

All Nations

In his final words, Jesus instructed that all nations were to become his disciples (Matt 28:19). This was a change of strategy. Until then, God's plan had been for the Jews alone, who for generations had been God's chosen people (Deut 7:7-8). In this chapter we will discuss the relationship between the Jews and the rest of the world as it affects Christians today.

Earlier, Jesus himself had firmly said that his mission was to Israel only. On one occasion, he withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon; he did not want anyone to know he was there (Matt 15:21, Mark 7:24). Maybe we should soften our remarks about churches going on retreat in an earlier chapter. Despite his efforts, a Canaanite woman came to him for help. She would have been descended from the original inhabitants of the land, and was not a Jew (Gen 12:6). Jesus tried to get rid of her, saying "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." When she persisted, he told her that the children's bread was not to be thrown to the dogs (Matt 15:26). This was insulting; at that time, dogs were not the well-tamed friendly companions to man that we are used to. However, she wouldn't give up, replying "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table (v27)." Her persistence overcame all, and her request was granted (v28. See Luke 18:1-8).

As it stands in Matthew, this story does not appear to give much hope for the Gentiles receiving anything from Jesus. However, Mark's account gives a slightly different slant. There, Jesus is reported as saying "First let the children eat all they want (Mark 7:27)." This suggests that Israel was to have priority in receiving the benefits of the gospel, but then the Gentiles would have their chance as well (see also Mark 11:17).

Some people understand the situation this way. Israel, the chosen nation, was disobedient from day one. They grumbled and complained in the desert after being rescued from bondage in Egypt, 'played the harlot' by going after other gods when installed in Canaan, and were finally sent into exile for their sins against God. However, a remnant returned, and the nation began to take root and grow again in Israel.

Despite all their wickedness God did not reject them. Jesus finally came, but his own people did not receive him (John 1:11). Not only did they finally put him on the cross, but they even shouted out, "Let his blood be on us and on our children (Matt 27:25)."

This was the last straw. God took them at their word, and allowed the nation to carry the responsibility for Jesus' death. Israel finally forfeited all the rights due to her under the covenants between her and God through her disobedience (Exod 19:5). She was soon defeated and dispersed once again. The blessing of God now passed to the Gentiles.

This scenario, in which the church has replaced Israel as the focus of God's activity in the world, has been called 'replacement theology'. It was the dominant view in the west for centuries. This is hardly surprising, since until this century, there was no visible Israel on the world stage. Rather than being gathered in one place, like the sand on the seashore (Gen 22:17), the Jews had become like the dust of the earth, blown here and there among all the nations (Gen 13:16).

Over the last hundred years, that situation has changed. The Jews may not be as numerous as they once were, and they may not even be racially pure, but there are now several millions of them in modern Israel, and the number grows by the month. It can now be said that there are in Jerusalem "Jews from every nation under heaven", even if they are not yet God-fearing (Acts 2:5).

Over recent years, the view has arisen that God did not finally desert his people, and that something significant in terms of world history is being played out in our generation, namely Israel being brought back from the dead (Ezek 37:1-14, esp 12-14). We will return to this point shortly.

The question which confronts us regarding Christianity has been well expressed by S. Telchin; "How did something which started out so Jewish wind up so Gentile?" (S. Telchin, *Betrayed*, Marshall Pickering, London, 1991, p77). We can see just how Jewish the new movement was if we observe the attitudes of the first believers. Those who heard Jesus' words had great difficulty in grasping that the Gentiles were now to be included in God's plan. Even after the resurrection, they were expecting God to restore Israel through the coming of Jesus (Acts 1:6). When the church in Jerusalem heard that God was at work in Samaria, they felt they had to send Peter and John to see

what was happening (Acts 8:14). Later on, God had to send Peter visions in a trance before he would even go with Gentiles to visit a God-fearing Roman centurion (Acts 10:9-20 & 11:1-18). Later again, despite having clearly seen God at work among Gentiles, Peter, who by now would associate with Gentile Christians freely, drew back from their company when certain 'Judaizers' turned up from Jerusalem (Gal 2:11-12).

