

# Israel: A theological and eschatological perspective

## Introduction

What I present is: a Christian viewpoint- not *the* Christian viewpoint. I ask in the light of that for a hearing to the end of the paper.

I acknowledge that we face some complex issues, not least of which is the emotiveness of the subject. If we have personal relationship with those who are Jews or Palestinians that can certainly colour our convictions. We are also living post-holocaust and that is another element for us. In Europe we have had to rightly face the sins of our fathers over Israel and Jews: much of which was committed by those who claimed to be followers of Christ. We are also those who live with the restoration of the people to the land.

Theologically we enter the debate of 'who is Israel?', or to put it another way 'are all Jews part of Israel'. This though is not a new issue – it was a central issue in the time of Jesus. This was what undergirded many of the sects, including the dominant sect, the Pharisees, who, for example, could effectively classify some Jews as non-Israel by calling them sinners. This issue is further compounded by those who were non-Jews by race finding a place among Israel through proselyte baptism and the washing away of their sins as they embraced Torah.

So how do the issues of race and faith mix? This has always been an issue and continues to be one today given that we have a secular state in place in Israel, and as Christians we proclaim that the fulfilment of the Jewish faith is now here through the coming of their Messiah.

We also need to ask how the Israel of today relates to the Israel of the Bible: is there a straight line? What impact does the death of Jesus make on this issue? And even if there were a straight line between the two, this could cause us to ask what a current prophetic word for Israel would be – what would be said? How would the care for the alien and the outcast be framed? What would be spoken into the issue of warfare and arms?

This paper has in its title the word 'eschatological' so two key points on that need to be made:

- Christ is the centre of eschatology, and
- the centre of eschatology is not the future but the past

This has to radically shape our thinking. We cannot think of this issue without placing Christ at the centre. All of Scripture points to and is interpreted through him. But we also need to make sure that our thinking about eschatology is not simply future-oriented. The end-time event has taken place in the Christ Event, which will be brought to a conclusion with the *parousia*.

## 1. The centrality of Christ, Messiah of Promise and Saviour of the world

### 1.1 *The promises:*

All the promises of God are fulfilled in and through the Christ appointed by God. He is not periphery he is central. 2 Corinthians 1:20 says that 'No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.'

This has an impact on every OT promise (particualry as these are the ones Paul had in mind in 2 Corinthians), promises regarding covenant people, land, Temple and king.

### 1.2 *Israel's story:*

In order to see how Christ as Messiah (Messiah is the representative one of the people) it is important to see what Israel's call and role is in salvation. They are as much the saving people as the saved people. Election is more to purpose than to salvific status.

The Biblical story is a framework of God blessing Abraham, and thus his seed, in order that they can be a blessing to the whole world. They are to be a redeeming nation, or the means by which the redemption of God can come to the nations. Their election is to a purpose. If they sin and persist then they will end in Exile (this is the message of the Deuteronomic historian who gives the basic outline that judgement came on the people for disobedience starting in 722 BC with the exile of the northern tribes, and again in 587 BC with the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon).

The situation we have at the end of the OT is that the redeeming nation themselves are in need of a redeemer. They are in bondage, and although back in the land, are still in some measure in Exile. The Temple cult is corrupt, the Roman forces rule the land, king Herod is a renegade,

subservient to Rome. This is not Israel, free to be the light to the world. She is waiting for her deliverance from this exile, she is awaiting the promised restoration.

This perspective is explicitly stated in the inter-testamental work of Baruch:

*So to this day there have clung to us the calamities and the curse which the Lord declared through his servant Moses (1:20)*

and again

*See, we are today in our exile where you have scattered us, to be reproached and cursed and punished for all the iniquities of our ancestors, who forsook the Lord our God (3:8).*

So although there was a stream that rejoiced that there had been a return to the land after Babylon the verdict of history was of the Exile, at least in part, continuing.

*All Israel is still in Exile just as before, whether she now finds herself in the land, which others rule, or in the Diaspora (O.H. Steck, Das Problem theologischer Strömungen in nachexilischer Zeit, 1968, p. 454 quoted in 'Restoration of Israel' in Dictionary of Paul and his Letters, IVP.).*

Tom Wright suggests that if Israel was not still literally in exile, it was at best *in semi-exile*.

