

The Role of Israel

Does the Modern State of Israel Fulfill Bible Prophecy?

(some articles on the subject as it relates to
futurist-dispensationalist views)

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God's Plan for Israel

by Gerhard F. Hasel

Our century has witnessed the phenomenal rise of the state of Israel in the Middle East. A multitude of questions of great importance are raised by these extraordinary events. The claim of the land of Canaan by Jews after almost two millennia of existence in the diaspora seeks a hearing. Indeed, the issue of the right of national existence and the fixing of national borders is a matter of world peace.

An intricate factor in the minds of thinking people is the applicability of biblical promises made to ancient Israel and their relevance for modern Israel. What was and is God's plan as expressed in the repeated promises concerning the possession of the land of Canaan and its repossession? Have these predictions and promises been fulfilled? Or are they in the process of being fulfilled today? Is there any condition connected with them or are they of an unconditional nature? These and other questions beg for careful Scriptural answers. What is the testimony of Scripture?

1. The Promise of the Land

God's plan for Israel as outlined in the Hebrew Bible is comprehensive and broad. We are forced to narrow the focus to one key issue: The divine promises regarding the possession of the land.

The pivotal call statement in Genesis 12:1-3 contains the divine imperative to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (vs. 1).¹ In unquestioned obedience Abraham leaves Ur (11:31) and subsequently Haran (12:4-5) "to go to the land of Canaan" (vs. 5). Once he had arrived in the land of Canaan, the Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem and promised, "To your descendants I will give this land" (vs. 7). The divine promise that the "seed" (*zera*^c) of Abraham, i.e. his "descendants,"² will receive the land promised to them is one of the key themes of the Bible.

After the peaceful separation between Lot and Abraham the Lord asks Abraham, "Lift up your eyes, . . . for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever" (Gen 13:14-15).³ In his subsequent covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:7-21)⁴

¹All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

²W. Baumgartner, et al., *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum AT* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 277.

³The antiquity of this promise is affirmed even by critical scholarship, cf. R. Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamstraditionen literarkritisch und traditions-geschichtliche untersucht* (Bonn: Hahnstein, 1966), 24-25.

⁴D. R. Hiller, *Covenant. The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: J. Hopkins Press, 1969), 102-3; N. Lohfink, *Die Landverheissung als Eid. Eine Studie zu Gn 15* (Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk, 1967); L. A. Snijders, "Genesis 15. The Covenant with Abraham," *OTS* 12 (1958), 261-79.

the Lord obligates Himself by divine oath⁵ to give “you this land to possess” (vs. 7). The covenant promise, “To your descendants I will give this land” is reaffirmed in verse 18.⁶ It appears repeatedly as secured by God’s oath (Gen 24:7; 50:24; Exod 33:1; Num 10:29; 11:12; Deut 1:8; 11:21; 31:23). In the second stage of the covenant with Abraham the Lord emphasizes, “And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God” (Gen 17:8).

The promise of the land is repeated to Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen 26:3) who passes it on to his son Jacob (Gen 28:4). Subsequently Jacob himself hears God say, “The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you” (Gen 35:12) “for an everlasting possession” (Gen 48:4). The book of Genesis closes with Joseph’s deathbed words that epitomized the hope based on the Lord God’s repeated promise, which had the guarantee of being an everlasting covenant (Gen 15:17) and nothing less than God’s own oath (Gen 15:7):⁷ “I am about to die; but God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land to the land which he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob,” (50:24). Here the covenant promise of the land is welded over again into God’s special plan for Israel, a plan that was to be fulfilled in the future. Possession of the land was promised to the patriarchs, the forefathers of Israel. For a time “they themselves were already living in the land, to be sure, but were not yet in possession of it, that is, the promise was not yet fulfilled.”⁸ The promise was to move on to fulfillment.

2. The Time of Fulfillment

Divine mercy is manifested in the revelation to Abraham about the time element as regards the fulfillment of the possession of the Promised Land. One of the pivotal sayings of the Old Testament discloses to the father of the Israelites that God’s patience towards the inhabitants of the Promised Land is extended,⁹ because “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen 15:16). Furthermore, Abraham’s descendants will be oppressed and serve as slaves for “four hundred years” (vs. 13). It should be noted parenthetically that there is no conflict between the figure of “four hundred years” and “the fourth generation” (vs. 16) since the term “generation” is *dôr* and can mean “duration, time-span, lifetime,”¹⁰ of which a hundred years is a conservative equivalent in the

⁵God’s oath is in keeping with the suzerainty (superior-inferior) treaty, cf. D. J. Wiseman, *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 12 (1958), 124-29; M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 124-26.

⁶The late dating of Genesis 15:7-18 by L. Peritt, *Bundestheologie im AT* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1969), 85ff., and E. Kutsch, *Verheissung und Gesetz* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972), 67, is not convincing. See Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 79-88.

⁷See Gen 24:7; Exod 33:1; Num 10:29; 11:12; 14:23; Deut 1:8; 10:11; 11:21; 31:23; 34:4; Josh 1:6; 21:43; Judg 2:1.

⁸G. van Rad, *Genesis. A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 245.

⁹D. Kidner, *Genesis* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), 125.

¹⁰W. F. Albright, “From the Patriarchs to Moses,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 36 (1973), 15-16.

patriarchal context.¹¹ This long delay in the fulfillment of the promise is part of the plan of the God who directs all history toward his appointed goal.

The time of fulfillment of the promise began during the days of Moses and Joshua. The book of Exodus recounts the preparation of Moses as deliverer of Israel, the deliverance, the covenant on Mt. Sinai, the wilderness wanderings, instructions for the tabernacle, apostasy and the renewal of the covenant. Moses' farewell speeches are recorded in the book of Deuteronomy. The great leader reminds the people of Israel of the divine command, "Behold, I have set the land before you; go in and take possession of the land . . ." (Deut 1:8). It is then recounted how they took possession of the Transjordanian territory of the Amorite kings of Heshbon and Bashan (Deut 2:26-3:11; cf. Num 21:21-35). Before his death Moses installed Joshua as his successor (Deut 34:9). Moses had been forbidden to lead the people of Israel into the land beyond the Jordan (Num 20:12).

The death of Moses signaled the conquest of the Promised Land (Josh 1:1-9). The miraculous crossing of the Jordan was the visible token of God's constant presence and His purpose in giving them the Promised Land (Josh 3:1-17). By the time when Joshua's death approached (Josh 23:1, 14) the Lord had given to Israel "all the land which he swore to give to their fathers; and having taken possession of it, they settled there. . . . Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (21:43, 45; cf. 23:14). Although a "remnant of these nations" (Josh 23:12) were still among them, they were so powerless that they proved no threat to Israel, so long as the Israelites adhered faithfully to their God (Josh 23:11-13). Notwithstanding that sections of the country remained in the hands of pagan nations (Josh 13:1-6), the promises had been fulfilled, for God had not promised the immediate destruction of the Canaanites but their gradual extermination (Exod 23:29-30; Deut 7:22; cf. Judg 2:1-2; 3:1-2; 2 Kgs 17:17-18). The Almighty acted in a way consistent with his own nature and started to fulfill His promise. Still the question haunts the student of the Word of God, Has the promise of the land found its complete fulfillment? An answer can only be found if the territorial extent of the Promised Land can be determined with some degree of certainty.

