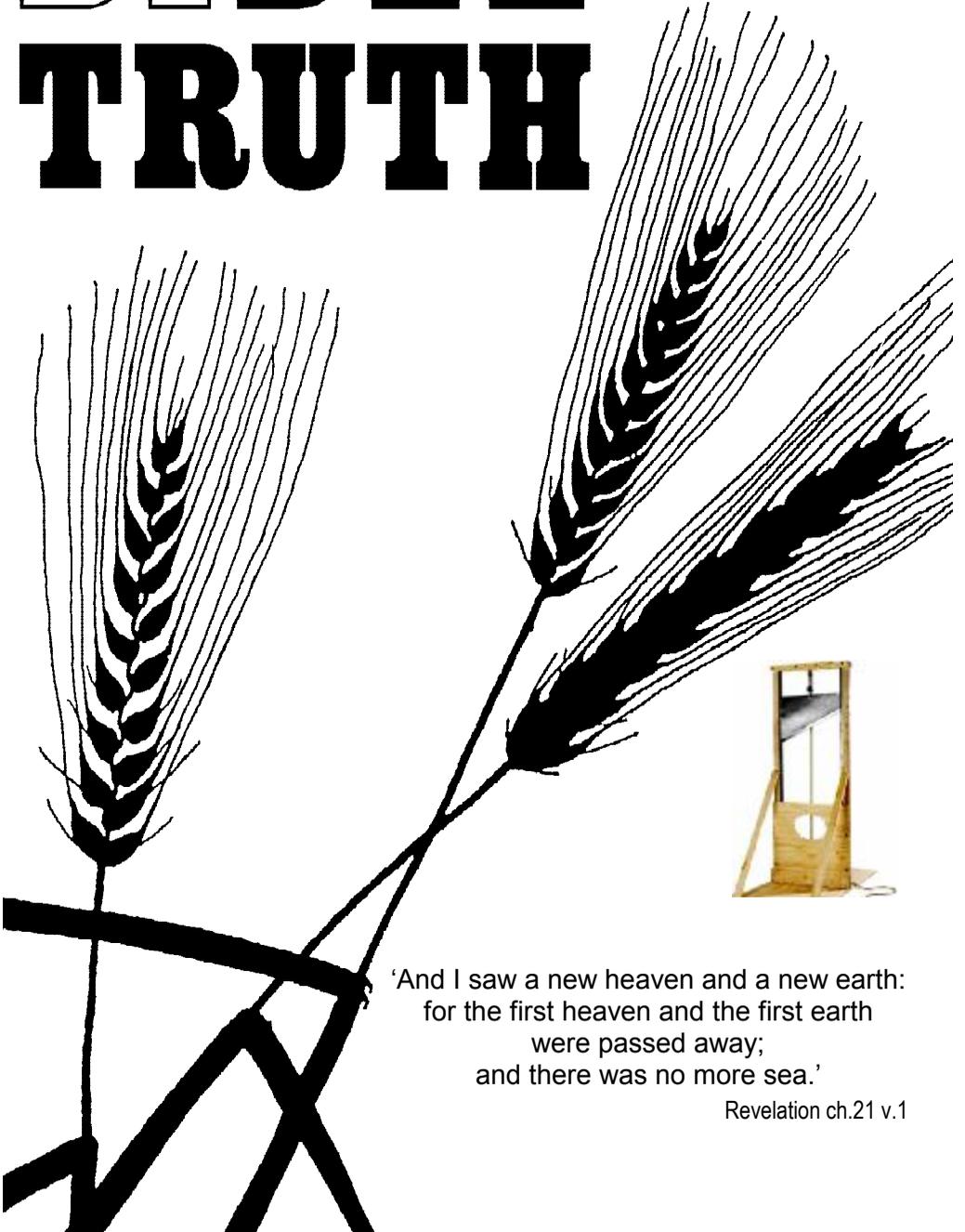


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'And I saw a new heaven and a new earth:
for the first heaven and the first earth
were passed away;
and there was no more sea.'

Revelation ch.21 v.1

THE PERCEPTION OF ISRAEL & HOW SCRIPTURE PORTRAYS THEM



By Paul Boyd-Lee

At the present time the term 'Israel' is exceedingly contentious. When the word arises in conversation it often evokes comments regarding Gaza, land grabbing and so on.