We can sympathise with Peter. Sometimes a truth needs to be repeated to us over and over again, before we finally dare to begin to believe it might be true. God understands that, and is very patient with us. Our problem today is largely the reverse of Peter's. Most readers of this book will have grown up with the idea that Christianity is part of our Western heritage. It requires an effort to remember that the Bible is a Jewish book, written by Jews almost entirely with Jews in mind.

Years ago I came across these lines (Verse and Worse, ed.

A. Silcock, Faber, London, 19582, p256).

How odd of God

To choose the Jews

W.N.EWER

But not so odd,

As those who choose

A Jewish God,

Yet spurn the Jews.

CECIL BROWNE

It may not be very good poetry, but it presents the issue neatly.

The great bulk of the Bible is about geographical Israel. It is striking how much of it centres on Jerusalem. We have grown so used to the idea of Jerusalem now referring to the church that we almost fail to notice this straightforward fact. Influenced by the same ideas that inspired Blake's hymn Jerusalem, we unconsciously expect to see Jerusalem built "in England's green and pleasant land."

However, certain passages in Scripture are addressed to nations apart from Israel, especially in the Prophets. Generally speaking, these were local nations which opposed Israel in one way or another, and received prophetic words of judgment from God (eg Jer chs 46-51). There are just a few passages in the Old Testament which are addressed to "distant coasts and islands". From the Israeli perspective, this might be thought to include Western Europe, the UK, and perhaps also the Americas. Isaiah 49 is one of these. "Listen to me, you islands; hear this you distant nations... (v1)". We can take this as a word specifically addressed to the West, so we will consider it briefly.

The passage is a rare one in the OT, in that it looks ahead to the ingathering of the Gentiles. "The Lord says: 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth (v6).'"

This passage was applied to Jesus by Simeon when Jesus was presented in the temple on his eighth day. He would become "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:32)."

We may notice that there is no hint of any replacement of Israel by the Gentiles here. Rather the idea is that both are to be included in God's plan. Sadly, the church has not behaved as if this was the case. She has even joined in the attacks on Jews which have been a strange feature of world history down the centuries.

Until August 1990, I personally took no interest at all in modern Israel. I thought it was an irrelevance, a modern state that happened to have the same name as biblical Israel, but that was all. But when Iraq invaded Kuwait, our church sensed that this was an important event in world terms, and that we needed to ask God how we should pray about it. So one Sunday our church set aside twenty minutes in which we waited silently on God, and afterwards we shared our impressions.

The first lady to speak was hesitant. She explained that sometimes biblical references came into her mind. She was not sure that they were from God. Anyway, she had found herself thinking of the reference Jeremiah 31:10. We all thumbed it up: "Here the word of the Lord, O nations;

proclaim it in distant coastlands: 'He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.'"

Months later, I realised this was one of the few 'distant coastlands' passages in Scripture, but at the time, all I was aware of was that it did not mention either Iraq or Kuwait, nor any idea of how to pray in the current situation that I could tell. I felt frustrated.

Others shared insights. One person had imagined an anvil. This too meant nothing to me at the time. A year or so later, I found from a concordance, that the only anvil in Scripture comes in Isaiah 54:16-17, where the promise to Jerusalem runs, "No weapon formed against you will prevail". The verse seemed relevant; the failure of the Scud missiles launched against Israel in the subsequent war has been widely recognised.

Another person came up with 'Isaiah 92', but was then disappointed to find that Isaiah had only sixty-six chapters. Then she sensed "try nine : two." This runs: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned."

We noted that the verse before refers repeatedly to Israeli territory - Zebulun, Naphtali, Galilee of the Gentiles and the way of the sea along the Jordan (9:1). But again, there were no references to Iraq or Kuwait.

During the period of quiet, I had imagined a camel's neck, with perhaps a dozen metal loops like curtain rings round it, but with the last one in the shape of a D rather than being round. I shared this. Someone pointed out that our church kneelers are hung on hooks by means of D shaped metal rings; could these strange thoughts of mine be an encouragement to us to pray?