3. The Extent of the Promised Land

The land promised to the patriarchs and their descendants is commonly identified as "the land of Canaan" (cf. Gen 12:5; 17:8; Exod 6:4; Lev 25:38; Deut 32:49)¹² which seems to refer generally to Syria-Palestine,¹³ the country west of the Jordan but it may also be Bashan to the east.¹⁴ The familiar idiom "from Dan to Beer-sheba" (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20) is a general description of a later

¹¹See G. F. Hasel, "General Principles of Biblical Interpretation," *North American Bible Conference Notebook 1974* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1974), 18.

¹²Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible. A Historical Geography* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 61-70

¹³K. A. Kitchen, "Canaan, Canaanites," *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 183; S. H. Horn, "Canaan," *SDA Bible Dictionary* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1960), 169.

¹⁴A. R. Millard, "The Canaanites," *Peoples of OT Times*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 33.

time used of the extent of the land from north to south.

Genesis 15:18-21 contains the first of the most extensive descriptions of the Promised Land. It is to extend “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kennizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” The southern border of the Promised Land is “the river of Egypt.” “Normally, this phrase designates the Nile.”¹⁵ The northeastern border is “the river Euphrates.” Thus the Promised Land is to encompass the territory from the Euphrates in the north-east, “the entrance of Hamath” (Num 34:8; cf. Ezek 47:15; 48:1) in the north (which is still not clearly identified),¹⁶ the Great Sea, that is, the Mediterranean in the west (Num 34:6; Josh 15:4; cf. Ezek 47:28), the River of Egypt (Gen 15:18) or the Brook of Egypt (Num 34:5; Josh 15:4, 47)¹⁷ respectively in the south, and the wilderness (Exod 23:31; Deut 11:24; Josh 1:4) in the east.¹⁸ On the basis of these descriptions the Promised Land seems to include the territory of both Transjordan and Cisjordan from the Nile to the Euphrates (Exod 23:31; Deut 1:6-8; Josh 1:2-4).

We can now return to the burning question concerning the complete fulfillment of the promise of the land. During the times of Joshua and the Judges no complete fulfillment is witnessed. The Israelites were at the height of their expansion in the time of David. His realm extended from Labo-hamath and the Lebanese border in the north (2 Sam 8:1-18; 10:1-19; etc.) to the Brook of Egypt in the south, from the desert in the east (1 Chr 19:1-19) to the Mediterranean on the west. About Solomon it is said that he “ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt” (1 Kgs 4:21; Heb 5:1), that is the Brook of Egypt (1 Kgs 8:65). This is as close a fulfillment as the Old Testament knows. However, the victories of David did not make the land of all of these nations his or Solomon’s own land. The defeated nations were reduced to tribute paying vassals (1 Kgs 4:21 [Heb 5:1]) or made into a forced levy of slaves (1 Kgs 9:21; 2 Chr 8:7-8). Nothing is known about Israel ever establishing control of the territory clear south to the Nile or to incorporate the cities of Tyre and Sidon, which were allocated to Asher (Josh 19:28-29; Judg 1:31). It is evident, then, that the land promised to the patriarchs was never completely fulfilled. Why not?

4. The Condition of the Fulfillment

There is a tension between Joshua 21:43-45, which speaks of a fulfillment of the promise of the Lord, and the fact that a complete fulfillment has not come about. How is this tension to be resolved? Did God fail to live up to His promise? Did he go back on His oath? As far as God was concerned “not one of all the good promises . . . had failed” (Josh 21:45). Israel’s God had kept His

¹⁵E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 114; cf. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 76. Other passages refer to “the Brook of Egypt” (Num 34:5; Josh 15:4, 47; 1 Kgs 8:65; Isa 27:12) which is normally identified with the great Wadi el-^cArish that empties into the Mediterranean about 30 miles south of Raphia.

¹⁶H. G. May, “Hamath, Entrance of,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:516-17; Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 65-67.

¹⁷See n. 15 above.

¹⁸For details, see Aharoni, *Land of the Bible*, 67-70.

word. But His promise and oath can find its full and complete fulfillment only when Israel is obedient to God's will and law. The discrepancy between the promise and its complete fulfillment does not rest in a lack on the part of the divine promise or God's ability and word, but in the lacking obedience on the part of Israel.¹⁹ "The complete fulfillment of the promise was inseparably connected with the fidelity of Israel to the Lord."²⁰ Israel was from the start in a state of disobedience. "They have done what is evil in my sight . . . , since the day their fathers came out of Egypt" (2 Kgs 21:15; cf. Deut 1:26). The unfaithfulness of Israel caused the promise of God to slip from their hands. God did not fail; his people failed. They failed to fulfill the conditions on the basis of which they could experience the fullness of the divine promise. A common misconception considers the covenant promise of the land made to Abraham as unilateral²¹ and unconditional.²² It is correct that the first stage of covenant-making (Gen 15:7-18) does not spell out how Abraham is to behave, but the second stage (Gen 17:1-27) clearly spells out that Abraham and his descendants are to "keep" the covenant (vss. 9-10 and that there are obligations that one can "break" (vs. 14). Abraham's obedience in not withholding his son keeps the promise functioning (Gen 22:16-18). Because Abraham "obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen 26:5), the Lord will fulfill his oath and give to his descendants "all these lands" (vs. 3). Abraham is not the recipient of the promise of the land because of his obedience;²³ his obedience, on the contrary, keeps the promise active. Without loyalty to God, the promise of the land cannot be fulfilled. The promise of the land is conditional.

The condition of the fulfillment of the inheritance of the Promised Land is obedience to the Lord. Those who despise the Lord shall not see the Promised Land (Num 14:34); those who refuse to follow the Lord wholly share the same fate (Num 32:11-12; Deut 1:35-36).

By rebellion the Israelites would forfeit the blessings and experience the curses of the Lord (Deut 11:26-31). They would even be dispossessed of the Promised Land (Deut 28:63-68; cf. 31:20-22).²⁴ The covenant between God and people is conditional (Lev 26:1-46).²⁵ The conditional aspects of God's covenant²⁶ and his promises is emphasized through a sharp contrast between the "if" of obedience (vs. 3) and the "ifs" or "if nots" of disobedience (vss. 14, 15, 18, 21, 23, 27). "And

¹⁹P. Diepold, *Israel's Land* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1972), 151.

