

DOES JESUS FULFILL ISRAEL'S LAND PROMISES?

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

Ever since the second century after Christ, many within the church have claimed that the church has forever replaced Israel. In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr in his famous *Dialogue with Trypho, A Jew* called the church "the true Israelitic race" on the basis that "Christ is the Israel." Justin goes on to say, "Such are the words of Scripture; understand, therefore, that the seed of Jacob now referred to is something else, and now, as may be supposed, spoken of your people. For it is not possible for the seed of Jacob, or for God to have accepted the very same persons whom He had reproached with unfitness for the inheritance, and promise it to them again."¹ Just one generation after the close of the New Testament canon the ugly theology of Israel being forever replaced by the church is born. Even more troubling for us today, is the fact that it not only survives in our day, but that it is on the rise within evangelical ranks that used to be almost devoid of such views.

THE LAND PROMISES TO ISRAEL

Throughout the Old Testament, starting in Genesis, the Lord made promise after promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants that the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. The promise is repeated about twenty times in the book of Genesis.² The book of Deuteronomy says at least twenty-five times that the land is a gift to the people of Israel from the Lord (Deut. 1:20, 25; 2:29; 3:20; 4:40; 5:16, etc.). Old Testament scholar, Walter Kaiser notes that, "sixty-nine times the writer of Deuteronomy repeated the pledge that Israel would one day 'possess' and 'inherit' the land promised to her."³ The Psalms, Israel's handbook of praise to the Lord, often lead the worshipper in thanksgiving to the Lord for His covenant promises and faithfulness. For example, the Lord declares: "For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation. 'This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it'" (Psalm 123:13-14). Throughout the Old Testament the prophets provide promise after promise of this time of future restoration to the land (Isa. 11:1-9; 12:1-3; 27:12-13; 35:1-10; 43:1-8; 60:18-21; 66:20-22; Jer. 16:14-16; 30:10-18; 31:31-37; 32:37-40; Ezek. 11:17-21; 28:25-26; 34:11-16; 37:21-25; 39:25-29; Hosea 1:10-11; 3:4-5; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:11-15; Micah 4:4-7; Zeph. 3: 14-20; Zech. 8:4-8; 10:11-15). Yet, in spite of an abundance of such clear statements in the Old Testament, many within the academic halls of the church say that God has disinherited His people in the New Testament.

Speaking of Israel's land promises, British scholar N. T. Wright is typical of the mentality coming from the academy in our day. He says:

Modern attempts to revive such a geographical nationalism, and to give it a 'Christian' colouring provokes the following, most important, theological reflection; the attempt to 'carry over' some Old Testament promises about Jerusalem, the Land or the Temple for fulfillment in our own day has the same theological shape as the attempt in pre-Reformation Catholicism to think of Christ as being re-crucified in every Mass. . . . If the wrath of God spoken of by Jesus and Paul was truly *finished* with the awful events of AD 70, then the only appropriate attitude in subsequent generations toward Jews, the Temple, the Land of Jerusalem must be one of sorrow or pity. To that

extent, 'Christian Zionism' is the geographical equivalent of a *soi-disant* 'Christian' apartheid, and ought to be rejected as such.⁴

Wright goes on to say that all of these Old Testament promises are not to be taken literally, but they are somehow fulfilled non-literally through Jesus' first coming and the formation of the global body of Christ. He says the following:

. . . the total New Testament reading of those promises, according to which, as Paul says, they have all come true in the Messiah (2 Cor. 1:20). This is no simple 'spiritualization'. Rather, these promises, seen now through the lens of cross and resurrection, have been in one sense narrowed down to a point and in another sense widened to include the whole created order.⁵

Walter Kaiser voiced the following response to Wright's philosophical sophistry:

