

ISRAEL: STILL GOD'S PEOPLE, STILL THE HOLY LAND?

One of the most controversial questions of our day...and has been for a while, is "What about the Jews?" Are they still God's covenant people? And what about the land of Israel? Is it the Land of Promise belonging to ethnic Jews?

Although we won't have time in one evening to sort through all of this, there are some things we can consider in order to get a handle on God's purposes for both Jews and Gentiles.

First, let us keep the big picture in mind. What I mean is we should start from the beginning, in Genesis, and review what happened at the creation and fall of mankind. Look at Genesis 3.

What happened? What judgments were pronounced? What promises were made?

Now consider the flow of Biblical history and the outworking of God's first promise of redemption. Think of the increase in lawlessness; think of the judgments of God at the Flood, and at the Tower of Babel.

What happened as a result of these two judgments? Are you keeping in mind the big picture: God's purpose to restore what was lost through Adam?

Now look at Genesis 12:1-8. God has singled out one man, Abraham, to be made a recipient of a gracious covenant relationship. To Abraham and His descendants God made promises of a gracious, loving relationship, and of a special piece of real estate, the Land of Canaan.

Why did God choose Abraham? Why did He promise him and his descendants the Land of Canaan? Do you still see the big picture in Genesis 12:3?

So the promise is made of a special relationship and a special land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We jump ahead and see that the sons of Jacob (Israel) are the 12 tribes of Israel. And also, that God has not forgotten His promises. In God's providence, He has them in slavery in Egypt, but by His mighty power He delivers them. Moses is God's leader through whom they are made a nation, through him they receive from God a covenant constitution: the Mosaic Law. Through a central sanctuary (Tabernacle), a sacrificial system (animal sacrifices), and statutes for daily living (the Ten commandments and other laws), God gave them a renewal and expansion of the special covenant given to Abraham.

Moving along through the Old Testament Scriptures, we see that Joshua leads the chosen people, the Israelites, into the Land of Promise. Look at Joshua 11:16-23; 21:43-45.

When God makes a promise, does His word ever fail? Did God fulfill His promise to give the Land of Canaan to Israel? Were there still enemies in the Land to defeat? How did that fact effect the promise?

Compressing things a bit (a lot!), we see that the history of the chosen people is a checkered one. At times we see them faithful and blest; at other times we see them as unfaithful, and under God's

covenant curse. There are many instances of repentance and restoration, and then falling into idolatry again.

In times of unfaithfulness God sent them prophets to declare God's Word and call them back. And within that calling is found the promise of a Messiah, One Who would "save His people from their sins."

Let's fast forward again. You are no doubt familiar with the promise of a New Covenant. Look at Jeremiah 31:31-34; Isaiah 62:2; 65:15.

It is very clear that the New Testament writers understood that the Old Covenant would be superseded and replaced by the New Covenant. That is obvious to any who have eyes to see and ears to hear. But the question remains: What of Israel?

I hope you are still keeping in mind the "Big Picture!" And also, this fact: that God has always reserved to Himself a remnant of faithful Israelites during those times when the nation had rejected Him as a whole.

We could say the same thing when we come to the New Testament, during the time of Christ and the Apostles who followed. We see that only a handful truly believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. And this was, by the way, according to God's plan.

When Israel was unfaithful in the past, God judged the nation and saved a remnant. So it was in the NT era. In order for Christ to be the promised Lamb of God, the nation had to reject Him, conspiring with the Romans, and put Him to death. But this ultimately would be the

foundation of the New Covenant, and the beginning of a new people of God.

This new people are given a new name that marks a new covenant relationship, that fits the bigger purpose of God that finds its first declaration in the Garden of Eden: Genesis 3:15.

Here are some of the various words or phrases used to describe the new people:

Israel of God ~ Gal. 6:16

Household of God ~ Eph. 2:19-22

His Body ~ 1Cor. 12:12; Eph. 1:22-23; Col.1:24; 2:19

The Church of the Living God, the pillar and ground of the truth ~ 1 Tim. 3:15

The Commonwealth of Israel ~ Eph. 2:12

Christians ~ Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16

Consider: Ephesians 2:11-22; Romans 2:28-29.