²⁰C. F. Keil, "Judges," *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 216.

²¹Hillers, *Covenant*, 103, states that the covenant with Abraham "binds only God."

²²E. H. Maly, "Genesis," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 20: ". . . the covenant is unilateral, unconditional on Abram's part."

²³M. Weinfeld, "b^crith," *Theological Dictionary of the OT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:270-71.

²⁴Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 126.

²⁵H. Graf Reventlow, *ZAW* 71 (1959), 40, regards Leviticus 26 rightly as a conditional proclamation of future events.

²⁶Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, 146, points out that human responsibility is the basic presupposition of the covenant stipulations. D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Richmond, VA: J. Knox, 1972), 3, emphasizes that "all covenants or contracts, have their conditions."

if in spite of this you will not hearken to me, but walk contrary to me, . . . I will devastate the land, . . . And I will scatter you among the nations.” (vss. 27, 32-33; cf. Deut 27:9-10; Josh 23:15-16; Judg 2:1-5). Seven centuries later, (722 B.C.), Israel’s God brought a final fulfillment of these threatened punishments to the Kingdom of Israel (2 Kgs 17:7-18) and a century and a half thereafter Judah was plucked up from the Promised Land and scattered in the Neo-Babylonian empire (vss. 19-20).

5. The Conditional Promise of Restoration

The exile of ancient Israel did not mean the end of God’s plan for His people. God held out hope of restoration and a return to their land. Isaiah predicted that “the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. . . . and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” (Isa 11:11-12). Note that this promise only foresees the recovery of a remnant from Israel²⁷ in contrast to the recovery at the *first time* of all Israel from Egyptian slavery.²⁸ The expression “second time” does not refer to a future gathering or the present return of Jews to the state of Israel, because the countries and places enumerated are all territories where the ancient Israelites were taken in the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. The phrase “four corners of the earth” means the four directions of the compass which corresponds to the territories enumerated in vs. 11. Thus the gathering of the *second time* is the one that took place in Persian times. This prophecy²⁹ has met its fulfillment in the return of the exiles as recorded in the book of Ezra.

It does not come as a surprise that the prophet Jeremiah, who ministered during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, has a distinct message of the divine restoration of his people. He proclaimed, “They shall dwell in their own land” (Jer 23:8). The Lord himself stated, “I will restore their fortunes” (Jer 32:44) and refers back to the promise made to the patriarchs, “I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever” (Jer 7:7). These promises of return and restoration are based upon the covenant relationship: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 33:38). This must be seen against their background of failure already outlined in detail by Isaiah (Isa 40:2; 42:24; 50:1; 54:7-8) who also emphasizes the re-establishment of a genuine covenant relationship with God (Isa 55:3-5; 54:9-10; 42:6; 49:8). The constant interrelationship between restoration in the physical sense and restoration of the inner life of the people is also maintained by Jeremiah. Without the inner restoration based on the new covenant “within them” (Jer 31:33) and written on their hearts (31:31-34), there can be no genuine restoration in the physical sense. The new covenant will make a new people.

It has become evident above that for the Exodus generation and their descendants the condition for the reception and possession of the Promised Land was the fulfillment of the covenant obligations on their part. The failure to live up to the conditions of the covenant caused Israel to fail

²⁷G. F. Hasel, *The Remnant*, 2nd ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1974), 339-48; cf. S. Erlandsson, “Jesaja 11, 10-16 och des historiska bakgrund,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 36 (1971), 24-44.

²⁸E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1:394.

²⁹See also Isa 43:5-6; 45:13; 49:9-13, 22-26.

to experience the complete fulfillment of the promise of the land and ultimately to lose the Promised Land that they occupied. The restoration of the Promised Land is again conditional. The new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) has also conditions: The law must be written on the heart (vs. 33). Repentance is the condition for receiving and remaining in possession of the Promised Land (Jer 25:5; cf. 24:8-10; 35:15; Deut 1:8). “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place” (Jer 7:3; cf. 18:11; 22:3-5). The manifold promises of restoration in Jeremiah³⁰ and other Old Testament prophets are all conditioned by the “ifs” of obedience (Jer 17:24; 18:8; cf. Zech 6:15) and the “if nots” of disobedience (Jer 17:27; 18:10; 22:5).

The biblical teaching regarding God’s plan for Israel’s reception of the Promised Land and its restoration is consistent. Israel’s title to the Promised Land is conditioned through her fidelity to her covenant God. A wholehearted turning of Israel to God and her continued answer through active deeds in response to the divine faithfulness and abundant mercy secures a divine fulfillment of the conditional restoration promises. The Promised Land is God’s gift, but cannot be received without the divine Giver. Since no nation in the Middle East today fulfills the conditions that are the prerequisite for the reception of the Promised Land one can hardly conclude that any of the Old Testament promises of restoration are physically fulfilled or in the process of fulfillment in our time. Yet God’s plan is not frustrated. The New Testament gives testimony on how He will work out His purposes for all men on the basis of the new covenant with the new people of God (Rom 2:28-29; 4:13-25; Galatians 5, 6; Col 2:11; Romans 9-11, etc.).

Why God’s Plan for Israel Failed

by Jerry Gladson

The thought that God can fail sounds revolting at first. After all, Scripture describes Him as One who “turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out upon the surface of the earth” (Amos 5:8).³¹ The nations of earth are under His control (Isa 40:15-17). He knows the end from the beginning (Rev 1:4) and nothing is impossible for Him (Jer 32:27). Can this God fail?

These concepts refer to what theologians have called God’s sovereignty. By this they mean that God is ruler, or Lord, over all creation. But Scripture also recognizes that God has given man the privilege of free choice—he is free to serve or reject God (Josh 24:15; Rev 22:17). The possession of free choice has important ramifications for the question of Israel’s election, for nations, composed as they are of people, also have the right to serve or reject—with the same ultimate consequences.

When man used his free choice to go contrary to God’s will, the Creator lovingly set in motion a plan of salvation (Gen 3:15). The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell us how God reached out and sought to embrace man once again and how man repeatedly spurned His love. Finally, He selected one man—Abraham—intending through him *and his seed* to “bless” all nations (Gen

³⁰Jer 23:1-8; 24:4-7; 30:8-9, 18-21; 31:27-28; 32:6-23.

³¹All Scripture quotations herein are from the Revised Standard Version.

12:1-3).³² After entering into a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:1-20), God subsequently renewed this covenant with his descendants in turn (Gen 26:1-5; 28:13-20; 48:15, 16). Following the Exodus from Egypt, He formally constituted a covenant with the whole nation of Israel (Exod 19:1-8; 24:1-11). Under the terms of the agreement, Israel was to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” with the ultimate purpose of announcing to all the world the saving love of God (Exod 19:5, 6; Isa 60:1-14). (Perhaps the most detailed statement of God’s plan for Israel can be found in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27, 28).

