

## A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ISRAEL/PALESTINE

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### **Introduction**

#### **The significance and seriousness of this question**

I hope I hardly need to point out that we are dealing here with one of the most complex, bitter and long-standing conflicts in the world in the last 100 years, and that this conflict has far-reaching implications for the peace of the world. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Six Day War in 1967 and Israel's continuing occupation of the West Bank have profoundly affected the lives of every single person in this region for the last sixty years. These are the huge stones that have been thrown into the pool – and the ripples go on affecting us all day after day.

Western support for the state of Israel has often been unquestioning; and Christians (especially evangelical Christians, and especially in the USA) have played a highly significant role in strengthening this instinctive sympathy for Israel.

This support for Israel, however, combined with all the different policies of western powers linked with it in recent years (including the war in Iraq) is probably at the top of the list of grievances that have fuelled the anger of Arabs and Muslims in recent years. I might even go as far as to suggest that if the West after 1967 had dealt with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a more even-handed way and pressed both sides hard and consistently towards a peaceful resolution on the basis of international law, 9/11 might never have happened.

#### **My personal pilgrimage**

My first introduction to the Middle East was in 1968 when I went to work in Egypt, which was still recovering from the disaster of 1967. I first began to understand what the Palestinian problem was all about through my wife, Anne, who before our marriage here in Jordan, had been working as a nurse among Palestinian refugees in Zerqa and had been caught up in the civil war in September 1970 ('Black September').

In 1977 I wrote an article about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for a popular

Christian monthly magazine in the UK because I couldn't reconcile the attitudes of many Christians in the West to the conflict with what I could see was happening on the ground in the Middle East. It was the angry letters in subsequent months which forced me to do further research – both into the history of the conflict and into biblical interpretation and eschatology, and led me to write the book *Whose Promised Land?* It was written in Beirut in the early 1980s during the difficult days of the Lebanese civil war when there was often the sound of gunfire in the streets, and it was first published in 1983.

I've spent 17 years working in different places in the Middle East in three separate spells (the latest until 2003), and have therefore tried to keep in touch with how Christians in the West perceive the conflict and how it has been working out on the ground. I quickly realised that the conflict has enormous implications in many different areas, because it touches on biblical interpretation, theology, contemporary international politics, inter-faith relations and the proclamation of the gospel. And I have come to believe what is at stake over this issue is nothing less than our understanding of God, our witness to the gospel and the credibility of the Christian church - especially in the Middle East - in relation to the Jewish people and the House of Islam throughout the world. The stakes are very high!

### **Relating the Bible and theology to history and politics**

When I wrote *Whose Promised Land?* I was aware that most western Christians knew very little about the history of the land since biblical times. The first third of the book was therefore simply trying to tell the story of what has happened in the land since biblical times, explaining in particular the origins of the conflict since the rise of the Zionist movement and the return of Jews to the land after 1880. The second part traced the theme of the land from Genesis to Revelation; and the last part explored other ways of using the Bible in relation to the conflict over the land.

Unfortunately there isn't time to go into the history and the politics in this presentation. But I simply want to emphasise the point that what we understand *from scripture* is likely to affect very profoundly the way we think about the conflict which is being played out before our eyes at the present time. We cannot keep our interpretation of the Bible and our theology in one compartment and our understanding of the conflict in another. We desperately need to be able to bring the two together so that we can live with the practical implications and the outworking of our biblical interpretation.

## Two radically different biblical and theological starting points

We need to recognise that there are at least two radically different approaches among evangelical Christians:

**1. Restorationism and Dispensationalism.** These are not the same; but I suggest that they have the same starting point. I'm using Restorationism to describe the belief of many of the Puritans and many evangelicals from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present day that God would one day *restore* the Jewish people to the land. In the American context these ideas were generally summed up under the term 'Premillennialism'. Dispensationalism, which was first developed by John Nelson Darby in the 1840s and popularised in the US by people like William Blackstone and D.L. Moody, takes Restorationism as its starting point and builds a complete eschatological system on this foundation. So while Restorationism and Dispensationalism are not the same, they do seem to start from the same assumptions, which I would summarise as follows:

