

WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL? (2)

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I. The Idea of the Land (continued)

Let us put the two passages together (Romans 4 and Hebrews 11) to see how sacred Scripture interprets the Old Testament land promise. In Romans 4:13, Canaan represents the world (the cosmos). In Hebrews 11, Canaan represents the heavenly country. Therefore, we have Canaan representing a heavenly world: the new heavens and the new earth. That is what God's Word says, interpreting Scripture with Scripture.

Who received this promise? Abraham, Hebrews 11:9 says, "sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise." Abraham had the promise; Isaac and Jacob had the same promise. Then in verses 12 and 13, all of Abraham's spiritual believing seed had the same promise:

Therefore sprang there even of one [i.e., Abraham], and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. These all died in faith, not having received the promises [in their lifetimes], but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

All of Abraham's believing seed are pilgrims and strangers on the earth. Romans 4:11-13 teaches that Abraham's seed are Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Old Testament saints and believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament age inherit the new heavens and the new earth: the heavenly Canaan.

How did the saints of the Old Testament understand this land promise? Let us look at Hebrews 11 again. Verse 10 says that "he [i.e., Abraham] looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." In other words, if you had gone to Abraham, as he was sitting one day outside his tent on the plains of Mamre by Hebron, and said to him, "God has given you the

promise of this land. How do you expect this promise to be fulfilled?" Abraham would have said, "God told me that I am not going to inherit this land in my day (Gen. 15), but I know that this land is a picture of the new heavens and the new earth, because I am looking for a heavenly city whose builder and maker is God. Also, I understand that the cities that I have seen in Canaan are only pictures of a better world. That is what I am looking for." As Hebrews 11:10 says, "[Abraham] looked for a city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God." He looked for a city that is permanent, one that is going to last. Then look at verse 13:

These [i.e., Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the true believing seed in the Old Testament] all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For *they* that say such things declare plainly that *they* seek a country.

Notice how the inspired writer moves from "he" (v. 10), a singular man, Abraham, to "they" (vv. 13-14). Moreover, verse 16 says, "But now *they* desire a better country [i.e., one better than the land of Canaan], that is, an heavenly country." "They," believers in the Old Testament, desired and said that they were seeking a better, heavenly country. The land of Canaan here on earth was only a temporary, interim fulfilment. They were looking for the blessed eternal state, the new heavens and the new earth.

This is the reason why Joseph wanted to be buried in the land of Canaan (v. 22). "By faith, Joseph, when he died," spoke of the things that were most important to him. He said, "I am going to die, but God has promised that you will leave the land of Egypt to live in the land of promise and I want you to take my bones with you. I do not want my bones in Egypt. I want my bones in Canaan." Having his bones in Canaan symbolized his part and share in the new heavens and the new earth.

Think, too, of the story of Naboth's vineyard in I Kings 21. Naboth was offered by Ahab good money or a replacement vineyard, but Naboth said, "I cannot sell you my vineyard, for it is the inheritance of my fathers." He would not sell his inheritance, not because he thought it was sinful to sell something to a wicked man, but because Naboth understood that the little parcel of land which he

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and his ancestors owned, was their sign and token that they had a share in the new and heavenly creation. He understood what the land symbolized. He was looking for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

In this way, the land of Canaan is similar, typologically, to the Garden of Eden. Both picture the new heavens and the new earth, though both picture it in different aspects. Eden tells us that heaven is going to be like a beautiful garden. There will be a river; there will be the tree of life; we will have the fellowship of God. We will be sinless, the way it was before the fall. Canaan fills out and enlarges the picture of the new heaven and the new earth by saying that it is like a land that flows with milk and honey. It is a fruitful country not just a garden. It has a city; the new world is a holy civilization. It is for a whole people, not just for two, as it was in Eden.