Israel’s response to this high calling was one of rejection on almost every level of life. The huge block of writings stretching from Joshua to Nehemiah reveals constant failure, especially in national policies. The various kings, with few exceptions, turned a deaf ear to the prophets and sought ever-increasing involvement with the practices of the nations around them (2 Kgs 17:7-21; 2 Chr 36:15, 16). Nor were things much improved among the religious leaders of Israel. Several passages highlight the moral irresponsibility evident among the priests (1 Sam 2:12-16; Hos 4:4,5) and the popular prophets (Mic 3:5-7; Ezek 13). The whole nation seemed bent on destruction, and its course rapidly took it toward the “point of no return.”

In addition, the text of the Old Testament discloses that compromise with pagan religious elements had even infiltrated down to the common activities of the people. Their religion, instead of being an unadulterated commitment to God, was rather a mixture (syncretism) of Canaanite practice and the worship of the true God (cf. Hos 4:12, 13; Ezek 16). Israelite proper names of the time, for example, sometimes incorporated Baal, the most popular Canaanite deity, producing such strange mixtures as “Bealiah,” “Yah(weh) is lord,” or “Yah(weh) is Baal” (1 Chr 12:6). It is hard for us to tell from this whether Yahweh was worshipped as Baal, or whether they were both worshipped together, but such popular usages indicate how far the apostasy had penetrated Israel.³³ Thus, instead of a dedicated people, a “kingdom of priests,” a “holy nation,” Israel became a “people laden with iniquity” (Isa 1:4). Various individuals, of course, remained true to God (Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, etc.), but the nation as a whole was judged no different than other peoples in terms of God’s purpose for them (cf. Amos 3:1, 2; Ezek 16:2, 3; 23:1-49).

Such rampant failure meant that it became impossible for God to use Israel as a means by which to spiritually embrace the world. This brings us to a crucial consideration of the nature of God’s covenant with Israel. It should initially be remembered that the Old Testament comes out of an ancient society and that its covenants must therefore be understood in the light of that ancient world, not in terms of modern culture. To fail to take account of this factor is to misconstrue the covenant of God with Israel and to fail to rightly understand Scripture. We simply cannot force upon Scripture a Calvinistic or dispensationalist scheme without consideration to the time and place of its writing. Study of the Hebrew *b^erith*, “covenant,” in the light of Hittite covenants in particular has confirmed the obvious: a covenant in the ancient world was always regarded as a bilateral

³²The Hebrew here (vs. 3) can be translated either “all nations will be blessed,” or “all nations will bless themselves.”

³³Cf. Hans W. Wolff, *Hosea*, trans. by Gary Stansell (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 49, 50.

relationship with responsibilities resting upon both parties.³⁴ Even the so-called suzerainty covenant, in which a superior bound an inferior under stringent obligations, always involved at least some reciprocal action on the part of the superior.³⁵ A careful reading of the relevant Old Testament passages shows that God's covenant with Israel was likewise based upon such conditions: "Now therefore, *if* you will obey my voice . . . you shall be my own possession among all peoples" (Exod 19:5 cf., also 1 Kgs 9:1-9; 2 Chr 7:11-22). It will also be observed that statements of the covenant sometimes occur with threats of "cursings" upon those who *break* it, thus definitely implying that the covenant could be shattered by man's infidelity (Deut 27:15-26; cf. also chap 28:15-68; Lev 26:14-39). Thus, the prophet Jeremiah did not speak futilely when he warned, "*If* at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and *if* it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then *I will repent of the good which I had intended to do to it.*" (Jer 18:9, 10). We cannot avoid the force of his statement: It applies to Israel as well as to other nations.

There are other passages, we admit, which seem to place God's covenant with Israel and her kings in what appears to be a unilateral, unbreakable framework (Ps 89:34-37; Jer 31:35-37; 2 Sam 7:1-17, etc.). However, these passages must also be examined in the historical and literary context of the Old Testament world. 2 Samuel 7:12 is cited again in Psalm 132:11, 12, this time *with conditions* attached. Psalm 89, also a restatement and elaboration of 2 Samuel 7, contains no obvious conditions, but Jeremiah's prophecy occurs in the context of a new covenant which lies *beyond* Israel's historical failure and envisions a truly converted and reconstituted nation (cf. application of this prophecy to the church, Heb 8:8-12). The book of Jonah helps us understand this apparent vacillation between conditional and unconditional ramifications. There an unconditional promise (chap. 3:4) turns out in the end to be conditional (vs. 10). Concerning this important fact of ancient Near Eastern covenants, D. J. McCarthy observes:

All covenants, all contracts, have their conditions. They must be defined somehow or other. These definitions are their conditions or stipulations which may often be assumed, things which are simply so well known in a culture that they *need not be stated explicitly.*³⁶

The Old Testament covenant records therefore harmonize when their inherent conditionality is understood.

Just as the Lord had instituted the covenant by his loving free choice (Exod 20:2), He also had the prerogative of annulling it on grounds of Israel's unfaithfulness. The repeated failure of Israel's people, kings, and religious leaders set up a crisis situation. What was God to do? He had hoped Israel would respond to His love and, in turn, extend that love to the world. The medium of his love, instead, became so corrupt that its witness was compromised almost beyond remedy. That is why the prophets in announcing God's judgment upon his chosen people sometimes prefaced their call to repentance with the word, *ulai*, "perhaps"—*perhaps* it is not too late, *perhaps* the Lord will still have mercy (Amos 5:15; Zeph 2:3). God did not want to punish His people (Hos 11:8, 9), but

³⁴Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:37.

³⁵G. H. Mendenhall, "Covenant," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. G. A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:716; cf. Ezek 17:13; Job 41:4.

³⁶D. J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1972), 3, emphasis supplied.

their unfaithfulness left him no other choice. So He sent them into captivity, there to learn lessons of obedience (Jer 25:5-7; 29:18, 19; 30:11-14; 46:28; Ezek 20:25-38; Mic 4:10-12). The Northern Kingdom, Israel, was conquered by Assyria in 722/21 B.C., and the Southern Kingdom, Judah, faced its final captivity in 587/586 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the ten Northern tribes never returned from exile but stayed to be assimilated into Gentile populations and subsequently lost from history.³⁷ Judah, though, did have a second chance. God held out to her the hope of a return (Jer 31:10-14; Isa 43:1-13). The return would include, among other things, a rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple (Mic 4:1-4; Isa 60:10-14), a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), and a new life (Zeph 3:9-20). Once again, however, the purpose of a renewed Israel was testimonial (Zech 8:20-23); God's plan had not changed. But in order for God's purposes to be fulfilled, Israel had to break with her past. A radically new relationship with God in which God's will by-passes speaking and hearing and is planted directly into Israel's heart was therefore proposed by Jeremiah (31:31-34).³⁸ Again, we must keep in mind two things: (1) All the Old Testament promises looking forward to a restoration of the Jews were given in anticipation of their return from Babylonian captivity, a return which transpired primarily in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. (cf. Isa 10:24-34; 61:4-10; Jer 16:14-16; Ezek 34:11-15, etc.). (2) God's honoring of His covenant obligations were still predicated upon Israel's fidelity: "This shall come to pass, *if* you will diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God" (Zech 6:15).