The New Covenant community, made up of both believing Jews and Gentiles, stands in historical succession to the covenant people which existed from the beginning (God has always had a people!), through Abraham and the Nation of Israel. It is this continuing body that receives the new and better covenant in Christ, which the Apostle Paul depicts as an olive tree. See Romans 11.

Israel as a nation would be judged for their rejection of Christ, just as Jesus told them: Matthew 8:12; 21:43; 23:34-38.

By that rejection the promise of restoration and blessing becomes wider than the tiny nation of Israel: John 3:16-21; 10:16; 17:20-21; Gal. 3:7, 13-14; Rom. 4; Matt. 8:11-12. Further, Paul writes this: Rom. 15:8-12. And Peter says this: 1Pet. 2:5-10.

From what we have seen so far, it ought to be clear that the Church of Jesus Christ is the historical successor of the faithful people of God in the past. And thus Roderick Campbell states in his book, *Israel and the New Covenant*:

1. In the case of the specific family, nation, or corporate body which is addressed, or to whom the promise is given, all the promises and privileges are conditioned upon obedience to the revealed will of God.
2. Israel as a nation forfeited its blessings and privileges under successive historical covenants.
3. All these blessings and privileges promised to Israel have been, or will be, fulfilled to and in the faithful Remnant of racial Israel which survived through all the national apostasies and disasters, and which formed the nucleus of the New covenant church.
4. This Remnant was used by God to preserve and to bring to completion the sacred oracles of Written Revelation.
5. The blessings promised to Abraham, Israel, and David, were designed, ultimately, for the well-being of all races and nations of men.
6. An unbelieving body of racial Jewry will survive the national dissolution, and Paul seems to say in Romans 11 that this body, perhaps even while maintaining its racial distinctiveness, will be united with the Christian church in the world-wide community of the New Israel. The fulfillment alone

will make manifest just what Paul means.

7. The conversion of this still surviving body of racial Jewry to the Christian faith will bring about revival or blessing to the Gentile world (Rom. 11:15).

If ethnic Israel was excommunicated for its apostasy and rejection of Christ, if the Church made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, is now the Temple, Chosen People, new Priesthood, etc, what about the land we call Israel?

In what way is that particular piece of real estate important to the world-wide purposes of God? In light of what we have read in Joshua, how should think about that land?

The New Testament is largely silent regarding the literal promised Land (and that silence speaks volumes), but it is anything but silent regarding the fulfillment of those promises in Jesus Christ. 'In Christ' (not 'in Jerusalem') we find the promised land. He is the ultimate Joshua. He is greater than Zerubbabel. Fulfillment is much greater than Palestine, but stretches across the globe.

By focusing on the Old Testament prophecies and neglecting the New Testament fulfillments, we are living in the shadows instead of in the light. We are going backward, not forward. We are living in yesterday instead of, as the author of Hebrews puts it, today. Much of the contemporary Christian church is far too focused on 1948. The 'land' promises were far bigger than Palestine. The land promises foreshadowed the fact that the Kingdom of God will, ultimately, be the last Kingdom standing on earth.

COME, MAKE A JOYFUL SHOUT TO GOD

BRIAN L. PENNEY, 2013
FROM PSALM 100

HUW ANGEL, 1764-1843

1. Come, make a joy - ful shout to God the Lord,
2. Know that the sov - reign Lord is God a - lone;
3. En - ter in - to His courts with thank - ful praise;

Serve Him with glad - ness, Praise Him with sing - ing;
And He has made us, We are His peo - ple,
Sing of His good - ness, Sing of His mer - cy,

Come to Him peo - ples of the earth. Hal - le - lu - jah,
We are the sheep un - der His care. Hal - le - lu - jah,
Sing of His truth for - ev - er - more. Hal - le - lu - jah,

Hal - le - lu - jah, Come, you peo - ples of the earth.
Hal - le - lu - jah, We, the sheep un - der His care.
Hal - le - lu - jah, Sing His truth for - ev - er - more.