

A RATIONALE FOR THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

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It is generally agreed among Biblical students that the Scriptures teach a special relationship between God and Israel. While there is much controversy over the meaning of Israel in the NT, most will agree that the historical Israel of the OT referred to a community of people bound together physically by descent from Abraham through Jacob and religiously by a covenant relationship with God. That this community of Israel also constituted a nation in the usual sense of this term is clear from Scripture. When the question is raised as to the rationale of the unique relationship of the nation of Israel with God, there is likewise the general belief that Israel was elected and brought into a covenant relationship with God for service to the rest of the world. The way of this service, however, and thus the place of the nation of Israel in God's history evokes diverse explanations. Aside from the understanding that sees Israel and Judaism as a legitimate way to God alongside of Christianity,¹ a position that has traditionally been rejected by Christians, four views regarding the mission of the nation Israel may be noted.

The dominant position throughout most of Church history has understood Israel's mission as a nation to have ended with the rejection of Christ, her role being assumed by the Church.² Many within this position do see a future salvation for Israel and incorporation into the Church, but nothing of a role or mission is retained.³ A second understanding of Israel commanding support today envisages a future for Israel that involves not only her salvation but also some function in God's salvation for the world.⁴ This view, however, rejects a literal understanding of the OT prophecies that picture Israel functioning as the central, distinct nation among the other nations during the kingdom reign

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¹A. R. Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers* (New York: Scribner's, 1967).

²H. H. Rowley, *The Missionary Message of the Old Testament* (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1944) 79, 81; G. Lindeskog, "Israel in the New Testament," *SEÅ* 26 (1961) 92.

³*The Documents of Vatican II* (ed. W. M. Abbott; New York: American Press, 1966) 664-665; A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 201.

⁴E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 305-307; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2, 81, 84; R. R. De Ridder, *My Heart's Desire for Israel* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 13; G. E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 562.

of the Messiah.⁵ Brief mention may also be made of a third position, which points to a present revelatory function for Israel in addition to the future role described in the previous view. According to this interpretation Israel, in the present disobedience to her election, serves the purpose of God by witnessing to his judgment on obdurate man.⁶ A fourth understanding of Israel's place in God's plan views the nation as yet having a role in which she functions as God's channel or means of blessing to the world. She does this as a national entity that in some way stands central to the rest of the nations.

That God's creation and election of Israel had cosmic significance that entailed a mission of Israel toward all nations is generally accepted. Referring to the promise of blessing to "all the families of the earth" given with the divine call to Abraham, Rowley says:

From this faint gleam we may trace the growing light through the passages at which we have looked, and others which cannot be examined, to the full perception of Deutero-Isaiah that by her election Israel is called to a conscious mission to the world, and that she can only fulfil the purpose of her election in the execution of the mission.⁷

Israel's mission is described as a mediatorial role in the founding of the nation at Sinai in Exod 19:5-6. There she is described as a special possession of God that is set apart from the rest of the nations. Interpreting the word "kingdom" in the expression "kingdom of priests" as a state organized similarly to other nations, Noth points to Israel's purpose in these words:

Israel is to have the role of the priestly member in the number of earthly states. Israel is to do "service" for all the world (cf. also Isa. 65.5f.); this is the purpose for which Israel has been chosen.⁸

It is significant to note in passing that Israel in this passage clearly has reference to a nation among nations when referring to its purpose. Similarly LaSor, after defining Israel as a people distinct from the Gentiles or nations, points to Israel's mission to the rest of the world:

Israel's election was not an end, but rather a means to an end. Israel was chosen in order that the world—the gentile world that knew not the true God—might have light, might be made to see, might have understanding of the great redemptive love of God.⁹

In a discussion of the meaning of history and Israel's place in it, John Bright notes three beliefs that were constant in Israel's faith:

That God controls history and in it reveals his righteous judgment and saving

⁵De Ridder, *Desire* 82, 77; C. Journet, "Mysterious Destinies of Israel," in *The Bridge* (New York: Pantheon, 1956), 2, 88.

⁶K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957) 2.2.203, 206-207, 234-235.

⁷H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election* (London: Lutterworth, 1950) 67; cf. R. Martin-Achard, *A Light To The Nations* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962).

⁸M. Noth, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 157.