Subsequent history did not prove consonant to these expectations. Israel's apostasy, it is true, took more diversified forms (exclusivism, multiplication of legal minutiae, compromise with Hellenism, etc.), but the apostasy was nonetheless just as real as before. Finally and ultimately, Israel failed its God. When the nation as a whole turned away from the Messiah, it became evident that it could no longer find employment as a medium of God's love to the whole world. The final choice had been made. All use of these prophecies as justification for modern Israel's restoration is therefore unwarranted and without basis.

Man stands before God in desperate need of redemption. God longs to forgive, to cleanse, to restore (John 3:16; 1 Tim 2:4). But He cannot save those who reject His salvation, either initially or subsequent to their acceptance of it. Scripture does not teach an irrevocable salvation (Heb 3:6, 14; 6:4-6; 10:36-39; Col 1:21-23; 1 Cor 10:13). This is as true of a nation as it is of an individual. From beginning to the end of the saving process man as nation or as individual must continue to respond in loving surrender (Matt 24:13). This Israel refused to do. God therefore had no other choice but to reject the Jews and turn to the Christian church as "spiritual Israel" for the fulfillment of His purposes (Rom 2:28, 29; 9:6-8; Matt 21:33-43).

New Testament Israel

³⁷Not all members of the Northern Kingdom suffered this fate. Apparently, some stragglers were left in Israel following the Assyrian and Babylonian invasions while a few survivors of these tribes returned with Judah from exile (cf. 1 Chr 9:1-3; Luke 2:36).

³⁸Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. by D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:213.

by Walter F. Specht

The New Testament writings express the conviction of the followers of Jesus that the Christian community supplanted the Jews as the special people of God. The apostle Paul speaks of Christians as “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:15), “Abraham’s offspring” (Gal 3:29), and “the true circumcision” (Phil 3:3). James, the brother of our Lord, designates them as “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1). Peter’s first letter is addressed “to the exiles of the Dispersion” in Asia Minor, “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” (1 Pet 1:1, 2). “Dispersion” is a term usually applied to Jews scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. James and Peter, however, are obviously using it for Christians disbursed in various lands. In response to Peter’s question regarding the reward the disciples who had left all to follow Jesus were to receive, our Lord promised, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28). It is evident that the apostles are not destined to rule over literal Israel since our Lord plainly told the Jews, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (Matt 21:43).

As a strong evidence of their claim to be the special people of God, Christians appropriated the designation, the *ekklesia* (assembly or church) of God. In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) *ekklesia* was one of the two words used to denote the people of Israel in their religious character as the “congregation of the Lord.” The other Greek word was *sunagoge*, “synagogue,” which became the designation for the Jewish community. It was not long before there developed a keen rivalry between the church and the synagogue. As a name for the Christian community *ekklesia* is first found in Acts 5:11. However, according to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus expressed his determination to build his *ekklesia*, people of God (Matt 16:18). How did Jesus go about building this new Israel, this new people of God? And how was the new community related to the old?

To begin with, Jesus regarded his mission of teaching and healing as being primarily for the Jews. He told the Syro-Phoenician woman, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). Most likely this is to be interpreted as meaning “the lost sheep, namely (or, that is to say) Israel.” There seems to be here an allusion to the words of Jeremiah 50:6, “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains” (cf. Ezek 34:6; Isa 53:6). Jesus put forth every effort in bringing back these “lost sheep.” He also directed his disciples on their first missionary tour alone, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6).

But our Lord’s messianic mission of salvation was rejected by the Jewish people as a whole. “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11). There was, however, a substantial number of them who responded in faith to Jesus’ message and work. This faithful remnant constituted the nucleus of a new Israel, a new people of God. They were our Lord’s “little flock” (Luke 12:32; Matt 26:31). At the center of these faithful ones were the twelve apostles. The fact that Jesus chose twelve such men is significant. It suggests that just as the twelve patriarchs were the founders of ancient Israel so these twelve men are the founders of a new Israel to which our Lord promised a kingdom (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30). The later choice of seventy others (Luke 10:1) is apparently modeled after the seventy elders of Israel appointed by Moses (Num 11:6).

It is important to recognize the unity and continuity of the New Testament people of God, with Israel in Old Testament times. Mere descent from Abraham was never an iron-clay guarantee

of membership in God's people. The apostle Paul was able to show from Old Testament history that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Rom 9:6). Rather, the true Israel is "a remnant, chosen by grace" (Rom 11:5). The concept of a faithful remnant within Israel is prominent in the Old Testament (e.g., Isa 4:2ff.; 10:20-22). They constituted the real Israel within Israel. There thus developed the view even back there, of a spiritual Israel, the real people of God. The early Christian church was made up of faithful Jews in the first century who responded to the Christian message.

The fact of the continuity between the church and the faithful of Israel is illustrated in Paul's metaphor of the olive tree (Rom 11:17-24). In this metaphor the olive tree, according to Ellen G. White, represents "the true stock of Israel—the remnant who had remained true to the God of their fathers" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 377-78). Branches, representing Jews, were broken off from it "because of their unbelief" (Rom 11:20). Wild olive shoots, representing the Gentiles, were, contrary to nature, "grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree" (vs. 17). Natural branches who turned in faith could also be grafted in the tree, "for God has the power to graft them in again" (vs. 23).

Although there was a continuity between the new Israel and the faithful remnant of ancient Israel, there was also a new element, the inclusion of Gentiles as an integral part of the new. The acceptance of Gentiles as part of the people of God was not due to human planning, but to the divine leadership of God's Spirit. That Spirit instructed Peter to disregard his Jewish scruples against visiting Gentiles, to go to Caesarea to instruct Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and finally to baptize him and his household as Christians (Acts 10, 11). "Who was I," Peter explained, "that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11:17). The persecution of Christians that arose in Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen, served to scatter them. Wherever they went they spread the Christian faith. At Antioch on the Orontes River in Syria, the first Gentile church was raised up (Acts 11:19-26). The apostle Paul was divinely called as a special apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:16-18, 23).