What about the formation of modern Israel in 1948? First, it is not the fulfilment of some biblical prophecy. Israel is unbelieving. Israel opposes evangelization. They do not like people witnessing about the Lord Jesus Christ in their land. Israel today only possesses part of the land. As for tribal allotments, obeying the Torah, Levitical cities and all the rest, most of Israel is not interested. Where will you see many Jews on the Sabbath? On the beach. They are as godless and secular as people in our own country. The Bible does not predict the formation of modern Israel. The formation of modern Israel in 1948 is indeed a marvel. It is a fascinating piece of history and many people did not expect it, but it is mainly a political thing. The Jews were so persecuted, especially in the days of the Nazis, that sufficient worldwide sympathy was gained for them. Also, the powers that favoured them had control over that tract of land and decided to “solve” the “problem” of the Jews by giving them their own homeland: “Maybe this will be a better idea since many of them want it, and although some of them do not want it, we will try this.”

Why then is it that Almighty God has decreed this? Why has Jehovah willed this in His providence? Using some general principles and ideas in Scripture, several general factors can be mentioned.

First, the creation of modern Israel in 1948 is at least part of the way that God maintains the Jews as a distinct people. Many nations no longer exist. Can you find today a Moabite, Babylonian, Samaritan or Hittite? But there have always been Jews, and God has willed that there will always be elect Jews in

the church (Rom. 11). The formation of the modern nation of Israel is part of the way in which God keeps them distinct, so that He can always save some Jews throughout history.

Second, with Israel back in the land and the numerous times it has appeared in the news, God, as it were, forces people in various ways to think about the Jews. What does the Bible say about Israel? Those discussing these issues include Christians, who go to the Bible and ask, "What does the Bible teach about them?" In this way, there is a development of doctrine. We are often lazy, and it is often through controversy that we are driven to study the Word of God.

Third, Israel's presence in the Middle East is a way in which Christ's prophecy of "wars and rumours of wars" is fulfilled (Matt. 24:6), for the surrounding Muslim nations hate Israel and would love to destroy it.

There is a fourth factor: syncretism, unbiblical fellowship with those of false religions, which paves the way for Antichrist. Some professing Christians believe that Jews can be saved without believing in Jesus Christ. That is increasingly popular among some evangelicals who see a spiritual significance in Israel being back in the land. There are evangelicals who are giving money, taking offerings in their churches and sending it off to Israel to raise funds to build an earthly temple in the city of Jerusalem. There are breeding projects to try to produce a red heifer like the one described in Numbers 19. There are people making clothes that they think look like the garments of the high priest and priests in the Old Testament for a new Levitical priesthood. They are being led astray into a false fellowship and cooperation with unbelieving Jews who do not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. So, in these ways and others, Israel's presence in the eastern Mediterranean is one factor in the preparation of the Antichrist.

Putting the third and fourth points together, we see that in the midst of the civil and religious unrest in the Middle East, people are crying out more and more, "We want an earthly peace. If only someone could stop the strife in Israel and in other hot spots around the world." If someone would rise up today and make peace in the Middle East, he would be hailed by *Time* magazine as man of the year. Someone who could stop the wars in the world would be made head of the United Nations, because of the longing in fallen man's heart to have peace in this world—without Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Fallen mankind is being readied for Antichrist!

II. Christ's Teaching on Israel in the Gospels

Turning to Christ's teaching in the gospels, we will consider John first. Then we will look at a few passages in Matthew.

John 1:14 states, "And the Word was made flesh, and *dwelt* among us, and we beheld his glory." You may know that the word "dwelt" here means "tabernacled." The Word "tabernacled" among us and we beheld His glory. In Jesus Christ, God's glory dwells far more gloriously than it ever dwelt in the tent in the wilderness. Christ is the reality pictured in the tabernacle.