⁹W. S. LaSor, *Israel: A Biblical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 18.

power; that God chose Israel in history and summoned her to destiny as his people; that God has a purpose in history toward which history tends—the establishment of his Kingdom over his people.¹⁰

Bright goes on to focus on the mission of the servant of the Lord in the prophecies of Isaiah. Noting that the servant is sometimes the entire nation of Israel, sometimes the true remnant of Israel, and sometimes a messianic figure, Bright concludes that the mission of the servant finally falls upon Israel as a whole. He writes:

However the Servant is pictured, the Servant mission is always laid before Israel as her destiny in history (e.g. 50:10). The Servant can no more be separated from Israel than Christ can from his church. . . . Israel is to be the people of the Servant—that is her destiny in history. It is her destiny to be the agent of establishing God's Kingdom in the world.¹¹

Even the appellations of honorifics to Israel's king found primarily in the Psalms are only meaningful if they have significance beyond the tiny state of Israel. Eichrodt writes:

Such language was made possible only by the belief in election, which awoke the sense of the nation's special mission in the service of the unique God of Israel; the right to universal dominion could therefore be ascribed to the Israelite king as the "son" of the covenant God without risk of megalomania.¹²

Finally we might point to Israel's relationship to God's ultimate purpose to glorify himself in the world. Concerning this purpose von Rad notes that to "an extraordinary degree . . . the *kābôd* of God is . . . a theme of religious hope and an established part of eschatological expectation." This is manifest in many statements such as the psalmist's declaration: "And may the whole earth be filled with his glory" (Ps 72:19). That Israel serves God's purpose in this goal as an instrument through which he intends to get universal glory is frequently mentioned in the OT prophets. Von Rad, referring to the great eschatological saving acts of God through which he attains universal glory, points to the central place of Israel when he says that "it makes little difference whether it is said that Yahweh will become *kābôd* for Israel or that Israel is created for Yahweh's *kābôd*"¹³ (cf. Zech 2:8; Isa 43:7).

There is little question that from the OT perspective the mission of Israel meant the fulfillment by Israel as being a distinct people with national existence in the world. This same belief that Israel's destiny is linked to her national existence is maintained in Judaism today. Jocz explains:

In the Jewish view, Judaism and Jewish nationhood are interdependent: there is no Judaism without the Jewish people and there is no Jewish people without Judaism. . . . Israel and Israel's message are inseparable; the message is vested

¹⁰J. Bright, "Faith and Destiny," *Int* 5/1 (January 1951) 11.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 24–25.

¹²W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1. 478.

¹³G. von Rad, "dokeo, doxa, et al.," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 478.

in the people and the people exists by the message. Israel, in order to fulfill his historical vocation, must exist.¹⁴

Martin Buber asserted this same position in an open letter to Gandhi in 1939 concerning the land of Palestine. For him the mission of Israel called for "a way of life that cannot be realized by individuals in the sphere of their private existence, but only by a nation in the establishment of its society."¹⁵

While the Jewish understanding cannot be followed all the way—especially in their tie to the old covenant—in the light of the mission of Israel as a nation portrayed in the OT Scriptures, it is incumbent on us to ask whether these prophecies still relate to the Israel that continues with us today. We would suggest that they do and that Israel's mission as a nation in the historical plan of God is not yet complete. This mission may be viewed around two focal points, neither of which in our understanding of God's plan of salvation for the world is yet entirely fulfilled.

I. ISRAEL'S ROLE AS THE CHANNEL OF REVELATION

One aspect of Israel's mission that remains to be complete is her role as a channel of revelation. That such a purpose is crucial to her role as a priestly people is evident both from Scripture and history. The psalmist praises God, saying, "He declares his words to Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for his ordinances, they have not known them" (Ps 147:19–20; cf. Deut 4:6–8). The apostle Paul similarly declares that God had entrusted to Israel "the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2). It is evident from history that not only in OT times but even to the present the special canonical revelation that God has communicated to mankind has come through those related to Israel. Not only the verbal Word of God but also the living Word in the person of Christ has come through the Jews.

Now while it is true that the NT teaches that God's revelation of himself is complete and final in his Son and therefore we do not expect any revelation outside of him, the question remains whether that revelation through Christ has been totally disclosed. Can we say with Boettner that God chose the Jewish nation to be the exclusive channel of revelation to the world?

But now that the Messiah has come and God's revelation to mankind has been completed, written in a book and made available to the people of all nations with nothing more to be added, there is no further need for a separate people or nation to serve that purpose.¹⁶

Or is it possible to see a place for Israel yet in the service of Christ's revelation to the world? As we have seen, Barth along with others sees Israel today even in unbelief in the service of God's revelation. If it is true that the continual preservation of Israel is God's doing, then it does seem reasonable to conclude

¹⁴J. Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (London: SPCK, 1954) 297.

¹⁵M. Buber, *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken, 1948) 229.

