

God and the Nation of Israel

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by Wayne Jackson

What role does the nation of Israel play in the plan of God?

Premillennialism is the notion that Jesus will return to this earth before he commences a 1,000-year reign on David's throne in Jerusalem. Premillennialism, and its theological sister—dispensationalism, argue that in connection with the second coming of Christ, God intends to re-establish a Jewish kingdom in Palestine. The doctrine contends that there is yet a purpose to be served by *physical* Israel.

Dispensationalists allege that in the “seven-year tribulation period,” just prior to Christ's “millennial reign,” God will restore the Jews to Palestine, and a national conversion of the Hebrew people will occur. It is not claimed that every Jew will be won to Christ; however, such vast multitudes will be saved—numbers proportionate to Israel's tragic fall—that it is appropriate to refer to the phenomenon as a “national” conversion.

One writer describes this so-called “restoration” as follows:

“The same prophets who predicted the world-wide exile and persecution of the Jews also predicted their restoration as a nation... This restoration was to come about in the general time of the climactic seven-year countdown and its finale—the personal appearance of the Messiah to deliver the new state from destruction” (Lindsey, 37-38).

The foregoing theory is quite erroneous in that it repudiates numerous fundamental Bible truths. Further, it is exceedingly dangerous in that it offers a false hope to Jews. Walvoord, a millennialist, says that: “This hope of restoration has sustained the Jews through nineteen hundred years of struggle” (76). This “hope” has been grossly misplaced—thanks, in part at least, to millennialists.

Israel in the Divine plan

A balanced study of the nation of Israel must include at least four elements—the selection, testing, rejection, and replacement of the Jewish people.

Selection

Almost 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, Jehovah selected Abraham to be the founder of a new nation. It was declared that through him a seed would come by whom all peoples of the earth would be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 22:17-18). Several centuries later, Abraham's offspring were delivered from an era of bondage in Egypt. They were given a special law and ritualistic system of worship which were designed to separate them from the other nations of the world (Ex. 19:5-6; cf. Eph. 2:14). All of this, of course, was in view of the coming Messiah (cf. Gal. 3:24-25; Heb. 9:1-10).

Testing

For some 1,500 years the Lord God attempted to cultivate the nation of Israel in preparation for the first advent of the Lord Jesus. It was a constant struggle to get the Hebrews to maintain a semblance of fidelity. They grossly violated the law, frequently went after “strange gods,” and they viciously persecuted the prophets that Jehovah sent to call them to repentance. Jeremiah summarized the history of the Israelite people when he charged that they did “nothing” of all that Jehovah commanded them (32:23).

Rejection

Because of the accelerating rebellion of the nation, consummated by the murder of Jesus Christ, God rejected the Hebrew people. Inexcusably, the Jews rejected their own Messiah; accordingly, Jehovah repudiated that nation and determined to scatter them as dust (Mt. 21:44). Thus, in the providence of God, the Roman armies came against Palestine in A.D. 70, and Judaism was destroyed (cf. Mt. 22:7; 24:1-34); the Jewish “vessel” was smashed, and it cannot be put back together (cf. Jer. 19:11). According to Josephus, some 1,100,000 Hebrews were slaughtered, and thousands were taken into slavery. All Jewish records were lost in that holocaust. Today, there is not a single Jew who knows his tribal ancestry (McClintock & Strong, 771). The physical nation of Israel is dead. The “Jews” that make up the State of Israel today (less than 25% of the world Jewish population) cannot legitimately be called a “nation.”

Replacement

As a consequence of Israel’s rejection of the Messiah, God has replaced physical Israel with a new nation, *spiritual Israel*. Today, the “Jew” is not one who is so physically, but one who is so inwardly, i.e., spiritually (Rom. 2:28-29). In this age, those who submit to the gospel plan of redemption—whether Jew or Gentile (Rom. 1:16)—become children of God, and thus are constituted as the true “seed of Abraham” (Gal. 3:26-29).

Errors of the Premillennial View Regarding the Nation of Israel

In view of the foregoing considerations, the following factors clearly indicate that the premillennial view of the nation of Israel is erroneous, and it should be rejected by conscientious students of the Bible.

First, it is a reflection upon the benevolent character of Jehovah to suggest that he intended to *perpetually* favor one nation over all others. Such a notion is at variance with the multiple Bible affirmations which assert the universal love of God, and his just, impartial disposition with reference to the whole human family (cf. Gen. 12:3; Psa. 145:9; Acts 10:34-35).