Although Jesus as the Messiah is the fulfilment of all the promises and prophecies of the OT, the *promises and prophecies about the land and about biblical Israel remain the same* even after his coming, and *need to be interpreted literally*. Because of the promise to Abraham, therefore, the *Jewish people have a special, divine right to the land for all times*. And even if the prophecies about a return to the land were fulfilled in a limited way in the return from the Exile in Babylon in 539 BC, they have been *fulfilled once again in recent history* in the return of Jews to the land since the 1880s, the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the capture of East Jerusalem in 1967. These events are signs pointing to the Second Coming.

### Evaluation of this approach

I recognise that many of you are probably starting from this kind of position. And even if you don't share these views yourself, I think you would agree that this is the starting point of many of the churches from which you come and the majority of evangelical Christians not only in the US but throughout the world.

I have to say, however, that this is not my starting point. But instead of challenging this approach point by point, what I want to do at this stage is simply to indicate very briefly what I see as its most significant weaknesses. I want to spend most of my time putting forward a positive, coherent and convincing alternative.

## **1. The insistence on literal interpretation**

The famous Schofield of the *Schofield Reference Bible* wrote: ‘Not one instance exists of a “spiritual” or figurative fulfilment of prophecy ... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion.’ And Hal Lindsay wrote: ‘If you take the Bible literally, then you will come up with the premillennial point of view ... I *hate* those who read their ideas into scripture by using allegory.’

This insistence on literal interpretation is seen most clearly in the assumption that the thousand years described in Revelation 20 must be understood as a literal period of 1,000 years when Christ will rule the earth.

## **2. The distinction between biblical Israel and the Church**

John Hagee writes: ‘Scripture plainly indicates that the church and national Israel exist side by side and that neither replaces the other – not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow ... Scripture describes and defines two Israels: one is a physical Israel, with an indigenous people, a capital city called Jerusalem and geographic borders plainly defined in scripture. Yet there is also a spiritual Israel, with a spiritual people and a spiritual New Jerusalem. Spiritual Israel, the church, may enjoy the blessings of physical Israel, but it does not replace physical Israel in God’s plan for the ages.’

## **3. Sympathy for one side in the conflict.**

For the last 100 years this starting point has inevitably led many Christians to have an instinctive sympathy for the Jewish people and for the whole Zionist project. ‘If what we have been witnessing is the fulfilment of biblical promises and prophecies,’ they say, ‘then surely we must see the hand of God in the establishment of the state of Israel and therefore be critical of the Arabs who seem to be trying to thwart or even destroy the Jewish state.’ Much, if not most, of what evangelical Christians know about the conflict comes from Christian sources (like *Late Great Planet Earth* a few decades ago or more recently *The Left Behind* series, the televangelists and Christian radio networks), and there seems no need to study the history of the conflict in any objective way. Questions of justice, human rights and international law become totally irrelevant.

Let me go on now to attempt to summarize an evangelical approach that is an alternative to Restorationism and Dispensationalism, which I am calling ‘Covenant Theology’:

**2. Covenant Theology:** The promises given to Abraham and all the prophecies in the OT have to be interpreted *in the light of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus*. The OT must therefore be read through the spectacles, the glasses, of the NT. Because OT promises and prophecies (*including those about the land and about biblical Israel*) have been fulfilled in the coming of the kingdom in Jesus, the return of Jews to the land and the establishment of the state of Israel have taken place under the sovereignty of God, but have *no special theological significance*. They are not to be seen as signs pointing forward to the Second Coming. *All believers in Jesus inherit all the promises made the Abraham*. They are ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9; Gal 3:26-29) and enjoy their spiritual inheritance which is ‘kept in heaven’ (1 Peter 1:4; Heb 4; 12:18-24).