Jesus' words, "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will raise it up" (John 2:19) were misunderstood by the Jews who thought Christ was referring to the temple in Jerusalem, which took forty-six years or so to build. Scripture explains that Jesus meant the temple of His body (v. 21). Christ's human nature is the temple. The essence of "templeness" is not having pillars or the right shapes of windows. The essence of a temple is that it is the place where God dwells, and God dwells in Jesus Christ, because He is God manifest in the flesh (I Tim. 3:16). The highest possible conception of the temple is realized in the relationship between the divine and human natures in the Lord Jesus. Moreover, since Jesus is the temple and God dwells in Him, believers are the temple because God dwells in us. We are temples individually and the church is a temple because God dwells in the midst of His people collectively (I Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19). This is what the Old Testament temple, both the one built by Solomon and the one built by Zerubbabel, pointed to: the church of every kindred, tribe and tongue in whom dwells the Holy Ghost. This is far better! We do not need some new Solomon or Zerubbabel to build a temple in the Middle East when we have the reality to which the Old Testament temple pointed: God dwelling in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ by His Spirit dwelling in us as His church. Having a temple built in Palestine is a step backwards. That temple would be, after all, merely a stone building—a big building, a nice building—but still just a building made of stones.

Christ said of Nathanael, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile" (John 1:47)! This teaches us that not everyone who is physically and outwardly an Israelite is truly an Israelite. "You, Nathanael, are an Israelite indeed, because there is no guile in you. You are honest and open before God, whereas most of those who are outwardly and physically Israelites have guile and deceit

in them. You are different. You are an Israelite indeed." This shows us that it is not blood descent that makes someone a true Jew.

Similarly, in John 8, the Jews said to Jesus, "Abraham is our father" (v. 39). But Jesus told the Jews, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father" (vv. 39-41). They responded, "We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God" (v. 41). Then Jesus replied, "Ye are of your father the devil" (v. 44). So here are these Jews, who say Abraham is their father, but Jesus tells them, "No, the devil is your father because you do not believe in me." Therefore, being a child of Abraham is not simply a matter of flesh and blood. It is a matter of faith, believing and living as Abraham believed and lived.

Our next passage is John 4, which concerns the woman at the well in Sychar. "Our fathers," the Samaritan woman says, "worshipped in this mountain [i.e., Mount Gerizim]; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (v. 20). Which one is it? Jesus responds in effect, "Look, woman, can you grasp this? The hour is coming when people are not going to worship God in Mount Gerizim or Mount Zion in Jerusalem" (v. 21). Place is not the issue! It does not matter what mountain you worship on, because the hour is coming, that is, the New Testament age, when earthly Jerusalem is not a special place to worship at all, never mind Mount Gerizim. In the New Testament age, Jerusalem is not a special place for worship, because there is no special presence of God there. There are no literal holy places and there is no physical holy land in the New Testament, because God dwells in His elect believing people, the holy catholic (or universal) church of redeemed Jews and Gentiles. The real issue is that we must worship the Father in spirit and in truth (vv. 23-24). God is graciously present wherever He is rightly worshipped. That is crucial, not the location.

Moving from the fourth to the first gospel, we hear John the Baptist explaining to the Jews the true identity of the children of Abraham: "And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham" (Matt. 3:9). This is what God did! In saving the Gentiles, God raised up children unto Abraham of the stones!

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Now turn to Matthew 21:19, Christ's words in connection with cursing the fig tree. Given the context and the biblical symbolism, the fig tree is Israel. What did Jesus say to the fig tree symbolizing Israel? "Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever." As the nation, the theocracy, the special manifestation of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament with its particular prerogatives and privileges, no more fruit will grow on Israel. As a particular body and nation, no more fruit will be produced unto God forever. There will never again be Israel as a theocracy, which is on a higher level or status than any other nation in the earth, because in Jesus Christ, believing Jews and Gentiles are equal, wholly and fully equal (Gal. 3:28-29; Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6).

In Matthew 21:43, after presenting Himself in the preceding parable as the son whom the tenant farmers killed, Christ states, "Therefore I say unto you [i.e., the Jews], The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." The kingdom of God was taken from Israel and given to another nation, a nation which consists of believers, the elect church. As is stated in I Peter 2:9-10, we, believing Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament church, are "an holy nation, a peculiar people." This is the way it has been for the last 2,000 years.