Second, the premillennial dogma ignores the fact that God’s initial selection of the Hebrew people, and the acquisition of the land of Canaan, was preparatory to the coming Christ. Jehovah employed the Jewish nation as a medium for the introduction of Christ into the world. Now that the Messianic mission has been accomplished, the role of “national Israel” no longer exists (cf. Gal. 3:24-25). That “middle wall of partition,” designed to isolate Israel from the nations, has been broken down (Eph. 2:14). It was abrogated at the cross (Col. 2:14). From the divine viewpoint, old physical Israel has passed away. It has been superseded by a *new* Israel.

Third, the Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that Israel's favor with Jehovah, even under the Mosaic regime, was *conditional*. "And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of Jehovah thy God, to observe to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that Jehovah thy God will set thee on high above all the nations of the earth..." (Dt. 28:1). The Hebrews were constantly warned of the consequences of disobedience (cf. 28:15ff). They could be disinherited as a nation (Num. 14:12), and disfranchised of their land (Josh. 23:13,16). The truth is, there are about as many Old Testament warnings to Israel as there are promises!

Fourth, there is not a solitary New Testament passage which speaks of the restoration of national Israel and the re-institution of Judaistic ritualism, etc. The Old Testament prophecies which predict the *literal* return of the Hebrews to Palestine were fulfilled in the Jews' release from political captivity (cf. Jer. 29:10; Ezra 1:1). Other predictions, which speak of a "restoration" of Israel, refer to a spiritual restoration [to God, not Palestine—cf. Isa. 49:5] through Jehovah's servant, Christ. [Note: Sometimes this spiritual restoration to God, through the redemptive work of Christ, is *symbolically* viewed in terms of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, etc. (cf. Jer. 31:38-40).] This blessing was for Jew and Gentile alike. Study carefully Isaiah 49:5ff, and note Paul's use of this context in the New Testament (Acts 13:47; 2 Cor. 6:2).

Fifth, there are many New Testament passages which portray a tragic future for physical Israel, with no hint of a national restoration.

Prophetic Pronouncements Concerning Israel

1. Like modern millennialists, there were Jews of old who felt that there was intrinsic virtue in being a physical descendant of Abraham (cf. Jn. 8:39). John the Baptizer informed them, however, that God was able to use stones in raising up seed to the patriarch. He then warned: "And even now the axe lieth at the root of the trees . . ." (Mt. 3:10). The context focuses upon a threatened "wrath to come" (vs. 7), which would find its nearest application in the destruction of the Jewish nation by the Romans in A.D. 70. Now here is a vital point. When a tree is cut down, there is hope that it will sprout again, provided its stump or roots remain (cf. Job 14:7,8; Isa. 11:1). But when the axe is laid at the *root*, where is the hope of restoration? There simply is none!
2. Christ once pronounced a curse upon a barren fig tree near Jerusalem. The tree served as an apt illustration of fruitless national Israel. Jesus declared: "Let there be no fruit from thee *henceforth for ever*" (Mt. 21:19). Where is the hope in that? Later, on that same Tuesday, just prior to Friday's crucifixion, the Lord announced to the Jews, "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (21:43). In other words, barren "national Israel" would be replaced by fruitful *spiritual* Israel, the church (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9; Gal. 6:16).
3. In the parable of the marriage of the King's Son, Jesus spoke concerning those who spurned the royal invitation. It was prophesied that the King (God) would send his armies (the Romans), and destroy those murderers (the Jews), and burn their city (Jerusalem). Why? They "were [imperfect tense—*sustained* state] not worthy" (Mt. 22:1-8). Is there any suggestion of "restoration" there? Later, in 23:38, Christ warned: "Behold, your

house is left unto you desolate.” The term “house,” as Bloomfield notes, refers not merely to the temple alone, but to the whole Jewish nation, especially its metropolis (116). “*Left desolate*” has a note of finality about it.