If this is the starting point, let me try to elaborate this approach in the following ten stages:

1. *The covenant promise to Abraham about the land (in Gen 12,15 and 17) is unconditional. But the promise about the land needs to be seen as one strand of the covenant and interpreted alongside the promises about the nation, the covenant relationship and blessing for all peoples of the world. A Christian interpretation of the land promise must therefore be closely related to the interpretation of the other three promises.*

In the book of Genesis the covenant with Abraham has four strands: (1) the nation, (2) the land; (3) the covenant relationship, and (4) blessing for all peoples of the world. These four strands need to taken together as a kind of ‘package deal’ in which all of the strands are bound together and are inter-dependent. Our interpretation of each one is therefore tied up with our interpretation of the other three. As Christians we have no difficulty in seeing the promises about the nation, the covenant relationship and blessing for all peoples of the world as fulfilled in Christ. And I suggest that we have no reason to put the promise *about the land* in a special category, insisting that it must be fulfilled literally and that it cannot be related in any way to Christ.

So, for example, when Peter is writing to Jewish and Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, he uses titles which had earlier been reserved exclusively for the Jewish people: ‘You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation’ (1 Peter 2:9). And writing to the Galatians, Paul says to Jewish and Gentile Christians: ‘If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise’ (Gal 3:29). It is inconceivable to me that Paul would have thought that these Gentile Christians inherit *all* the covenant promises made to Abraham *except those about the land*.

2. *In the OT continued possession of the land is conditional. Disobedience to the law of the covenant means that the people forfeit the right to live in the land and will be expelled from the land (Deut 4:25-27; Lev 18:24-28). The promise of restoration to the land is also conditional on repentance (Deut 30:1-5). Because there is some kind of repentance during the Exile (e.g. in Daniel and Nehemiah), God brings the people back to the land in faithfulness to his promise to restore them after repentance. If the return of Jews to the land since 1880 is to be seen as a fulfilment of prophecy, how does it fit the terms of Deut 30? After the coming of Christ, repentance would mean recognition of Jesus as Messiah.*

In passages like Deut 4:25-27, God says to the Children of Israel through Moses, 'If you are obedient, you can live in the land. But if you are disobedient, I will throw you out of the land.' Leviticus 18:28 says that the land 'will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations who were before you.' The land doesn't belong to the Children of Israel, but to God: 'the land is mine, and you are but aliens and my tenants' (Lev 25:23). While the land has been given to them as a gift, therefore, they can continue to live in the land *only* if they are faithful to the covenant.

When God brings the people back to the land after the Babylonian Exile, he does so in accordance with the terms of Deuteronomy 30: 'If you return to the Lord your God ... even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back ...' (30:2-3). But how can we say that the same pattern has been repeated in the Zionist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? Restorationists and Dispensationalists say that God has brought the Jews back to the land 'in unbelief', and point out that many who have returned to the land in recent years have come to believe in Jesus as Messiah. We must of course rejoice that this has been happening. But the fact that the condition of repentance that is taught in Deuteronomy 30 has not been fulfilled in this recent return makes it difficult to assert with confidence that the events of the last 120 years must be seen as a further fulfilment of OT prophecies about a return to the land.

3. *The Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem are signs of God living among his people (Ex 25:8; 1 Chron 23:25), and point forward to the incarnation. Christians have no difficulty in seeing everything associated with the Tabernacle and the Temple as being fulfilled in Christ (e.g. John 1:4; 2:18-22; Hebrews 4 - 10). It is therefore unthinkable that the rebuilding of the Temple should be seen as a significant event in God's plan of salvation for the world.*

When John says 'The Word was made flesh and lived (*eskenosen*, literally 'tabernacled') among us; and we beheld his glory' (1:14), he is saying in effect,

‘We have seen the glory of God not on the tabernacle in the wilderness nor on Solomon’s temple, but on the person of Jesus.’ For John, therefore, Jesus is the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s vision of the glory of God returning to a restored temple in Jerusalem. In John 2:18-22 Jesus speaks of himself as the fulfilment of everything that the temple had stood for: ‘destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’ John comments: ‘the temple he had spoken of was his body.’