Now turn to Matthew 27, the final passage in Matthew that we are considering in this regard. After Jesus gave up the ghost, we read, "Behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (v. 51). The problem is that people have the wrong view of the temple. They think, "What a wonderful building. I wish we had an earthly temple today! Would it not be great if there was a temple in Jerusalem in the future!" However, the earthly temple symbolized not only God dwelling with His people, but it symbolized also God dwelling with His people *with exclusion barriers*, because the overwhelming majority of the Jews never got into the Holy of Holies. Only one man, the high priest, could enter. Moreover, he could only go in there one day a year, and he had to go with blood. Although, in the Old Testament, the temple represented God dwelling with His people, the ordinary Jewish man could only get as near as the outer court; some, the priests, could get into the holy place; only one person, the high priest, could get really close to God in the Holy of Holies. That one person could only get into the Holy of Holies on one day of the year. He did not even get to spend the whole day in there

either. Therefore, the temple in the Old Testament declared, in effect, "God is with us, but keep your distance!"

Now, through the substitutionary death of Christ for His people, the veil is rent so that all believers can come unto God through Jesus Christ—not merely the Jewish high priest, but all believing Jews and Gentiles, every day of the week, every moment of the day, through faith in our crucified and risen mediator. If you want an earthly temple, you are saying, "I want a veil, I want a priest, I want an altar, I want to wash my hands in a laver, and I want to come up only at certain times, and I am happy not to get too close to God!" However, the earthly temple is finished and we will never be going back to a far less glorious age with priests, altars, veils and animal sacrifices again.

III. Paul's Teaching on Israel in Romans

Finally, let us turn to Paul's inspired words in Romans. Chapters 1-8 present the gospel of grace for Jews and Gentiles. Both Jews and Gentiles are under sin. The apostle writes in Romans 3:9, "What then [i.e., what shall we say on the basis of the previous chapters]? are we [i.e., Jews] better than they [i.e., Gentiles]? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." This is total equality: all Gentiles and Jews are totally depraved sinners! There is also perfect equality for Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ and are justified by faith alone: "It is one God, which shall justify the circumcision [i.e., Jews] by faith, and uncircumcision [i.e., Gentiles] through faith" (v. 30). The previous and following chapters not only explain that we are equal in justification, but also that both Jews and Gentiles are sanctified and persevere by God's sovereign grace alone.

Now look at the last couple of verses in Romans 2. What is a Jew, a real Jew, a spiritual Jew? Romans 2:28 tells us the negative, what he is not: "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly [with a skull cap, for instance]; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh." Positively, verse 29 states, "But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." We, who believe in the Son of God, are Jews and, as Jews, we inherit all the promises that God promised to the Jews, because a Jew is somebody who has praise of God. That is what "Judah," from which comes the word "Jews," means: "praise."

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God says, "You are one of my children in Jesus Christ and so I delight in you." "Israel" means "prince of God." We, who are kings in Christ, are princes of God, and we pray and wrestle with God, as Jacob did (Gen. 32:24-32). However, an unbelieving Jew is reckoned a Gentile or uncircumcised (Rom. 2:28-29).

Let us return to Romans 4:13, "For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith." We do not inherit anything through the law, but the promise is received through faith. We, the spiritual children of Abraham and spiritual Jews, inherit not just Canaan—that is not big enough for us—but the world in Jesus Christ!

Romans 9:4-5 sets forth the privileges that the Jews have in their generations. Theirs is "the adoption," because God took Israel as His son (Ex. 4:22). Theirs is "the glory," the glory cloud or Shekinah that came on the tabernacle and temple. Theirs are "the covenants," the covenants with Moses, Levi and David. Theirs is "the giving of the law," for the Jews (not the Russians or the Welsh) were physically on Mount Sinai. Theirs is "the service of God" in the tabernacle/temple, and "the promises" of the Old Testament Scriptures. "The fathers" were Jews: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. In addition, and especially this, in the line of the Jews came forth "Christ," who is "God blessed forever." Clearly, the Jews as a nation had special religious privileges.