If all this seems strange, then look at the chapter on prophecy in part six at this stage, if you wish. For the present, we discussed the belief that God speaks today in the last chapter. We did not ask how he might speak. My experience is that he does not limit himself to verbal communication alone. I have formed the view that when I ask God to speak, and then ideas come into my mind, I will then be open to the possibility that they might be from God.

This was not always so. When I was due to begin my research into the Book of Judges some years before, I was expecting a grant from a certain body to fund it. One morning, as I came towards the doormat to find the post, a sentence from the Psalms came clearly into my mind:

"I was young and now am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken, nor his children begging their bread (Psalm 37:25)." This seemed most strange. I wondered what could have brought that to mind. On the mat were several letters, one from the grant body. "Oh good", I thought, "a reply". I opened it with my wife, and we were shattered to find that there had been a heavy crop of applicants for funds, and the society were unable to help us.

Clearly, my grasp of the situation had been faulty. Suddenly, we realised, in 6 weeks time, our income would cease. We just managed not to panic, and went to the college principal for advice. With his encouragement, I ended up doing the research after all, and we found support from here and there for two years, and never ran into financial problems.

The point of this story was that in all this, I was unable to believe that the verse from Psalm 37 was a word from God, because I did not expect to hear from God in that way. More than once, it did cross my mind that the verse which had come into my mind was strangely relevant, but I put it down to coincidence and drew no comfort from it.

Eight years later, I think differently. I am now open to the possibility that God will speak at many times and in varied ways today, just as he did in Bible times (Heb 1:1). I would not expect any of these insights to go against Scripture or add to it.

It should be noted that in OT times, God normally chose to communicate through riddles and puzzles, although with Moses he spoke more clearly (Num 12:6-8; for an example, see Jer 1:11-12). Perhaps this is why Jesus chose to speak in parables, and why some of them are so enigmatic (eg. Mark 4:10-12, Luke 16:1-9).

Returning to August 1990, after all the material had been shared, my mind was in confusion. None of the insights that had been shared were apparently about Iraq or Kuwait. And they did seem enigmatic. However, largely because of the geographical references in Isaiah 9, and the kneeler

hooks, I announced that I thought that maybe God wanted us to pray for Israel at this time. I did this with no sense of Israel having any relevance to the situation in Kuwait; it might just as well have been Antarctica or Newfoundland that God wanted us to pray for, it seemed to me. My attitude was that God knows best, and if he wants us to pray for Israel, we had better get on and obey him.

Over the next months we prayed for Israel. As we did so, two things happened. Firstly, I came into contact with the idea that God had by no means finished with Israel, and that once he makes a promise, he does not change his mind (1 Sam 15:29). The Jews, it was said, have not ceased to be God's chosen people. Secondly, it became apparent from the news that Iraq's ultimate aim was to destroy Israel, and that annexing Kuwait was a first step along that path. None of our church knew that in August 1990.

Later on, our prayers, along with those of countless others, appeared to have been answered. When the ceasefire ending the Gulf war finally came, it fell on the day of the Jewish festival Purim, recalling the deliverance the Jews had from Haman's threats in Esther chapter nine.

Let us consider the lasting nature of God's promises about Israel. There are several passages from the Psalms, besides others, which state that God will not cast Israel aside. Psalms 72 & 89 teach that the line of David will last as long as the sun, moon and heavens endure, even if David's descendents sin against God (72:5, 89:28-37).

Psalm 105:8-11 declares that God's covenant to give Abraham, Isaac and Jacob the land of Canaan is to last for a thousand generations. If a generation is reckoned as twenty-five years, then a period of twenty-five thousand years is in mind. So far, only about three thousand years have passed since the Psalms were written. In other words, in the same way that God does not change, and his word lasts for ever, so Jacob's descendents are not destroyed (Mal 3:6). Psalm 136 confirms over and over again that God's love endures for ever. Finally, in a passage all about Israel's future, Paul writes that God's gifts and call are irrevocable (Rom 11:29).