¹⁶L. Boettner, "A Postmillennial Response," in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (ed. R. G. Clouse; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 52–53.

that he desires to reveal something through this activity.

When we turn to Scripture, particularly to the prophecies of Ezekiel, we find numerous references to God revealing himself to the nations through his actions with the nation of Israel. Referring to Ezekiel, Zimmerli says, "The prophetic word announces that what happens to Israel historically is in fact Yahweh's own dealing with both his people and the nations."¹⁷ This is true with prophecies dealing both with the judgment of his people and their restoration. Concerning judgment, Zimmerli explains:

The recurring direct association of this judgment of Israel with the strict statement of recognition virtually identifies it as the locus at which Yahweh reveals himself in his most personal essence. Yahweh's revelatory self-introduction is to be recognized in his judgment over Israel.¹⁸

Ezekiel's prophecy in 21:5—"Thus all flesh will know that I, the LORD, have drawn my sword out of its sheath"—along with numerous others makes it clear that both Israel and the nations are to come to know God through God's judgment on Israel (cf. 5:13; 6:14; 7:9; 12:15 ff.; 15:7; 39:21–24). This same effect of knowledge is connected to the prophecies concerning the restoration of the nation. God says in Ezek 39:27, "When I bring them back from the peoples and gather them from the lands of their enemies, then I shall be sanctified through them in the sight of the many nations." Likewise the psalmist predicts that Yahweh will arise and have compassion on Zion. In consequence he says that "the nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth thy glory" (Ps 102:13–15). This effect includes Israel herself (cf. Ps 59:13; Isa 41:17–20; 43:10–12; 49:26; 60:16).

It is difficult to see all of these predictions as fulfilled in the Babylonian deportation and subsequent return. Clearly there is in these contexts an eschatological situation. The question remains therefore whether they can be explained in terms of God's universal spiritual work in the Church without reference to the literal nation of Israel.

In response it is immediately evident that Israel has continued to exist as a people and now as an actual nation. Their experience since NT times follows exactly the predictions of a worldwide dispersion with an attendant persecution and unrest (Lev 26:33; Deut 28:64–68; Jer 24:9; 25:18) and the apostle's explanation of their partial divine hardening (Rom 9:25). One is therefore tempted to agree with Barth that the present situation of Israel is indeed revelatory of God's judgment. But such is the case only to believers; the nations do not yet see any revelation of God. According to the prophets this disclosure to the world would only take place when God reestablished Israel as a people and bestowed his bounteous grace on them. As a result of God's mighty acts of deliverance on behalf of Israel, the only explanation of their previous downtrodden state will be the knowledge that they were under the hand of God's judgment. Any revelatory function of God's judgment for unbelief that Israel might serve today therefore necessitates a future display of God's gracious power on their behalf

¹⁷W. Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 88.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 93.

in a change of their present status among the nations.

Beyond what one might argue for a future restoration of Israel on the basis of a continuing revelatory function is the question of the real nature of God's revelation. Is it enough to say with Boettner that God's revelation was completed with Christ's coming and is written in a book that is available to all people?¹⁹ It is clear from the Scriptural record that God's revelation involves not just the revelation of the message of truth but historical actions as well. Contrary to the gods of the philosophers, the knowledge of whom is related to abstract thought, the God of the Bible shows himself by direct intervention within history. That God's historical actions with Israel of old as well as his message through the prophets were revelatory to the world is evident from the Scriptural record. Given this understanding of the Biblical nature of God and his revelation—i.e., he makes himself known in direct intervention within history and intends to do so even more evidently in the future—is it correct to conclude that Israel does not yet have a role to play in God's revelation on the actual historical plane? Since Israel is a divinely appointed channel of the revelation of God to the nations, is it enough to say that it has fulfilled that role toward the nations in bringing the gospel of Christ contained in the Scriptures? Perhaps more basically we must ask whether God might still intend to reveal himself to the nations through clear historical actions other than a climactic judgment that brings history to a close.

We would concur with those who view God's action with historical Israel as inherent in his revelatory activity to the world. Jocz states:

Jewish history is the visible, empirical act of revelation. It demonstrates to all who want to see that the God of Israel is not a philosophical concept, but the living God. He cannot be imprisoned in a book, no matter how sacred, and relegated to the past. He is still the enactor of history; he is still a Presence in human affairs and still acts against and on behalf of his people.²⁰

A significant aspect of the revelatory nature of Israel's history is seen in its being the object lesson of God's dealing with all of mankind. It would seem reasonable in the light of the prophetic Scriptures that we have noted concerning God's revelation of himself to the nations through the judgment and restoration of Israel to believe that he has not completed that revelation through the realities of history and that he yet intends to display his redemptive power overtly in the restoration of his people as a people.