4. In the parable of the barren fig tree (Lk. 13:6-9), it is suggested that fruitless Israel would be soon cut down. “This parable gives Israel to know that its life is only a respite, and that this respite is nearing its end” (Godet, 119). There is no suggestion that the “tree” would spring up again. Strange indeed—if millennialism is true.
5. In another parable, uttered shortly before his death, Jesus depicted himself as a nobleman who was going into a far country (heaven) to receive for himself a kingdom (the church). Later, he would return (the Second Coming). However, while he was in that distant land, his citizens (the Jews) hated him (imperfect tense—*abiding* hatred) and sent this message to him: “We will not (present tense – *continued* determination) that [you] reign over us” (Lk. 19:14). Even millennialists admit that this refers to the Jewish rejection of Christ (Martin, 252). Without the remotest suggestion that there would be an alteration of this hateful Jewish disposition, the nobleman, “when he was come back” (15), characterized these citizens as his “enemies,” and commanded they be slain (27). The language describes “the state of rejection in which [the Jews] are plunged *till the Lord’s return*” (Godet, 223; emp. WJ).
6. In another parable, Jesus foretold Israel’s rejection of the gospel, and the subsequent success of the kingdom of heaven among the Gentiles. Of those stubborn Jews, he declared: “. . . none of those men who were bidden shall taste of my supper” (Lk. 14:24). This refers, of course, to the Jewish majority that refused the gospel (a remnant accepted the invitation—cf. Rom. 11:5). Why did not the Lord give some clue that eventually there would be a massive Jewish acceptance of his invitation?
7. In Luke’s account of the Olivet discourse, Christ, alluding to Jerusalem’s impending destruction, declared that the city would be “trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled” (Lk. 21:24). The term “trodden down” is a present tense participle, suggesting prolonged hardships (though not necessarily uninterrupted) for Jerusalem (and what she represented—the nation). This oppression was to continue until the “times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” The phrase “times of the Gentiles” is an expression for the current age. It implies a “times of the Jews” (i.e., the Mosaic period). For fifteen centuries the Hebrews were Jehovah’s special people—an era which might be appropriately termed “the times of the Jews.” When they rejected the Messiah, that age of prominence (called a “reign”—Mt. 21:43) ended. It was superseded by “the times of the Gentiles”—the Christian age. It is clear that Israel is to be the recipient of divine retribution throughout the Christian era.

Millennialists argue, however, that Jerusalem was to be trodden down only “until” the times of the Gentiles is fulfilled. After that time, they contend, Jerusalem will be exalted to her former glory. The key word in their argument is “until” (Greek, *achri*). Premillennialists assume the term has a *temporal* implication in Luke 21:24, thus implying a *reversal* of events after the time specified. But the assumption is unwarranted. The term *achri* frequently has a *terminal* thrust in the New Testament. Consider, for example, Revelation 2:25, where Christ sought to encourage the saints at Thyatira:

“[T]hat which ye have, hold fast *till* I come.” Does this suggest that these Christians will relinquish their blessings when he comes? Of course not. Similarly, just because the Lord declared that Jerusalem would be trodden down *until* the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled, that does not imply that, following “the times of the Gentiles,” the city would be restored to some sort of divine glory. Proof for such a theory will have to be found somewhere other than in the word “until.” The truth of the matter is, God’s wrath has come upon Israel “to the uttermost” (1 Thes 2:16).

8. In his letter to the Romans, Paul contends that “a hardening in part hath befallen Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in . . .” (11:25). There are several important matters that need to be noted here. First, the “hardening” was the Jewish disbelief in Christ. Second, the “in part” suggests that this lack of faith was characteristic of only a portion of the nation; there was a remnant that did believe (cf. 9:27; 11:5,14). Third, the verb “hath befallen” is a perfect tense form, stressing the *abiding nature* of that hardness—until the fulness of the Gentiles comes in. Fourth, “fulness of the Gentiles” simply denotes the accomplishment of Jehovah’s purpose among the Gentiles (or the “nations”). In other words, Israel’s hardness will remain until the end of the present dispensation. As B.M. Christiansen comments: “This partial hardening will continue throughout the time of the Gentiles, i.e., until Christ’s return” (cf. Lenski, 174).

Since the hardening of Israel was not total, but only “in part,” there was/is still hope that many Jews may be saved. But how will the Jews be saved? They will be saved by their acceptance of the gospel (10:12-16), and their surrender to the Deliverer from Zion (11:26). This provides the correct meaning of “so all Israel shall be saved.” The word “so” is an adverb of *manner*, meaning, “in this way.” Hence, it is “in this way” (the way of obeying Christ) that all Israel (who are saved) shall be saved. This passage does not affirm a nation-wide conversion of the people of Israel.

The theory that Paul expected a mass conversion of Israel is flawed on several accounts: (1) It contradicts his entire line of argument in Romans 9-11. (2) It leaves as inexplicable the throbbing anguish for his brethren in the flesh, which saturates this entire section. For instance, Paul writes: “For I could wish (potential imperfect – ‘I kept being on point of wishing’) that I myself were anathema from Christ for my brethren’s sake, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). *Why*—if he knew that a national conversion of Israel was an ultimate reality?

The premillennial concept of the “nation of Israel” is clearly erroneous. There is no promise of a national conversion of Israel in the Bible. The gospel is still God’s power to save both Jew and Greek (Rom. 1:16), and all who possess hearts that are “honest and good” (Lk. 8: 15) will accept it. The only “hope” for Israel is in the cross of Christ (see Acts 26:6-23).

Sources

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