The continuity of Israel would seem to have been assured (Jer 31:35-36). Few things in Scripture are promised with such emphasis. In view of Israel's history over the last nineteen hundred years, we can begin to see one possible reason why such statements were made; they would give hope through all the dark days, when it seemed as if there was no hope. In short, they were provided for the same reason that Psalm 37 came into my mind when I was collecting the post. And if we are honest, they have largely met with a similar response to mine. But if Psalm 37 can speak to me about my finances in the 20th century, why cannot these other verses from the Psalms speak about God's continuing choice of Israel as well?

If this argument is accepted, then certain issues are raised. Chief among these is the persecution of Jews down the years, and in particular, in our own century, the holocaust. Nearly six million Jews died, out of an estimated world population of nearly eighteen million Jews, in other words, one third. The question arises, where was God in all this, if the Jews are still his chosen people? How could he permit the holocaust?

The overriding message of the book of Revelation is that God has everything under control. Chapter 12 may not be easy to understand. However, verse four is at least suggestive. We read there, in John's vision, that the dragon's tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The parallel with the holocaust may be noted. We have already seen that Scripture compares the nation of Israel lasting for ever to the sun, moon and stars. In addition, the metaphor of Israel being like the stars had been stated specifically to Abraham; God took him outside to look at the stars, and said "So shall your offspring be" (Gen 15:5, cf 22:17 & Deut 10:22).

It seems possible that the holocaust was prophesied in Revelation 12:4. The interpretation might be as follows. In the purposes of God, Satan may have been allowed to destroy a third of the Jews, but he could not destroy God's plans for the nation. Satan's attempt to do so rebounded on him, when in 1948 the world community re-established the nation of Israel. This was an unexpected event. Indeed, while the holocaust might be considered the greatest setback to the Jews since they were called into being by God, the re-creation of Israel has been described as perhaps the greatest miracle since the resurrection.

These issues raise questions all round. Those who wish to deny the continuing significance of Israel in the Christian era are faced with the question of why Satan has been so keen to destroy the Jews, and still is, if they are no longer at the centre of God's plan. Those who accept that what the Prayer Book calls "God's ancient people" are still in the focus of his plan, are faced with the difficulty of explaining how the Gentile church fits into God's purposes.

Perhaps our best course is to recognise that both have a vital place. Without Israel, there would have been no church. Now and in the days to come, it may truly be said, without the church, there will be no Israel. I believe that Christian people do well to recognise the place that the Jews have in God's heart, to perceive that this puts them directly in the firing line of Satan, and choose to stand with Israel in difficult times. I believe that not only our local church, but all churches do well to pray for Israel. In particular, the Psalms invite people to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Our cynical world has so reduced the meaning of the word peace that nowadays, it suggests little more than the absence of war. But the original Hebrew word Shalom has a much richer meaning. It speaks of right relationships between a person and God, as well as with other people. In other words, as well as praying for an end to hostilities in the Middle East, churches would do well to pray for the full restoration of the relationship between Israel and her God. May they all come to believe in his chosen Messiah, Jesus.

Even if this does not appeal, at the very least, Christians can all agree to turn from anti-semitism, and utterly repudiate all dislike of Jews. Westerners could take their lead from Lech Walensa, who as Poland's head of State visited the Israeli Knesset in 1991, and apologised for what had taken place in his country against the Jews during the second world war. This event was hardly reported by the media.

Perhaps we can end this chapter by considering another of the biblical words addressed to 'islands'. They are to be silent before God (Isa 41:1). In the days of television news, we all tend to think we are experts on the problems of the Middle East. The truth is that we are at the mercy of the media in this as in every other issue. Who can confidently say where truth ends and propaganda begins? We would do better to keep quiet, and recognise that God is with Israel, and will strengthen and uphold her, and all who rage against her will be as nothing and perish (v8-11).

Paul believed his message was first for the Jew, then for the Gentile (Rom 1:16). Followers of Jesus wanting to be faithful to his way do well to adopt a similar attitude; both have their place in God's heart.