area of prophetic revelation concerning God's covenant relationship with the Jewish people concerns Israel as a civic entity. God's covenant and promises not only concern the Jews as an ethnic group, but also focus on their being a political state. In ancient times, the Israelites were a nation-state inhabiting the Promised Land. The golden age of this state was during the reign of King David. For centuries, the state floundered under good kings and bad, a political division into Northern and Southern Kingdoms, and subsequent exiles of the two kingdoms. Attempts to reestablish the kingdom occurred at various times, especially under the Hasmoneans. Finally, Israel completely lost its statehood with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. For almost 1900 years, the people of Israel existed without a state of Israel (cf. Hosea 3:4).

All of this history was anticipated by the prophetic words given to Moses. Through the great Lawgiver, the Lord promised to establish the Children of Israel in the Promised Land forever. However, he warned them that he would send them into exile if they were not faithful to his covenant and live in obedience to his Law (Deuteronomy 28:64-65). Yet, along with this warning came God's promise that he would return them to the land again (Deuteronomy 30:1-5). This did happen during the Babylonian Exile and the Jews' return to the land. But, it would happen again centuries later. Along with the loss of their statehood in A.D. 70, most Jews were scattered throughout the surrounding nations. (Although, and this is important to note, there has always been a remnant of Jews living in the land throughout the centuries since the year 70.) This dispersal (the Diaspora) was also foreseen by God and there are prophecies anticipating yet another return to the land (see below). We saw these prophecies fulfilled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a most dramatic way.

If anyone doubts that the Jewish people are still chosen of God and have a special place in his plan for history, I would challenge them to explain the miracle of the Israeli state. It is inconceivable that a group of people could be conquered, dispersed, oppressed, and experience repeated attempts at the genocide of their race, and then return to their native homeland after 1900 years, reestablish themselves as a political state, reinstate their ancient language as the official national language (cf. Zephaniah 3:9), and reclaim and restore the land, and all this was done without divine intervention—that, to me, is ludicrous. Indeed, the words of the prophet

Hosea anticipated all of this—the Jews living without a ruler and no civic state, and then being returned to the land and reestablished as a people (see Hosea 3:4-5).

Consider the prophetic word of God about the reestablishment of Israel in the land.

- 21 “Then say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God: “Surely I will take the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; 22 and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all; they shall no longer be two nations, nor shall they ever be divided into two kingdoms again.” (Ezekiel 37:21-22)
- “He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, And gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth” (Isaiah 11:12). This prophecy was fulfilled over a period of decades during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Jeremiah 16:14-15 speaks of God gathering Israel from all nations, especially from the land of the north. Some may assert that this refers to the exiles returning from Babylon. But those exiles were from Babylon, not all nations. And it was not all of Israel, but primarily those of the tribe of Judah who came back to the land. (Although a few Israelites from the other tribes also returned with them.) This prophecy of Jeremiah evidently refers to the general return that has occurred within the past century. It probably specifically refers to the thousands of Jews who have come to Israel from the land of the north (Russia and Ukraine?). Isaiah 43:6 refers to the same return.
- Some may say that the above prophecies refer to the Babylonian exiles returning to the land. However, God clearly indicates that there was a second future restoration. For example, Amos 9:14-15 says, “‘I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,’ says the Lord your God.” This prophecy obviously cannot refer to the exiles who returned after sojourning in Babylon. The majority of them were removed from the land and dispersed by the Roman conquest in the first century. Therefore, this prophecy refers to a time far in the future—indeed, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Isaiah 11:11 is especially significant in this regard. It says, “It shall come to pass in that day that the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people who are left.” Notice, there will be a second gathering of Israel. The first was after the Babylonian Exile. The second would occur in our own time.
- Jesus himself indicated an exile and a return to the land. He spoke of the fall of Jerusalem, the captivity of the Jews, and Jerusalem being under foreign domination “until the time of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24).
- Clearly, the first disciples anticipated a full restoration of Israel as a sovereign state, for they asked Jesus when this would occur (Acts 1:6). Jesus did not deny that this would

occur, but simply said that this was within the providential plan of God (1:7), and then enjoined them to focus on their immediate concern, world evangelization (1:8).