*From some points of view, the exile was still continuing: as long as the Herods and the Pilates ruled Palestine, the great prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah were still waiting fulfilment. The period which historians call 'post-exilic' was seen at the time as semi-exilic. Not until Israel's God, the God of the whole earth, demonstrated that he was both of those things by liberating Israel from this internal exile would Jews be satisfied that the covenant had been kept. (Themelios, 16.1, p. 11; see also his seminal work 'The New Testament and the People of God').*

This I suggest is the narrational framework of the New Testament in its approach to the OT story. We can illustrate it below, with two central examples of Matthew and Galatians, and some comments particularly on Luke-Acts.

#### **1.2.1. Matthew's Gospel:**

The overall framework is the entire OT story – indicating that it is reaching a climax in Jesus and a fulfilment in Jesus. Hence the many references to the fulfilment of the OT Scriptures. The book begins with 'The book or record of the *genesis* of Jesus of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.' This places Jesus firmly in the line of the inheritor of the

promises to Abraham and to David with a more than passing reference to the opening book of the Jewish Scriptures.

The book ends with a likewise more than a passing reference to the closing book of the Jewish scriptures 2 Chronicles. There King Cyrus says:

*The Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you – may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.*

This can be seen to bear close resemblance to Jesus words:

*All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me, go make disciples, and lo I am with you to the end of the age.*

Thus indicating that the rebuilding of the Temple is on the heart of God – the Temple to be rebuilt is not that of an earthly Jerusalem but of a people whose citizenship is in heaven. The true king of Israel, the Messiah would indeed rebuild the Temple, hence Herod's Temple came with Messianic claims. This is in line with Jesus own words about the Temple and its destruction. The destruction of his own body as Temple marked the end of the Temple in Jerusalem, but he would restore it again – a reference to his Temple but not the Temple in Jerusalem. This issue of the rebuilding of the Temple throughout the whole earth is followed through consistently in scripture. It is a necessary follow up to the ripping of the Temple curtain at the death of Jesus. There death of Jesus does not simply restore a Temple in land, but press toward the fulfillment of all of history: a dwelling place for God throughout the whole earth. Holiness is not to be confined to space behind a curtain, but is to break out into the whole earth. Stephen's speech also makes a big deal of the whole earth being the place of revelation for the Creator God (Acts 7).

To return to Matthew. His opening chapter concerning the beginning of Jesus is one of setting his birth in the context of the end of exile. He divides the generations into 3 sets of fourteen. From Abraham to David 14 generations; from David to exile fourteen; and from the exile to the Christ 14 (1:17). Six groups of 7 generations so that the fulfillment generation ,the seventh group of seven, begins with Christ. There has been a return to the land (in part) but the exile will only end with Jesus' coming. With his coming we have 'Immanuel, God is with us' – not just in his birth but in his continued presence to the end of the age. The Exile is due to the sin of the people, but in Jesus there is 'the forgiveness of sins for his people' – in context this is not to be understood evangelically but theologically and

ones who have not received Jesus, or are they ones who have rejected Jesus?)

### 3.2 *My final area though of focus is the Jew / Christian relationship*

#### 3.2.1. There is a debt which is owed

They are our fathers (Rom. 11:18; 15:27), so we are indebted to those who have gone before. The God of Israel is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This I suggest needs to impact two ways:

#### 3.2.2. Make Israel jealous

The call is on the body of Christ to be everything that Israel was called to be. To stand in the place of fulfillment so that there might be a jealousy worked in Israel. The root of jealousy is that of fear of losing one's place.

#### 3.2.3. Stand in the gap

We also need to be willing to carry the issue of identificational repentance into this arena. Rather than condemn the deeds of Israel, perhaps the church needs to be the ones who are willing to love Israel to the extent that we desire to stand in the gap for their sins. This was certainly the attitude of Paul who wished he could be accursed for the sake of his people (Rom. 9:3).