Not only were Gentiles accepted as members of the Christian community, but the Jerusalem Conference decided that it was not necessary for them to be circumcised and accept the Jewish laws in order to be Christians. Nevertheless they were regarded as on an equality with the Jews. They were "fellow heirs" and "members of the same body" with Jews (Eph 3:6). Though once "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" they have been brought near by the blood of Christ. They were therefore "no longer strangers and sojourners" but "fellow citizens with saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:12, 19).

The gospel of Jesus Christ recognizes no nationality or race. Peter with difficulty learned that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34, 35). In Christ "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him" (Rom 10:12). In Christ Jesus all men become sons of God through faith (Gal 3:26). "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29). The basis of salvation is not natural descent, but faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is not national, but personal. Anyone of any nation or race who accepts Christ in faith will be saved (Rom 10:16). That faith makes him also a child of Abraham who through faith became righteous. "The purpose was," Paul says, "to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (Rom 4:11, 12).

Thus the true Israelite is not necessarily a physical descendant of Abraham. “For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly. . . . He is a Jew who is one inwardly” (Rom 2:28, 29). John the Baptist declared that God was capable of raising up children to Abraham from stones (Matt 3:9). The true descendants of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham.

The new Israel thus constituted appropriated the promises and titles anciently given to the Hebrews. This is most clearly shown in 1 Peter 2:9, 10 in which designations drawn from Exodus 19:5, 6 are applied to Christians. They are “a chosen race,” an elect people, chosen by God just as truly as was ancient Israel. They are also a “royal priesthood,” a designation corresponding to “kingdom of priests” in Exodus 19:6. The Hebrews were to comprise a kingdom consisting of priests, so the church constitutes a body priests, each one of which has a direct access to God. Like Israel of old (Deut 7:6; 14:1), Christians comprise a “holy nation.” They are a holy people because God has separated them from all other people to be dedicated to him. They are therefore “God’s own people,” or in the words of the KJV, “a peculiar people,” “peculiar” in the sense of belonging exclusively to God as his special treasure. Recalling the message in the names of Hosea’s children (Hos 1:6-11), Peter adds, “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.”

Why has God called a new Israel as his special people? Peter answers, “that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:11). It is the function of the church to witness to the excellencies of God. God has not called the church to privilege only, but to a weighty responsibility. Every Christian is to testify to God’s grace and love in leading him out of darkness into the light of truth. Jesus Christ, as Paul put it “gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14). The risen Christ gave his church the task of making disciples of all nations, and of teaching them to obey our Lord’s commands (Matt 28:19, 20). The church is to display the manifold wisdom, and power, and love of God to the world (Eph 3:10).

Futurism’s Countdown: Fact or Fantasy?

by Frank B. Holbrook

Although elements of the current futurist-dispensationalist system of prophetic interpretation are found as far back as the early church fathers (second-third centuries A.D.) and the Catholic counter-reformation (16th century), it was first formulated and promulgated in the 1830s and onward by a “back to the Bible” movement in England known as the Plymouth Brethren. Since the first decade of the present century, it has been popularized across denominational lines by the widely used *Scofield Reference Bible*, and in more recent years by a flood of best-sellers numbering millions of copies from evangelical presses.

Futurist interpretations of the prophecies do not stem from critics who have lost faith in the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. To the contrary, the persons who espouse this viewpoint are conservative, Bible-loving Christians who expect a soon return of Christ. It would seem therefore, that Seventh-day Adventists would have much in common, but as will be observed by this series of

articles, our explanations of the prophecies are quite different.

As the Christian follows the path of Bible truth, he does well to realize he will encounter as much danger on his right from those who misinterpret the Scriptures in all sincerity as he will from those on his left who reject its authority outright. The tracks of error and truth often lie close together, but ultimately they diverge. Although emphasis on some last-day signs of Christ's coming may be similar, Seventh-day Adventist Preaching of Bible prophecy is basically incompatible with futurist expositions.

Some Characteristics

Futurist interpretations of prophecy can be maintained only by an extreme literalism and the lifting of passages out of context. For example, the "image of the beast" (Rev 13:15) must mean a statue, and the "mark" of the beast a kind of tattoo. Christ's prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (Matt 24:1, 2, 15-20)—fulfilled in A.D. 70—is wrested from its context to prove that Christ taught a restoration of Israel to Palestine, the building of a third temple, and Israel's observance of the Sabbath in Palestine in the end-time of history!

More serious and fundamental to the system are its errors which rupture the *unity* of the plan of salvation, the followers of God, and the Holy Scriptures. Instead of *one* plan spanning both Testaments (cf. Heb 4:1, 2), seven dispensations are invented in which God deals differently with each group of mankind. Instead of *one* family of God on earth (Christians considered the Hebrews their spiritual forebears, 1 Cor 10:1), Israel is arbitrarily separated from the church and is predestined to inherit all the promises made to it in a future millennial kingdom. Likewise the Old Testament and most of the instruction in the Gospels of the New are construed to be especially for Israel in the Kingdom Age. Only the Epistles of the New Testament are for the spiritual guidance of the church in the present era! Such assumptions naturally affect futurist interpretations of the Scriptures.

Last-Day Events

As the first article of the series has described in some detail the futurist system and its understanding in regard to the role of Israel, this article will touch on only a few aspects of what futurists expect in time's final countdown.

Central to futurism's view of last-day events are the Jewish people. The forecast goes like this: (1) The Jews will be restored to Palestine in the end-time (fulfillment, establishment of the state of Israel, 1948). (2) The Jews will recover the city of Jerusalem and its sacred sites (fulfillment, Six-day War, June 1967). (3) The Jews will rebuild the Temple on its ancient site; sacrifices will be offered again (immediate fulfillment expected).

Since the forecasts of the first two points have been fulfilled, futurists naturally anticipate the soon occurrence of the third. The third expectation is believed to be interlocked with the last seven years of this age, and so there is a heightened awareness not of the soon victorious return of Christ, however, but of a secret rapture of the church away from great troubles to come, of the reign of a world dictator (antichrist), and of a terrible time of tribulation for those not raptured.

The last years. Futurism is so-called because it places the bulk of prophetic fulfillments in the future beyond the Christian Era rather than in historical time. Arbitrarily the seventieth prophetic week (7 years) of Daniel's prophecy (Dan 9:24-27) is detached from its context and placed at the end

of the age. The “gap theory,” as it is sometimes called, temporarily suspends all fulfillment of prophecy until the Christian Era is over. This unwarranted wresting of the prophecy revives the erroneous teaching of the church father, Hippolytus (died ca. 236), and fashions the frame for the futurist’s picture of earth’s last seven years.