Some of the things that have happened with Israel are wonderfully specific fulfillments of God's word. Consider the following:

- "Who has ever heard of such things? Who has ever seen things like this? Can a country be born in a day or a nation be brought forth in a moment?" (Isaiah 66:8 NIV). And yet, this is exactly what happened. Israel became a nation in one day, May 14, 1948. That date was an exact fulfillment of a specific prophetic word.
- In 1867, Mark Twain recorded in *Innocents Abroad*, his impressions of the Holy Land. He called it a "desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds" and a "mournful waste." And then God restored His people to the land, and Israel became a nation again. What did the Israelis do to the land? They fulfilled prophecy by making the land fertile and productive again. Consider Isaiah 27:6, "Those who come He shall cause to take root in Jacob; Israel shall blossom and bud, and fill the face of the world with fruit." Also, Isaiah 35:1, "The wilderness and the wasteland shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."
- Since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the city of Jerusalem has existed under the domination of foreign powers: Roman, Byzantine, Muslim, Crusaders, Turkish, and British. But in 1948, part of Jerusalem came under Jewish rule, and then the whole city in 1967. This is a clear fulfillment of biblical prophecies, e.g., Luke 21:24, Zechariah 8:4-8.

However, it must be observed that the current state of Israel is only a partial fulfillment of what God has prophesied for his Chosen People. Consider what prophecies are still awaiting complete fulfillment.

- There are indications in Scripture that there will be a Third Temple in Jerusalem. Many Orthodox Jews anticipate this, and there are Jewish groups who are actively preparing for it. For there to be a Third Temple, it seems reasonable to believe that there must be a state of Israel in existence. Prophecies that cause us to believe in a Third Temple are found in passages dealing with the Antichrist and his future betrayal of Israel (see Daniel 9:27, Matthew 24:15, and 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4.)
- It is interesting that Zechariah predicts that Israel as a body will turn to the Messiah and accept the One whom "they pierced." But this happens to those dwelling in the land, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the house of David (Zechariah 12:10, 13:1). Clearly, inhabiting the land must come before the universal salvation of the people of Israel. Their prophesied presence in the land has clearly occurred. Yet, Christ's return has not happened yet. We still await the universal Jewish acceptance of Yeshua as the Messiah. Note that Paul refers to this event in Romans 11:26 and quotes from Isaiah 59:20 as proof that salvation will come to the people in the land.

- The prophecy of Ezekiel 37 indicates that the restoration of Israel will occur in stages: bones, flesh, then new life (Ezekiel 37:1-14). Israel has returned to the land. The skeleton is there. Flesh and muscle have come upon the bones. Israel is now a strong political and military force. But there will come a day when breath/spirit enters into them, and they experience the new life found only in the Messiah (Ezekiel 37:14).
- Elsewhere, Ezekiel also speaks of the people of Israel returning to the land, which is followed by God cleansing them of their sins and putting a new heart with them (Ezekiel 36:24-26).
- In that day of future glory, the Children of Israel will dwell in the land under the reign of David (Ezekiel 37:24, Jeremiah 30:9). Imagine, the resurrected ancient King of Israel, David himself, will rule over the future, glorified state of Israel.

All of the above points lead to two clear and undeniable facts. One, God is sovereign in history, and works out all things according to the counsel of his own will (Ephesians 1:11, Isaiah 46:10). Two, God has not rejected Israel as his people (Romans 11:2). He has continued to work in their behalf through the centuries. And within the past 150 years, we have seen the Lord fulfill numerous prophecies regarding his Chosen People and the land he promised would be theirs forever.

One final word about the present state of Israel. It is evident from the foregoing that God still has a plan and purpose for the Jews, which includes the country of Israel. However, as we have seen, the current state of Israel is only a partial fulfillment of all that God has purposed for his people as a civic body. The completion of his sovereign plan will only happen with the second advent of the Messiah. This means that for the present, the Israeli state is not perfect, and every action it takes does not necessarily have the approval or blessing of God. We do not live in a situation where our motto is “Israel: God’s country, right or wrong.” Love for Israel and acceptance of the Jews as God’s covenant people is not a carte blanche acceptance of everything the political body of Israel does. Not every law from the Knesset is God-ordained. Every action by the Prime Minister is not a decree from the Almighty. This is true today, just as it was in ancient Israel. Just because Solomon was the son of David, King of the covenant race, ruler over the Chosen People, did not mean that everything he did was “kosher.” Did God approve of Solomon building temples to pagan gods? Of course not. Throughout the history of ancient Israel, we see many instances of the kings of Israel being rebuked and admonished by the prophets of God. This occurred from the time when Samuel confronted Saul, and Nathan rebuked David, to Elijah pronouncing judgment on the house of Ahab, or Jeremiah confronting the sons of Josiah. As it was in ancient Israel, so it is today. As with any country, Israel is expected to enact laws that are fair and equitable, maintain civil and human rights, engage in just war, and interact with other nations in a reasonable manner.