The ministry of reconciliation is what Jesus carried, and gave to his people. Could it be at the end of the age that Christians could be at the forefront of working with our brothers and sisters for reconciliation. Brothers and sisters through creation, brothers and sisters through becoming inheritors of their covenant, and grafted in as chosen of God, and full brothers and sisters to those of Jewish, Arabic, Palestinian or Gentile race that have met at the foot of the cross. I end by asking could it be that in the place of land called Israel or Palestine that God might desire to demonstrate reconciliation as races live together. Will this happen without the presence of the Peacemaker? And will his presence be there without the presence of his people?

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## 2.2 *There is a remnant who are saved by faith*

There is in Jewish theology the hope that there will always be a remnant that will be faithful to God. Through their faithfulness the hope of ultimate restoration of the rest is held alive. Hope expressed very vividly in the Qumran community. Illustrated in their move to the geographical place where the Temple waters would flow eastward into the Dead Sea as an expression of their call.

The hope in many sectors (and sects) in Israel was of a remnant that is faithful so that the rest might come to faith which then could be followed with the possibility of Gentiles flowing to Zion to participate with Israel in the salvation of God. Paul uses the same model: simply adjusting the order. He calls for a faithful remnant, the ingrafting of the Gentiles through faith (and a law-free Gospel) then hope for the rest of the Jews.

So he holds out a hope for the Jewish people. If they were restored then that would be nothing other than life from the dead. It is hard to press this to the point where he states that definitely all Jews will find faith, but this was a motivating factor in his mission.

## 3. This aspect leads me to explore a few conclusions

### 3.1 *The already but not yet*

The already but not yet of the Gospel opens the possibility that Israel with a covenant that belongs within the old age era could in measure find salvation within that. Those who are of Israel are loved Rom. 11:28. However, that never meant, and cannot now mean that all Israel is saved. Let me ask it this way to sharpen the issue: 'was Paul a zealous righteous Jew, saved before the road to Damascus or only after'. Faith not race is the criterion; grace, not nationalistic or legalistic standing can be the criterion.

If we do accept the already but not yet scenario we still know that the thrust of the NT was preach the Gospel and preach it to the Jews.

We cannot go back to an era of shadows now that the New Covenant is in force. We live in the era of fulfilment. We cannot rejoice at the idea of a restored physical Temple, but can rejoice as Jews find salvation through their God-appointed Messiah.

So if we are willing to explore this possibility we would still have to hold that any such salvation would be incomplete. (We could incidentally explore the same issue with those who are non-Jewish. Are the ones who are lost the

narratively as the end of exile (1:21). It is the forgiveness of the sins of Israel so that Exile can end.

### 1.2.2. Paul and Galatians:

We find the same world view in Paul. It is in Galatians that Paul fights so strongly for the centrality of Christ and that all who have received the Spirit are the seed of Abraham regardless of race or allegiance to law (3:26-4:7). The story line of exile though is most clear in 3:13-14. There he states that Jesus became a curse for us (Jews) in order that the blessing of Abraham might flow to the nations. If the blessed nation (Israel - Abraham's descendents) is cursed how can the Scriptures be fulfilled? So Jesus takes on the curse of Israel so that now the nations can be blessed. Once the curse is gone the fulfillment of the promise can come: I will bless you *and you will be a blessing...*

It was this story that had caused Paul to claim for himself a righteousness and zeal when he was persecuting the church. For Gentiles to claim a crucified man was their saviour would have been seen as irrelevant, but for a Jew to do so would be seen as blasphemous. A crucified one would not be the Messiah but the cursed one, for cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. To make Messianic claims for such a one is to ask for the judgment of God on the nation. To persecute them and call for them to recant would be to exercise righteousness. Paul's radical conversion, of heart and world-view, leads him to see that this Jesus has indeed been cursed, but only so as Israel can be liberated. He is the Messiah appointed, through which forgiveness of sins is freely offered. As Israel's king he is appointed the saviour of the world.