Seventh-day Adventists believe a straight-forward study of Daniel’s 70-week prophecy (490 literal years) will clearly show it to be *an unbroken unit* of time especially allotted to the nation of Israel. Since the Messiah was to come during this period, it could have been the grandest era of Israel’s history (Isa 60:1-3). The first 69 prophetic weeks (483 years) extended not to the birth of the Messiah, but to His official appearance. It was at His baptism that Jesus, being anointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38; Matt 3:13-17), began His official ministry as the “Anointed One,” or Messiah.

It follows therefore that the remaining “week” (7 years) of the prophecy must be occupied with the years of the Saviour’s ministry, His atoning death, His entrance into heaven to begin His priestly ministry (Dan 9:24; Heb 8:1, 2), and the continued appeal to the nation by the apostles until the period closed in A.D. 34 with a second national rejection of the Messiah in the stoning of Stephen. It was Christ’s ministry and sacrificial death which confirmed the everlasting covenant (cf. Dan 9:27; Rom 15:8) and brought the significance of the sacrificial system to an end (Matt 27:50, 51; Eph 2:13-17).

A secret rapture. While not all futurist’s teach this concept, it is the prevailing belief. It is argued that Christ’s second coming is in two stages—a secret rapture or snatching away of the church at the beginning of the seven year period, and a visible, glorious return with the church to the earth at its close. Israel is related to this notion in that the removal of the church permits God to resume relationships with the Jews who continue to gather back to Palestine. The general view is that God will then select and seal 144,000 literal Jews who will evangelize the world with the gospel of the kingdom (all within this period!), garnering in an innumerable host of converts to Christ.

Seventh-day Adventists believe the testimony of the Bible consistently teaches only *one* return of Christ. All Scripture points to *one* great consummation—the return of our Lord in *one* great victory day for God and His people. The very text often cited in behalf of a secret snatching away (1 Thess 4:14-17) is seen to teach just the opposite: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven *with a shout*, with *the voice of the archangel*, and *with the trump of God*: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.” (vss. 16, 17).

The coming of Christ will be both seen and heard. Furthermore, to suggest that evangelization will take place *after* the coming of Christ is to create a “second-chance” theory, a concept quite foreign to the Bible. Such a view places millions of redeemed in heaven while it extends probation to those persons still living on the earth!

Antichrist. By putting a gap (the Christian Era) *between* the fourth beast (pagan Rome) of Daniel’s vision (chap. 7) and its horns, current futurist teaching looks for a *political* antichrist (the little horn with eyes and mouth)—a single, world dictator—who will take over a revived form of the Roman empire (10 horns) at the beginning of the seven-year period. Although he makes a covenant with the Jews permitting the temple and its services to function, he later breaks it, stops the ritual, deifies himself in the Jewish temple, and commands worship. From this point on his tyrannical rule triggers a great period of tribulation (3 1/2 years) that whips the nations up into an all-out Armageddon in Palestine, the Jewish nation being the center of the maelstrom.

Seventh-day Adventists believe this view simply revives the Catholic counter-reformation

teachings of the Jesuit Francisco Ribera (ca. 1590). Ribera sought to deflect the prophetic finger away from the papacy as the Christian apostasy sitting in the temple of the church seeking to control the conscience of Christendom by acting in God's place (2 Thess 2:1-8).

The prophecy of the "little horn" in Daniel 7 together with its parallel, "the leopard beast" in Revelation 13:1-10, and the "man of sin" in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8 have always been considered by Christians as dealing with the subject of the antichrist. Daniel's prophecy pointing *back* into historic time clearly places the rise of the "little horn" *among* the nations of Western Europe, sometimes *after* the dissolution of the Roman Empire (A.D. 476). It would be characterized by a *religious* nature, and would not only speak great words against God, but would also change His times and Law, and would persecute His people for an extended period of time. Only a *system* of apostasy could adequately fulfill these prophecies.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Christians are never warned against political governments as such in the Bible. Rather, they are warned against *spiritual* deceptions (cf. 2 Thess 2:5-7; 1 Tim 4:1; Matt 24:24, etc.).

A Jewish millennial kingdom. According to futurist teaching an open Advent of Christ with His church halts Armageddon. Antichrist and his forces are slain. Israel accepts the Lord as the Messiah, and enters with Him as His covenant people into a 1,000 year kingdom age. Christ rules directly over the nations in their mortal state from the throne of David in Jerusalem. Incongruous as it may seem (after Calvary and Christ's mediatorial ministry) the temple and the typical services function again. Those who reject Christ's rule are eventually judged and destroyed at the end of the millennium; the new believers receive immortality, and eternity begins.

Seventh-day Adventists reject this interpretation as being contrary to the Scriptures since it proposes a kingdom on earth—ruled directly by Christ—composed of glorified saints (the church) on the one hand, and nonglorified Jews and nations on the other! Such a scheme creates the anomaly of offering grace to both Jews and Gentiles *after* human probation has closed.

The Bible is clear that the mediatorial ministry of Jesus ceases just prior to His coming (cf. Heb 7:25; Rev 8:3-5; 15:1, 5-8). No subsequent millennial age can provide another chance for salvation when Christ's ministry terminates in the heavenly temple. The day of grace will then be over for both Jew and Gentile. Christ *brings His reward* with Him when He comes—not a further extension of grace (Rev 22:12).

Furthermore, the destruction wrought upon the earth by the seven last plagues (Rev 16), and the slaying of the world's impenitent by Christ's glorious return (cf. Rev 19:19-21; 2 Thess 2:8; Isa 11:4) renders the earth unfit for a millennial reign. Since Jesus promised to return from heaven for His people (John 14:1-3), Seventh-day Adventists believe Christ and His redeemed will share in a millennial reign *in heaven* (1 Thess 4:16-18; Rev 20:6) at the close of which the final executive Judgment will occur (Rev 20:11-13) together with the destruction of the lost and the re-creation of the earth as the eternal home of the redeemed (Rev 20:14, 15; 22:1-5; Matt 5:5).

"Put on the whole armour of God," the apostle Paul appeals, "that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph 6:11, KJV). As deceptive errors continue to multiply, ensnaring the unwary, it is urgent that every end-time Christian learn to use sound principles of interpretation, thereby fortifying his mind with the protecting truths of God's Word.

Iraq in Prophecy?³⁹

What the Scriptures say about the Middle East

by Clifford Goldstein

With Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Middle East has again seized the attention of the world. Prophecy students are scouring verses of Holy Writ in an attempt to find, hidden in the writing of the prophets, tomorrow's headlines.

Though for the most part Seventh-day Adventists have not been absorbed with the Middle East, in recent years many church members have accepted a theology that applies prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, as well as statements from Ellen White, to *current* events in the Middle East, such as the Iran-Iraq war or, most recently, the confrontation between the U S and Iraq over Kuwait. Are events in the Middle East part of the present truth message that God has entrusted to Seventh-day Adventists? And what are the dangers to the church if this Middle East-centered interpretation is wrong?