The apostle Paul says in Romans 9:1-3 that he is not lying, but that his conscience and the Holy Ghost bear witness that he has great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart, because he would love to see the Jews, his kinsmen, converted. He even goes as far as saying that, if it were possible, he would go to hell to save them (v. 3). That is what he says! Amazing!

In Romans 9:6-8, Paul explains that it is not as if the Word of God did not really work, as if it did not take any effect. One has to understand that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (v. 6). Outwardly, they are Israelites, but there are only some of them who are truly Israel. There are many who are physically descended from Abraham, but only those who are effectually called by God are really the children of Abraham (v. 7). Paul makes his point with another statement of this truth: Those that are of the promise are really the children of Abraham, but the other ones are just carnal Jews. They are not spiritual inwardly, unlike the true seed of Abraham (v. 8).

Next comes the example of Jacob and Esau: same mother, same father, both twins, not yet born, not having done any good or evil; yet one was elect, Jacob, and one was reprobate, Esau (vv. 9-11). "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated" (v. 13). It is the same with Israel. God loved some in Israel and hated others. Paul anticipates the objection that this is not fair. He explains that God is completely sovereign and righteous in electing some and reprobating others, even in physical Israel, from very early in its history with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all the way up to the present day (vv. 14-24).

This brings us to Romans 11:1-10, which explains that there is always an elect remnant in (outward) Israel. For instance, in the years of Elijah, when most in the Northern Kingdom worshipped Baal, there were seven thousand who had not bowed their knee to that idol (vv. 2-4): the "remnant according to the election of grace" (v. 5). Moving forward some seven hundred years, Paul says, "I also am an Israelite" (v. 1). Therefore, God still had His people from among the Jews two thousand years ago. The apostle makes this general point, "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (v. 5). Therefore, it is all of grace (v. 6). Since it is all of grace, works do not save us; otherwise, it would not really be grace. If it were of works, then you cannot have grace; otherwise, it is not really works. Works and grace concerning salvation are mutually exclusive (v. 6). Verses 7-10 speak of election and reprobation within (ethnic) Israel.

The rest of Romans 11 deals with the casting off and saving of the Jews and the calling of the elect Gentiles, with believing Gentiles being grafted into the olive tree (vv. 11-36). In the latter part of verse 25, Paul sums up his argument: "Blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." The apostle is referring to the whole period of the New Testament church, from Pentecost to the *parousia* or second coming, until the last Gentile is saved, when "the fulness of the Gentiles is come in." Christ returns when the last Gentile is saved. Blindness is only "in part" of Israel because there is always a remnant of the Jews saved. In this way, "all Israel shall be saved" (v. 26): all the elect Jews, beginning with Abraham, to the seven thousand in the days of Elijah, to Paul and some in the first century AD, through the New Testament age, until the fulness is come when the last Gentile is saved. The last Gentile being saved is contemporaneous with the last

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Jew being saved. When all the church of elect Jews and Gentiles is gathered, Christ comes back in great glory.

So what about Israel? We are not looking for a day when Israel is going to occupy all of the land of Palestine. We are not looking for some great gathering of Jews in a literal millennium on earth. We are looking for the fulfilment of God's purpose with Israel: to save a remnant according to the election of grace (v. 5) throughout the New Testament age, as God also did in the Old Testament days. We are looking for the fulness of the New Testament period when all the elect from all the nations (Jews and Gentiles) are saved and when the whole catholic (or universal) church of Christ is gathered. Then comes the bliss of the new heavens and the new earth, when we shall dwell with the Triune God in Jesus Christ forever in perfect peace and joy!