## Conclusion

Beginning with Abraham, God established a covenant relationship with those who would come to be called Israelites, and later Jews. This covenant relationship was ratified at Mt. Sinai with

God's revelation of the Law, and declaring the Children of Israel to be his covenant people, his own Chosen People.

In dealing with his Chosen People, God made promises to them and pledged an everlasting covenant with them. These covenants and promises involved two aspects. First of all, there were spiritual promises that primarily involved atonement for sin and the work of the Messiah in redemption. These were completely fulfilled in the work of Jesus as the Savior. Part of this atonement involved a Messianic New Covenant, which included Gentiles, as well as Jewish believers. The Gentiles were adopted as recipients of the Abrahamic blessing and grafted into the original stock of God's people. Together with the believing Jews, they became a "New Israel." It should be noted that this "one, new man" is a new Israel, since "Israel" (in this sense) comprises the people of God.

However, the majority of the Jewish people did not, and still have not, accepted Yeshua/Jesus as Messiah. As a result, these "branches" were broken off and set aside for a time. Yet, this does not mean that they are utterly rejected as the Chosen People. As far as salvation is concerned, they are unbelievers who are lost and need redemption. But there will come a day when these rejected branches will be restored to the original trunk that is the true Israel.

In the meantime, there is still the reality of the second aspect of God's everlasting covenant with Israel. God's promises also involved establishing Israel as his own people in the Promised Land, which belongs to Yahweh himself. This land-covenant aspect of God's covenant is reckoned as the inheritance of his Chosen People. God is still working in and through Israel, fulfilling prophecies and supernaturally intervening in human history in their behalf. We now await the day when all Israel will be saved, Jew and Gentile followers of the Messiah will worship the Triune God together. In that future era, the Children of Israel will possess their rightful inheritance in the Promised Land, with its God-ordained borders, ruled over by King David himself, and living in a state of honor and glory among all nations.

As modern-day Gentile followers of the Messiah, what is our response to be? I would suggest several things:

- Let us never allow a hint of antisemitism to enter our hearts. It is an evil and wicked spiritual sin. Further, not only do Genesis 12:3 and Numbers 24:9 apply here, but considering all of the above, to have a prejudicial bias against the Jews is a denial of the Lord's providence and the sovereign will of God. If you hate Israel, you hate those that God loves. No wonder God said that if you touch Israel, you are "touching the apple" of his eye (Zechariah 2:8). This refers to the iris of the eye, the most vulnerable part. This illustrates how precious and valuable Israel is to the Lord. Frankly, the church has often had a miserable record in this regard. We must repent of this sin and honor the Jews as God's Chosen People.
- Let us be thankful for the saving grace of God, freely given to all men. And let us appreciate that in God's providence, he decided to include Gentiles in the New Covenant and graft us into the olive tree that is Israel, the people of God.

- Let us join with Paul in praying for all Israel to be saved (Romans 10:1). We, who were wild branches grafted into the tree that is God's people, should yearn and cry out to God for the natural branches that were broken off, that they will be grafted in again. Our plea to God should be, "Lord of the harvest, save all Israel."
- Let us pray for the Jewish people. We should pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6). We should pray blessings upon them, for the promise of God is that he will bless those who bless Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:3, Numbers 24:9).

Perhaps there is no more fitting prayer than are found in the words of the ancient Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come, Immanuel":

O come, O come, Immanuel,  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.

O come, O come, great Lord of might,  
Who to your tribes on Sinai's height  
In ancient times did give the law  
In cloud and majesty and awe. Refrain

O come, O Branch of Jesse's stem,  
Unto your own and rescue them!  
From depths of hell your people save,  
Give them victory o'er the grave. Refrain

O come, O King of nations, bind  
In one the hearts of all mankind.  
Bid all our sad divisions cease  
And be yourself our King of Peace. Refrain

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel  
shall come to you, O Israel.