Theology, Not Geology

No question, Bible stories that dealt with salvation history have focused almost entirely on the Middle East. But why? Was the land itself—the rocks, the trees, the hills—somehow, in and of itself, holy? Or was this emphasis placed on the Middle East simply because of who lived there?

“Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation” (Gen 12:1, 2).⁴⁰

This great nation, of course, was ancient Israel, the Jews, who sat in the center of the civilized world. Travelers, merchants, wayfarers from Africa, Asia, and Europe, would readily come in contact with this unique people who worshiped the Lord as God. With the Jews placed at the apex of civilization, the surrounding nations could learn about the true God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

The Middle East's importance, therefore, came not because of any mystical quality in the dirt, but because God had centered His salvation activity for the world in Palestine by placing His ancient people there. Had for some reason the Lord sent them northward into Europe, then the Bible might have been filled with such names as Bonn, Paris, and London, not Jericho, Damascus, and Jerusalem!

The issue isn't geography, but theology. The Middle East was important because Israel was important, and Israel was important only because of its special relationship with the Lord. Israel alone—in a covenant with God—is what made the Middle East *at that time* the focus of the Bible.

Holy Land?

³⁹Reprint from *Adventist Review*, October 4, 1990

⁴⁰All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

If the birth of Israel thousands of years ago in the Middle East made the area significant, then wouldn't its rebirth do the same there today too?

It depends. If the covenant promises made to ancient Israel are applicable to modern Israel, then yes, Israel's presence would again make the Middle East prophetically important. This view—that the covenant relationship to ancient Israel was unconditional and that it applies to the Jews as a corporate body even now—is dogma for many evangelicals, which explains their obsession with the modern Hebrew nation.

Adventists as a whole don't accept this understanding of the covenant. Repeatedly the promises in Scripture made to ancient Israel were conditional. "It shall come to pass, *if* thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord . . ." reads promise after promise. Israel as a political entity didn't obey the voice of God, and therefore the promises made to it *as a nation* were eventually invalidated. Instead, the promises went to the New Testament church, composed of Jews and Gentiles from all over the world. "You are a chosen people," Peter wrote to believers in various countries, "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9, NIV).

Adventists believe that "if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:29, NKJV). Few among us believe that modern Israel enjoys the same covenant promises made to their ancestors. Instead, the remnant church—with the gospel, the sanctuary, the law, the health message—has taken the place of ancient Israel. Also, how many hundreds, if not thousands, of times has Ellen White referred to us as Israel or spiritual Israel?

What, then is the significance of the return of the Jews to Palestine? It's important to them, of course—and after what the Jews have suffered, they certainly have the right to safe and secure borders. But does their presence make the Middle East holy or the center of Bible prophecy? If a large number of Jews makes a place sacred, then for years the holiest place on earth must have been Brooklyn!

The Middle East was significant *only* because God's people were there. Where are they now? In more than 180 nations all over the world. Therefore, why would the Bible now direct us toward the Middle East, when it is no longer the center of God's salvation activity for the world? The answer, of course, is that it doesn't. Nothing in Ellen White's writings ever points to the Middle East as the focus of last-day events either.

Some, however, teach that they do. One proponent quotes Ellen White's statements that when the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are understood as they should be, a great revival will happen among God's people. He then asserts that because all the prophecies of Daniel have been fulfilled, in order for Ellen White's statements to make sense Daniel has to be reinterpreted and its prophecies placed in the future.

This reasoning is false on two major points. To start, all the prophecies of Daniel have clearly *not* been fulfilled: "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed" (Dan 2:44). "And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was" (Dan 12:1). Which of these events have already happened? (See also Dan 7:27).

Also, Ellen White's statements about Daniel and Revelation don't automatically mean that the books need a future fulfillment. If, for example, Adventists understood 1844 and the investigative judgment the way they should, the way that the pioneers came to understand them, that alone could bring revival.

Faith Undermined

Actually, Ellen White warns against those who apply past prophecies to the future: “Some will take the truth applicable to their time, and place it in the future. *Events in the train of prophecy that had their fulfillment away in the past are made future, and thus by these theories the faith of some is undermined*” (*Selected Messages*, bk. 2, p. 102, italics supplied).

She then describes in even more detail exactly what is being promoted within Adventism now: “From the light that the Lord has been pleased to give me, you are in danger of doing the same work, presenting before others truths which have had their place and done their specific work for the time, in the history of the faith of the people of God. You recognize these facts in Bible history as true, *but apply them to the future*. They have their force still in their proper place, in the chain of events that have made us as a people what we are today” (*Ibid.*, 102-3, italics supplied).

How accurately she describes those today who, while paying lip service to the historical Adventist interpretation of, for instance, Daniel 8, nevertheless place it in the future. The activities of the ram, the goat, and the little horn of that chapter—so crucial to Adventist interpretation—have now become Ayatollah Khomeini’s Iran, or Iraq, or the United States involved in a Middle East conflict. The subtle, long-range effect of this type of interpretation can only, as Ellen White warned, undermine faith.

It’s no coincidence that Daniel 8, unquestionably depicting “the chain of events that have made us as a people what we are today,” is one chapter that has been subjected to much reinterpretation. Keeping in mind Ellen White’s statement, “After this period of time, reaching from 1842 to 1844, there can be no definite tracing of the prophetic time” (*The SDA Bible Commentary*, Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 7, p. 971), if we place all of Daniel 8 in the future, then we must place the 2300 days, the center of the chapter, in the future as well, with a date other than 1844 for the cleansing of the sanctuary, in verse 14. Also, because the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9, which points to Jesus, is inextricably linked to the 2300 days of Daniel 8, then it too must be given future dates as well. When many Adventists are not firmly rooted in our historical interpretation of these crucial prophecies to begin with, it’s easy to see how these theories can destroy our message.

In recent years Adventists have suffered from a dearth of study and preaching on prophecy. As a result, many members feel a vacuum, a need. Someone then appears, quoting Ellen White, preaching orthodox Adventism (at least in certain areas), even doing a good work (such as printing and distributing Spirit of Prophecy books), and sincere saints, impressed by the apparent faithfulness of the ministry, let down their guards and get snagged in false theology. Satan will do anything to deceive us, and if he can have those who, while appearing to be faithful Adventists, are introducing speculative theories that can subtly undermine the message—he will do it!

Of course, the situation in the Middle East is dangerous, and it could bring about an economic collapse that sets the stage for final events. But to take the precious prophecies that have given our church a distinct message and turn them into Saddam Hussein’s battle plans is a perversion of historical Adventist interpretation, a misuse of Ellen White, and a subtle attempt at sabotaging the truths on which our church is founded.

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