*4. Prophecies of a return to the land are linked with spiritual renewal of the nation and God’s plans for the nations (e.g. Ezek 36-37). Since these prophetic dreams were fulfilled in a very limited way after the return from Exile, the people continued to look forward to a future national and spiritual restoration (Hos 6:1-3; Zech 14:9).*

In Ezekiel 36 – 37 many different themes and images like these are woven together to depict the glorious future that God has in store for his people when they are restored to the land:

- ‘Like dry bones coming to life, I will bring you back to the land ...’
- ‘I will sprinkle clean water on you, and ... I will cleanse you from all your impurities.’
- ‘I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you ...’
- ‘I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.’
- ‘You will live in the land I gave to your forefathers.’
- ‘I will call for the grain and make it plentiful ... the desolate land will be cultivated.’
- ‘Then the nations ... will know that I the Lord have rebuilt what was destroyed.’
- ‘I will make their people as numerous as sheep.’
- ‘I will make them one nation in the land ... Judah and Israel will be reunited.’
- ‘There will be one king over all of them ... my servant David will be king over them ... for ever.’
- ‘They will all have one shepherd.’
- ‘I will make a covenant of peace with them ... an everlasting covenant.’
- ‘I will put my sanctuary among them for ever ... my dwelling-place will be with them.’

Like Ezekiel, all the other prophets are looking forward to the time when God will establish his sovereignty over the whole world, when in the words of Zechariah, ‘The Lord (Yahweh) will be king over the whole earth’ (Zech 14:9). And Hosea, in some important words to which we shall return later, expresses the hope that God will one day revive and restore the whole nation of Israel: ‘After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we

may live in his presence' (Hos 6:1-3).

These, then, were the hopes and expectations of the Jewish people which built up over the centuries before the coming of Christ, and they included both national and spiritual restoration and renewal.

*5. The torah, the land and the Temple were fundamental themes in Judaism at the time of Christ. Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who would enable the Jews to drive out the Romans and establish an independent Jewish state in the land, so that the Jews could obey the torah in the land (e.g. Luke 2:25, 38; 24:21).*

Luke tells us, for example, that Simeon was looking forward to 'the consolation of Israel' (Luke 2:25), and Anna spoke about Jesus to all who were looking forward to 'the redemption of Jerusalem' (Luke 2:38). These expressions sum up the hopes of the Jewish people as they had developed since the time of the prophets, and Simeon and Anna believed that they were going to be fulfilled in Jesus. This was the worldview of the disciples of Jesus, and their expectations therefore included all these dreams and centred round the establishment of a sovereign, independent Jewish state in the land in which the people of Israel would live in obedience to the *torah*.

*6. Jesus had little or nothing to say about the land; the only clear reference is Matt 5:5 (cf Psalm 37:11). The reason for this silence is not that Jesus took traditional Jewish hopes for granted and affirmed them, but that the fulfilment of all these hopes is now to be understood in the context of the coming of the kingdom of God in and through Jesus (Mark 1:15). Jesus predicted the destruction of the Temple; but instead of speaking about its restoration, spoke about the coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13; Matt 24; Luke 21:5-36).*

Restorationists and Dispensationalists argue that if Jesus said little about the land, it's because he didn't need to say anything about it and could take traditional Jewish teaching for granted. The other possible explanation, which I find much more convincing, is that Jesus could not affirm all the nationalistic expectations of the Jewish people. In his teaching about the kingdom of God there was no place for traditional Jewish ideas that the kingly rule of God revolved around the Jewish people and the Promised Land. In Mark's summary of the message of Jesus (Mark 1:15), he says in effect, 'The time that the prophets looked forward to - when they said "In that day ..." - has at last come! The kingly rule of God is just about to come and God is about to establish his kingly rule on the earth.'

Here I would strongly commend W.D. Davies' magisterial study *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine*, which



attempts to demonstrate how the teaching of Jesus challenged and changed the expectations of the Jewish disciples about the kingdom of God as they related to the land. This is how Davies summarises the way Jesus transformed traditional Jewish ideas about the land:

‘In the last resort this study drives us to one point: the person of a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord only to die accursed on a cross and so pollute the land, and by that act and its consequences to shatter the geographic dimension of the religion of his fathers. Like everything else, the land also in the New Testament drives us to ponder the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, who by his cross and resurrection broke not only the bonds of death for early Christians but also the bonds of the land.’