Further significance for Israel's revelatory mission to the nations might be noted in her Biblical mission as a model of community or societal salvation. Buber speaks of "the true communal living to which Israel was summoned by the Covenant with God." He goes on to relate this purpose to others:

The prophets call upon a people which represents the *first real attempt at 'community'* to enter world history as a prototype of that attempt. Israel's function is to encourage the nations to change their inner structure and their relations to one another.²¹

¹⁹Boettner, "Postmillennial."

²⁰J. Jocz, *A Theology of Election* (New York: Macmillan, 1958) 3; cf. Journet, "Mysterious" 39, 42.

²¹Buber, *Israel* 170.

It may be justifiably argued that this Jewish view does not do justice to the prophetic teaching on spiritual redemption, especially the ramifications of the predicted new covenant. But it may also be asked whether the so-called spiritual prophecies for Israel exhaust the prophetic message for Israel's future. In Rowley's understanding they do not. Although he sees Israel as failing and therefore replaced by the Church, he nevertheless interprets the OT prophets as calling the nation to an obedience of God that would reveal itself in the totality of life. If the nation responded, Rowley says, the prophets believe that

the life of Israel would be incomparably glorious and happy; the hand of God would protect her from all her foes and peace and prosperity would be her portion; and other nations be so moved by the sight of her happiness that they would come to her to learn its secret and would find it in her religion.²²

Such a coming to Israel to learn the ways of God is the teaching of several prophetic passages (cf. Isa 2:2-4; 51:4). Since these passages teach that the nations will learn the Word of God and his paths by coming to Zion, it would appear impossible to place the fulfillment of the prophecy in the eternal state when all people know God. The question therefore remains as to whether they can be said to be fulfilled through the Church, and that question finally relates to the meaning of the ways of God. Do they actually mean a community or society in which his ways prevail and in which the very laws are expressions of his righteousness and justice, or are they limited to the more individual expression of spiritual and ethical righteousness in the Church? It must be remembered that in the Church age we yet deal with the two realms of Caesar and Christ. And while we seek righteousness in the public sphere, Scripture gives no indication that Christ assumes the realm of Caesar until he returns to destroy the antichrist.

If therefore the meaning of the ways of God includes the totality of human life, it becomes obvious that only in a nation and an age when these two realms are unified can the ways of the Lord become a reality and thus be learned by all nations. This brings us to our final issue relating to the question of Israel's future, and that is the understanding of the nature of God's salvation.

II. ISRAEL'S ROLE IN THE COMPLETION OF SALVATION

It is well known that one of the chief stumbling blocks for the Jews toward the recognition of Jesus as the Messiah lies in the problem of the unfulfilled promises of the OT. They are concerned not only with those that relate specifically to the nation of Israel but also with those that promise salvation for the world. In their understanding of the prophetic Scriptures, when the Messiah came he would redeem Israel, restoring them as a nation, and through them bring the blessings of divine salvation to all nations. They obviously see that the promises with regard to their people are not fulfilled, but they also point to those concerning the salvation of all nations as not yet realized. Martin Buber graphically makes this point using his own people as the example when he says, "Standing bound and shackled in the pillory of mankind, we demon-

²²Rowley, *Missionary* 29.

strate with the bloody body of our people the unredeemedness of the world."²³

The Christian cannot accept this total negative understanding with respect to the fulfillment of the promises. Jesus has come as the Christ in fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures. This is the consistent apostolic witness. But some Christian interpreters are also willing to acknowledge that while some of the OT prophecies are fulfilled in Christ, there remain many that are yet unfulfilled. With specific reference to Israel LaSor says:

There are countless prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Israel and the land of promise which have not been fulfilled in the Christian church, and, in my opinion, can never be fulfilled in the church. They can be fulfilled only in Israel.²⁴

The Church has frequently seen herself as the "new Israel" fulfilling Israel's promises through the realization of the new covenant. But the question must be asked as to whether we have experienced the full reality of this covenant and its implication for salvation as prophesied for Israel. Pointing to the fact that the covenant had implications for society, the Roman Catholic writer Rosemary Ruether argues for the lack of fulfillment. According to her the new covenant was "the messianic destiny of the covenant with Israel . . . which overcomes the ambiguities of historical existence and human self-alienation." While perhaps exaggerating the lack of fulfillment, she goes on to say:

Must we not say today that this messianic covenant lies as much ahead of the historical reality of Christianity as it does that of Judaism? Before God, must we not see the Christians as being in the same historical position as the Jews? . . . Christians are not yet encamping in the Promised Land. . . . The Christian, as much as the Jew, is still on the way through the desert between the Exodus and the Promised Land.²⁵

Parkes, pointing specifically at the concept of OT salvation as involving even the political structures of nations, argues that every time the Church makes a distinction between "secular" and "religious" she repudiates her intention of fulfilling the OT.²⁶

We are well aware of the interpretation that sees the fulfillment of the societal aspects of salvation as reserved for the new earth and eternal state. This view, however, has two serious problems that can be mentioned only briefly. First, it does not provide room for the OT prophecies that speak of a particular people (whether Israel or the Church) as being God's agents in bringing this societal salvation to the other peoples. Surely in the eternal state there will be no more mediation of salvation on the part of some people to others. Under this view, therefore, the salvation that is mediated through a special people must be only the present individual spiritual salvation that is experi-

²³M. Buber, *Ereignisse und Begegnungen* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1920) 20; cited in Eckardt, *Elder* 106; cf. E. B. Borowitz, "The Dialectic of Jewish Particularity," *JES* 8 (Summer 1971) 567.

²⁴LaSor, *Israel* 81.

²⁵R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury, 1979) 253.

²⁶J. Parkes, *The Foundations of Judaism and Christianity* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1960) 325-326.

enced in the Church and not the complete salvation of society's structures. Second, a societal salvation in the eternal state would no longer be part of the Messiah's peculiar work of mediating God's kingdom to the world. The apostle Paul teaches that Christ gives up the kingdom to the Father at the inception of the eternal age (1 Cor 15:24-28). Christ's subjection of the hostile powers yet at work in society's structures would then be fulfilled in their destruction but not in a positive restoration of these structures in salvation.

The question then remains: What is the full nature of the messianic salvation that Christ is to bring to man? Borowitz argues that the real problem of man is "the problem of his collectivities."²⁷ It is the problem of true communal living among the peoples of the world that is not yet solved. Exactly at this point is where many see a place for the nation of Israel in the plan of God—namely, to be a model of such a society, which serves as a center from which the characteristics of such a society radiate out to transform all peoples. Expressing the Jewish understanding of Israel's role, Borowitz explains: "Israel is brought into history to show that the might of man unified can be subjected to and perfected through the divine sovereignty." Explaining more specifically he says:

Judaism called men to subject their particularities to the covenanting King so as to make their group the sort through which universalism can become real in history. Nationhood subordinated to messianism, collectivities faithful to God, real lambs lying down with real lions. That remains the continuing vision of Jewish particularity.²⁸

Again without accepting the totality of the perspective of Judaism, is it not conceivable that the messianic salvation that God has designed for man in this history does include the total structures of his society as well as the spiritual structures of the Church?

That God's salvation for mankind includes a worldwide society in which justice and righteousness prevail and the nations walk in the paths of God is clear from Scripture. That Israel was to be a channel in the service of God in some way to bring this to the nations is also clear. Whether this Israel refers to the nation or the Church remains in dispute. But given the nature of this salvation, we would suggest that this mediatorial role is best understood as fulfilled through a real nation, the restored Israel of God. We would concur with the reasoning of Buber when he says that

only an entire nation, which comprehends peoples of all kinds, can demonstrate a life of unity and peace, of righteousness and justice to the human race, as a sort of example in beginning. A true humanity, that is, a nation composed of many nations, can only commence with a certain definite and true nation. Only the fulfillment of this truth in the relations between the various sections of this people, between its sects and classes, is capable of serving as a commencement of an international fulfillment of the truth and of the development of a true fellowship of nations, a nation consisting of nations. Only nations each of which is a true nation living in the light of righteousness and justice are capable of

²⁷Borowitz, "Dialectic" 568.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 568, 574.

entering into upright relations with one another. The people of Israel were charged to lead the way toward this realization.²⁹

III. CONCLUSION

The question of the future of Israel is complex. Because it relates to one's understanding of the vast scope of God's salvation history, it impacts almost every area of theology. It is therefore not surprising that some difference of interpretation would be found among students of Scripture. The presence of Israel today as a nation and its continual significance in contemporary world affairs, we believe, call for increasing theological consideration. That God has been providentially involved in the historically unique preservation of the people of Israel up to this point is difficult to deny. That he has done so because Israel yet has a role to play in his plan for the world seems most reasonable in the light of the prophetic Scriptures.

²⁹Buber, *Israel* 186-187.