There are at least five fatal flaws in the thinking of those supporting the replacement covenant thesis: 1) The 'New Covenant' was made with the house of Israel and Judah. God never made a formal covenant with the Church; 2) The failure of the Jews, like the failure of the Church, was calculated in the plan of God (Rom. 11:8); 3) The New Testament clearly teaches that God has not cast off disobedient Israel (Rom. 11:25–26), for they are the natural branches into which the Church has been grafted; 4) The 'eternal' aspect of the promise of the land is not to be equated with the 'eternal' aspect of the Aaronic priesthood (1 Chr 23:13) or the Rechabite descendants (Jer 35:19); and 5) Paul's allegory of Galatians 4:21–31 does not teach that national Israel has been replaced by the Church; it teaches that the quest for justification by works leads to bondage whereas justification by faith and grace leads to freedom and salvation.⁶

Gary Burge, a professor at Wheaton College, is an American echo of Wright's sentiment on this matter when, after quoting Karl Barth he says,

Therefore the New Testament locates in Christ all of the expectations once held for "Sinai and Zion, Bethel and Jerusalem." For a Christian to return to a Jewish territoriality is to deny fundamentally what has transpired in the incarnation. It is to deflect appropriate devotion to the new place where God has appeared in residence, namely, in his Son. This explains why the New Testament applies to the person of Christ religious language formerly devoted to the Holy Land or the Temple. He is the new spatiality, the new locale where God may be met.⁷

ANSWERING SUCH NONSENSE

Such "theologians" construct total nonsense out of a foundation of pure abstract thinking that is not supported by either the Old or the New Testament. As the Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity and chasing after the wind." I know some others who would simply say it is just a bunch of hot air. Christ's accomplishments at His first coming are the basis upon which Israel will inherit her physical promises, not a ground upon which to deny their future blessings. The Apostle Paul answers such nonsense in Romans 11 when he asks the question: "I say

then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! . . . God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (Rom. 11:1–2). Again Paul says, “I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be” (Rom. 11:11)!

These “theologians” are telling folks things that are not to be found in the Bible. Where does the New Testament teach that Israel has been disinherited from her land? Why does the New Testament not mention this? The New Testament does not mention this because it has never happened. This is why they attempt to spin mere abstractions, the product of vain imaginations, since no passages teaches such a disinheritance of Israel’s land promises.

When we think about the unprecedented worldwide regathering and reestablishment of the nation of Israel, it should prompt us to ask the question: “Why would God bring the Jewish people back to their homeland, reestablish them as a nation if they have no future in the land? Why does Revelation 12 speak of Israel in the land during the tribulation? Why does Paul speak of the defiling of the temple of God by the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2 if there will not be a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem? The Temple will take up space in Jerusalem. Why will Jesus return to Jerusalem at His second advent if it is O. K. for the PLO to be in charge of that piece of ground? Why will there be 144,000 Jewish witnesses, 12,000 each from the twelve tribes of Israel, if the Jews have been displaced from the land? What about the two witnesses who will minister in Jerusalem for forty-two months or three and a half years?

God has not—and will not—cast away His people. Israel is indeed God’s “super sign” of the end times. She is the powder keg fuse for the final world conflict. And for the first time in almost two thousand years, the fuse is beginning to smolder. Zionism and Christian Zionism have been tools used by God in history to get the snowball rolling downhill and now it cannot be stopped. It seems that with every day that passes, Israel and the nations become increasingly aligned into the path that they will take during the impending tribulation. Yet, many have become blinded by their so-called “spiritual” understanding of the New Testament.

Wonderful and terrible events lie just ahead! Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, A Jew*, chapter 135, paragraph 1.

² Note the following references in Genesis: 12:1–3, 7–9; 13:14–18; 15:1–18; 17:1–27; 22:15–19; 26:2–6, 24–25; 27:28–29, 38–40; 28:1–4, 10–22; 31:3, 11–13; 32:22–32; 35:9–15; 48:3–4, 10–20; 49:1–28; 50:23–25.

³ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 124–25.

⁴ N. T. “Tom” Wright, “Jerusalem in the New Testament,” in P. W. I. Walker, editor, *Jerusalem, Past and Present in the Purpose of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), pp. 73–75.

⁵ Wright, “Jerusalem in the New Testament,” p. 73.

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “An Assessment of ‘Replacement Theology’” *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* (Feb. 1994; No. 21), p. 10.

⁷ Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to “Holy Land” Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), pp. 129–30.