Recent studies of the eschatological discourses suggest that the main thrust in what Jesus says in these passages concerns the immediate future and the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and that it is only in the last section of the discourses, when he speaks about ‘that day’, that he is speaking about the end of the world. This interpretation helps to resolve a major difficulty in the traditional interpretations which has frequently been recognised, namely that Jesus seems to be jumping from the immediate future to the end of the world and then back again to the immediate context. In Daniel’s vision the coming of the Son of Man is not a coming *to earth* but a coming *into the presence of God* to receive kingship and kingly authority. In this interpretation, therefore, the whole sequence of events including the death and resurrection of the Jesus, the ascension, the giving of the Spirit and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD are to be taken together as a series of events in which Jesus is seen to be entering into his kingly rule. Sayings about the coming of the Son of Man can still be related to the Second Coming; but their primary reference in the context of these discourses is to the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. This interpretation then helps us to make sense of Jesus’ saying that ‘there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power’ (Mark 9:1).

*7. The disciples began with typical Jewish ideas about the land and the kingdom of God; but the teaching of Jesus in the period between the resurrection and the ascension gave them a new understanding of the kingdom. The meetings with the risen Jesus recorded in Luke 24:13-27 and Acts 1:1-8 marked a turning-point in the thinking of the disciples. There is nothing in the NT to suggest that they continued to look forward to restoration to the land or the establishment of a Jewish state as part of God plan for the Jews or for the world.*

When the two disciples on the road to Emmaus say, ‘We had hoped that he (Jesus) was the one who was going to *redeem Israel...*’, they are expressing the

hopes of all 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews. But in his response, Jesus in effect says, ‘Don’t you realise that *Jesus has redeemed Israel – but not in the way that you expected*’ (Luke 24:13-27).

Similarly when in Acts 1:1-8 the risen Jesus is speaking to the disciples about ‘the kingdom of God’ and the disciples ask him ‘Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’, they are again expressing the same hopes of a restored Jewish state in the land. There are two significantly different interpretations of Jesus’ reply to the disciples’ question (1:7-8). According to the first interpretation, given by Restorationists and Dispensationalists, Jesus accepts the *idea* that this will one day happen, but simply tries to correct their understanding about the *timing* of when it will take place: ‘It is not for you to know ...’ According to the second, which I would follow, Jesus is not only correcting their understanding about the *timing* of it all, but trying to correct *the idea itself*. He is trying to show them that the kingdom of God isn’t something literal and physical, that it isn’t related only to the Jews, and that it is not tied to the land. He then goes on to speak about his disciples taking the gospel to the ends of the earth, helping them to see that this is what the coming of the kingdom of God is about. I believe that at this point, the penny finally drops, the lights finally go on in their minds, so that the disciples at last begin to understand the nature of the kingdom of God. I cannot find a single verse in the NT which suggests that the disciples continued to hold on to traditional Jewish expectations about an independent Jewish state in the land.

8. *NT writers continued to use OT terminology about the land and the Temple, but re-interpreted them in different ways in the light of the incarnation (e.g. 1 Pet 1:3-5; Acts 20:32; Eph 1:14; John 1:14; 1 Cor 6:19). Their interpretation of the OT is not always literal (e.g. Luke 1:29-33; 22:28-30; 1 Cor 15:3-4).*

The word ‘inheritance’ (*kleronomia*), for example, is often associated with the land. Here are three examples of this land terminology being given a new interpretation in the NT:

- Peter says that all believers are given new birth into a living hope, and into ‘*an inheritance ...*’ There is a clear reference here to the land, since Peter describes our inheritance as one which (unlike the literal, physical land) ‘can never perish, spoil or fade’ (1 Peter 1:2-5).
- Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders contains clear echoes of Joshua’s farewell address. Thus, whereas Joshua was enabling the people to enter the inheritance of the land, Paul says: ‘I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you *your inheritance* among all who are sanctified’ (Acts 20:32).
- In Ephesians Paul writes of the Holy Spirit as the one ‘who is a deposit guaranteeing *our inheritance ...*’ (Eph 1:14).