### 1.2.3. We could do the same with the other NT writers:

Luke - Acts

The fulfillment themes are there in the birth narratives: Luke 1:31-33 The throne of David is given to Jesus who will reign for ever over the house of Jacob - the whole of Israel.

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25-26 the consolation is none other than the restoration of Israel). He had seen it and can now die in peace. Anna likewise spoke to those who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. These events had already begun to take place in the birth of Jesus.

In his second volume Luke continues with the theme of the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6). This restoration had awaited the outpouring of the Spirit from on high so that the good news could be taken to the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 32:1-15 with the turning point in verse 15. Jesus fulfils this as stated in Acts 2:33. The very answer to the questions of the restoration of Israel is couched in language rooted in Isaiah's narrative and theology:

You will receive power to be my witnesses - echoes the call of Israel as servant of Yahweh, e.g. Is. 43:10; and the call to restore from Jerusalem... to the ends of the earth is the promise from Is 49:5,6.

How will this take place, through the eschatological marker of the outpouring of the Spirit. By this means they will be baptised into the mission of Messiah, they will be marked as covenant people, they will be Abraham's seed.

It is this restoration that that lies behind the earlier symbolic choosing of both the 12 apostles as founders of a new nation and the sending out of the 70 / 72 disciples as symbolic of the task of reaching the nations.

Jesus is redefining Israel around himself, he is commissioning *this* Israel to reach the nations (70 or 72 nations listed in Gen. 10 dependent on whether the Hebrew or Greek text is used).

The very structure of Acts is also one which is based on its parallel nature to the book of Joshua and the conquest of the land:

gradual spread from Jericho	gradual spread from Jerusalem
begins with command to conquer the land	Begins with another command for conquest
uses the sword	Uses another type of sword
Achan's sin threatens the community	Annanias and Sapphira's sin likewise threatens the community
repeated phrase: and the land had rest from war	repeated phrase: enjoyed a time of peace... strengthened... grew...

So a conquest is to take place now but not of the land but of the world. Gospel is not only for the people in the land but for all people. The restoration of the kingdom is to Israel - but there is a redefining: leaves us

at the end of the book with Paul in Rome, the capital of the world, for if Israel has been restored in Christ this is the time for a world faith. All kingdoms are to bow to his Lordship. The Gospel is indeed political in its scope.

This again is in line with Paul's words in Romans where the promise to Abraham was of the whole world (Rom. 4:13; this parallels the giving of the Garden to Adam and Eve but their inheritance is the whole earth).

John's Gospel is read also in this light. Although rejected by 'his own' people (1:11) he is accepted by those who abide in him and are the branches of the Vine (imagery for Israel in OT). Thus when he eats the Last Supper he eats it with 'his own' (13:1). The imagery of Jesus as the new Moses sitting with his people is very strong. The people are defined relationally and consist of those who receive the one God has appointed.

## 2. So redefinitions are forced on us because of Jesus, the centre of all eschatology and the purposes of God

Jesus as Israel's representative is the one who inaugurates the age of fulfillment. This crystallises the age long issue of who is Israel. Paul states that now, as then, it was not based on *race* - for there were two sons of Abraham who could claim to be seed of Abraham (Isaac and Ishmael, 9:7), but the line comes through one not the other; neither is it based on *deeds*, for one is chosen before their acts are visible (Jacob and Esau, 9:12). The two markers claimed by the Israel of Paul's day, of race and Torah, are insufficient.

Who is Israel? It had never actually been on the basis of race or of works (the two defining elements claimed by Israel) Paul argues, so he can state in line with their own (and his own) history that 'not all children are Abraham's seed' (Rom. 9:7).

### 2.1 There is only one Olive Tree in history

The Olive Tree analogy stems from Jeremiah 11:16-17 where due to the violation of the covenant the branches would be broken off. In its historical context this is a reference to judgement in 587BC. Paul only sees one olive tree and now the Gentile branches have been grafted in with the hope of a future ingrafting for Israel.

The imagery of the Gentiles coming in stems from Isaiah e.g. 2:2-5, but the order is reversed, Israel is now being challenged to come to the nations because she sees the salvation and glory which they have in Christ.