I am often told that my argument is based on silence - on the fact that the NT

has so little to say about the land. My answer is that the argument is *not* based on silence, since NT writers *do* use land terminology. They use words like ‘inheritance’, which are associated with the land (e.g. 1 Peter 1:3-5), but they always interpret the theme of the land in spiritual ways (e.g. Hebrews 4).

We have already seen how John speaks of Jesus describing himself as the one who fulfils everything that the Temple had meant (John 1:14). And Paul is extremely bold when he compares individual believers with the Temple in which God lives: ‘Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?’ (1 Cor 6:19).

If we ask how NT writers interpret the OT, we can hardly say that their interpretation is always literal. Luke, for example, in his account of the annunciation to Mary in 1:29-33 sees no problem in seeing Jesus as the fulfilment of all the promises made to David in 2 Samuel 7:11-16. Of course Luke knows that Jesus never sat on David’s throne in Jerusalem and ruled over his people in the way that David had done. But he has no difficulty in claiming that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the fulfilment of OT promises and prophecies. This is not simply a ‘spiritualising’ of the OT. In Luke’s mind the kingly rule into which Jesus has entered through his incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension *is the real and substantive fulfilment* of what God had promised in the OT about the kingly rule of the Messiah.

Paul’s reference to the resurrection of Jesus ‘on the third day according to the scriptures’ in 1 Cor 15:3-4 is another example of how OT expressions and ideas are interpreted in the NT. In speaking about Jesus being raised ‘on the third day according to the scriptures’ there must be a clear echo of Hos 6:1-3 which, as we have already seen, expresses the hope of the revival and restoration of the nation of Israel. In this way the resurrection of Jesus is seen as the beginning of the revival and restoration *of the nation of Israel*. These, therefore, are examples of how NT writers understand and interpret the OT; and it’s hard to see how we can possibly insist that their interpretation is always literal.

9. *The church is not ‘the new Israel’; it does not replace Israel (Replacement Theology or Supersessionism). The church is Israel renewed and restored (1 Pet 2:9-10; 2:9ff; John 15:1-4 [cf Ps 80:8-18]). Gentile believers are grafted into Israel (Rom 9-11) and inherit all the promises made to Abraham. In these chapters Paul looks forward to a brighter future for the Jewish people, but this is related to the Messiah, not to restoration to the land.*

I and many others are often accused to teaching ‘Replacement Theology’ or ‘Supersessionism’, the idea that the church has ‘taken the place’ of, or ‘superseded’, Israel. But this is not my understanding. The NT never speaks of

the church as ‘the new Israel’, and it was therefore most unfortunate that theologians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century started using this expression to speak about the church, implying that God had finished with ‘the old Israel’, the Jewish people. Paul clearly says in Romans 9 – 11 that ‘God has not rejected his people’ (11:1), and that ‘they are loved on account of their forefathers’ (11:28). But he also says that when they fail to believe in Jesus as Messiah, they are ‘broken off because of unbelief’ (11:20), and therefore fail to benefit from the covenant promises. In Paul’s terminology, therefore, every Gentile believer is grafted into Israel, and *the church is Israel – but Israel renewed and restored in Jesus the Messiah*.

These ideas are also clearly implied in John 15 when Jesus claims to be ‘the true vine’ (John 15:1-11). In Psalm 80:8-18 the vine is a symbol of Israel: ‘You brought a vine out of Egypt ... and planted it and it took root and filled the land’ (vv 8-9). So when Jesus says, ‘I am the vine ... I am the true vine ...’, he is identifying himself with Israel, saying in effect ‘I am Israel; I am the true Israel ... and all who believe in me are the branches of the true vine, the true Israel.’ So John 15 can be the basis for a challenging devotional message about ‘abiding in Christ’. But it has deeper levels of meaning and application than this!

In this context let me add that Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37) can be seen as looking forward to the resurrection of Jesus. Ezekiel is told, ‘These bones are the whole house of Israel.’ And if Jesus *is* Israel, if he *sums up* Israel, it is the resurrection of Jesus and not the return of Jews to the land since 1880 that is the fulfilment of Ezekiel’s prophecy which goes beyond the immediate context of the prophet himself.

10. *The reign of Christ in Rev 20:1-7 has to be interpreted in the context of the whole book of Revelation, and hardly provides an adequate basis for all the ideas associated with ‘the Millennium’, a literal reign of Jerusalem for 1,000 years.*

I realise that we are embarking here on one of the most sensitive, controversial and divisive issues of all, and in many ways I would have preferred to saying nothing about the subject. But I know from previous experience that if I don’t say anything, the very first question afterwards will be, ‘What about the Millennium?’ So let me summarise very briefly five reasons for challenging views about the Millennium which are so widely accepted among evangelical Christians:

1. Rev 20:1-5 is the *only* passage in scripture which speaks about ‘the Millennium’.
2. This passage must be interpreted in the context of the book which is full

of symbols which need to be interpreted. It's not meant to be seen as 'a video of future history'.

3. There is nothing in the passage which relates 'the Millennium' to the Second Coming of Jesus.
4. There is nothing in the passage that suggests that 'the Millennium' is on earth.
5. The main focus in this passage is on the martyrs, not on the whole church.

I suggest that for these reasons (and no doubt many others) the idea of a literal Millennium, a literal reign of Jesus on earth, based on this one passage cannot be used as the main hermeneutical key for constructing our eschatology.

### **Evaluation of this approach**

In evaluating this approach, I hope that some of you in a few minutes will tell me what mistakes, weakness and limitations you see in this approach. But let me end by pointing out briefly what I see as the *strengths* of this approach in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

1. It is based on a *thoroughly evangelical view of the authority and inspiration of scripture*. It cannot be rejected out of hand on the grounds that it is 'liberal'.
2. It is *thoroughly Christ-centre* because of its emphasis on how much of the promises and prophecies in scripture have already been fulfilled in Jesus. My personal testimony would be that study in these areas has enriched and deepened my understanding of the incarnation and the finished work of Christ.
3. Instead of giving us neat, tidy answers on a plate, it *gives us the responsibility of interpreting and understanding recent history*. It enables us to recognise that while there is much in biblical prophecy which is still to be fulfilled, the Bible may not be able to help us to understand the complexities of this particular conflict. We will need to study history and international relations if we want to understand the roots of the conflict and its development over so many years.
4. It enables us to see *how to address the political and justice issues in practical ways*. There is no suggestion that we can find a simple formula from the prophetic writings that will enable us to understand and resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. It therefore encourages

us - dare I say? – to put our theology on one side and to attempt to understand the conflict in its own terms - as a clash of nationalisms, with two peoples claiming the same piece of land for different reasons. Political problems require political solutions, and the conflict over the West Bank and East Jerusalem, for example, cannot be resolved by pointing to biblical proof texts, but only through face to face negotiation on the basis of international law and with the encouragement and help of the watching world.

5. It enables us to *proclaim the gospel clearly to Jews and Muslims*. Many Jews will no doubt be disappointed when Christians do not support their claims to hold onto the West Bank and when Christians even want to ask awkward questions about the very concept of ‘a Jewish state’. But instead of encouraging Jews to see the state of Israel as *a* fulfilment or *the* fulfilment of Jewish hopes, our message to the Jewish people should be that it is in the person of Jesus the Messiah that the hopes of their nation have been fulfilled – not in their return to the land and the creation of the state of Israel. Similarly, in speaking with Muslims I find myself constantly needing to distance myself from Christian Zionism which has become an enormous stumbling block for the gospel in the minds of Muslims.

In short, this way of interpreting scripture enables us to read the OT through the eyes of Jesus, to read the OT through the spectacle, the glasses, of the NT writers. When we see how Jesus *has already fulfilled* so many of the hopes and dreams of Israel in the OT, we can see how, in addressing this particular conflict at this particular time in history, the followers of Jesus today can, in the spirit of the Beatitudes, *both* hunger and thirst after righteousness/justice *and* be genuine peacemakers.

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