Many people have come to view the establishing of the Jews in the former land given to Israel and giving it the same name of the State of Israel, as a racial and politically explosive issue. Some rejoice over the Jews having a homeland whereas others think of the Palestinians as being oppressed by the Israeli State. They see it as an apartheid state because it is based on race, so they think it should be brought to an end like South Africa a couple of decades ago.

This standpoint is held by many church people in the Western World even to the extent that with the new Church of England *Psalter*, it has been said that,

'the name Israel has been purged as far as possible from the text ... so as to avoid offending Arabs! Instead, great offence has been caused to Jews'.

When it comes to Bible study the word Israel is usually perceived in one of two ways; either it refers to the Church, or alternatively, to the Jews. To some extent it can depend on what type of church is attended but in general it appears that - If the blessings are being claimed, then Israel is interpreted as the Church. However, if it is the curses then the Jews are seen as Israel.

Yet, 'Israel' is the most frequently occurring name in the Bible (about 2,400 times in the Old Testament and nearly 80 in the New). Surely this means that it deserves serious attention of the Bible student in order to get its meaning correct. Further, it should raise the earnest question of which does it refer to, Jews, the Church, or perhaps both at the same time?

In short, the way that Scripture portrays or describes Israel is of crucial importance.

HOW IS THE CHURCH SEEN AS ISRAEL ?

In the early days of the Disciples they had a threefold task.

1. To show that because Israel in the past had sinned, therefore they must now repent. As Peter said, 'repent and be baptized'.
2. To spread the news that the Saviour had come,
3. That the resurrected Lord, the Messiah, would return physically.

This task has led to erroneous teaching such as this example.

'The Jewish people by reason of their unfaithfulness to God, and especially in having caused the crucifixion of Jesus, were finally rejected by God as His special people, and have been replaced as the People of God by the Church, which is seen as the **New Israel**. ... I.e. the Jews are no longer a special people but are to be evangelised like any other non-Christians we seek to reach.'

Latimer Comment, 42

New Covenant

In support of the so called concept of a 'New Israel', some people cite 'The New Covenant' mentioned in *The Book of Hebrews*, as being built upon that which God gave to Israel in Old Testament times. Its newness they say, 'lies in the fact that it is the same but "internalised" by the Spirit'. So the New Covenant becomes solely a spiritual entity possessed by Christians. In a way it is snatched away from its rightful owners who are the descendants of Abraham through Isaac.

This New Covenant is described in Hebrews ch.8

'For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when **I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah:**

Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.

For this is the covenant that **I will make with the house of Israel** after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people:'

Hebrews ch.8 vv 8-10

Unfortunately the idea that this New Covenant text specifically applies to the Church runs into some real problems such as these.

1. The text is actually a direct repeat of Jeremiah ch.31 v.31 where the prophet is specifically writing about Old Testament Israel's descendants, not a church of the future.
2. To confirm this, the writer to the Hebrews, note, spells it out by saying 'the house of Israel' & 'the house of Judah'. Also it describes the two sections of the Hebrew peoples (Israel and Judah). The Church is not divided into two, it is united in Christ.
3. The prophecy depicts God writing His law into Israel's hearts whether they are willing or not, whereas people of the Christian Church joyfully receive Jesus into their hearts.

The Concise English Dictionary of the Church furthers this dogma by defining 'Church' as follows.

'The NT as a whole teaches that **the Church ... was established by Christ as the New Israel** and endowed by Him with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.'

Whilst pondering this valuable and much used reference book which makes this statement about a New Israel, it is worth noting that the term 'New Israel' does not actually occur in scripture.

Bishop Michael Nazir Ali, in his *The Unique & Universal Christ* (p.25) puts things in better perspective when writing,

'from the Gospels it seems clear that the mission of Jesus was focused on the renewal of Israel ... the implications of returning from exile in Babylon and on the restoration of an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty'.

So the renewal of Israel is the key feature to be sought. Unfortunately a casual reader might just home in on Nazir Ali's words 'renewal of Israel' & erroneously read this as a 'new Israel'. Also with the words, 'returning from exile in Babylon', the quote might give the impression that all the tribes of Israel went to Babylon and from thence returned to Palestine where the small number of Jews during Jesus' day was all that was left of them.

Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible says that it is the Greek 'Ecclesia' that is translated as 'Church' in our Bibles & derives from the Hebrew 'Mahal' signifying 'the nation of Israel as assembled before God'.

It then intimates that,

- 'By removing Israel as a nation there is no Kingdom for Jesus to rule,
- There is nothing for Christians to be 'fellow heirs' over.

In reality the Church was no 'new thing' because,

- The Church always was. The 'ecclesia' simply means 'called out ones',
- The New Thing was that the Messiah had come & brethren were to be told.

So although some churchgoers see their church as the New Israel, scripture does not support the view. Indeed the idea denies fulfilment of promises that God made to literal Israel's descendants.

WHAT ABOUT THE JEWS BEING SEEN AS ISRAEL?

Some people have a simplistic view of the world that it is made up of just Jews & Gentiles. In this context the word 'Jew' is then invariably assumed to mean Israel, thus all the Jews in the world are God's Chosen people. An example of this was shown in *The Bible League Quarterly* which in its October 2009 edition (p.284) wrote,

'In the OT it was the Jewish nation He chose'.

This statement is surprising coming from a reputable journal where it gives a misleading rendering of the true biblical text which states,

'And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; In the day **when I chose Israel, ...'.**

Ezekiel ch.20 v.5

The Christian Friends of Israel is an organisation which says, 'Israel means the Jewish people, both inside the nation and in the Diaspora throughout the world. It also means the modern nation of Israel, which includes both Jews and Arabs, all precious to God.

So, we are Christians who love Israel and its peoples and believe that God has a special place for them in His Kingdom purposes before the return of Messiah'.

They say that the Scriptures,

'point to a restoration that would see God dwelling in the midst of a redeemed Israel'.

This is a somewhat confusing mix of who they would include as modern day Israel. It can be seen though that the current conflict in the Holy Land particularly concerns them because they see the war as a threat to the fulfilment of the Messiah dwelling amongst them.

Anthony Julius wrote about 'the restoration of Israel' in the foreword, to the *Anglican Friends of Israel* information leaflet, *How did we get here?*

'I am delighted to have been asked to contribute a foreword to this pamphlet, written to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Israel, the Jewish State ... It became their mission to restore the land to its lawful owners, and thereby assist in fulfilling Biblical prophecy.'

(Anthony Julius is a lawyer known for his actions on behalf of Diana, Princess of Wales and also his opposition to new anti-Semitism.)

The pamphlet then continues with,

'the Jews had lived continuously in the Holy Land, Israel's rebirth was a joyous rebirth'.

Again, the statements are misleading. Whereas it is true that it is called the State of Israel (Israeli State) today, and is seen to be 'Jewish', the comment about Jews having continuously lived in the land is fallacious. It was the tribes of Israel who in ancient times occupied the land and they were not Jewish, to the contrary, for the most part of their time there they were apostate or heathen. Thus one can certainly look to their 'joyous rebirth' but not a rebirth of Jews as the leaflet seems to infer.

Pastor David Hathaway, a modern day leading evangelist asks in his magazine *Prophetic Vision* (No.44 Summer 2007 p.7),

'When the Jews crucified Christ did God give their inheritance to the Church?'

He answers,

'God has not changed His promises concerning Israel despite their rejection of the Messiah?'

It is heartening to read David Hathaway reiterating that God keeps His promises to Israel but he does mention two matters of concern.

1. It was not Israel that rejected the Messiah but the Jews. Many centuries later it was largely the Israel nations in the dispersion that proclaimed the Messiah, (e.g. The 19th century AD great missionary movement). The Jews, on the other hand, still await His first coming!
2. The Jews never had an inheritance to give; the inheritance was Israel's, Judah (part of whom became Jews) were only one tribe amongst the many tribes of Israel). Note that the Jews are largely united by a religion, Judaism, rather than ancestry.

HOW DO British Israelites SEE THEMSELVES AS ISRAEL?

Research shows that in recent centuries descendants of Israel have largely been found amongst the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic peoples. There are many reasons for claiming this, but it is not this article's main subject. Even so, it is worth noting these four key points.

1. The extensive British Empire was at a height during Queen Victoria's reign. It was the largest Empire in the world, stretching right across it and comprising nearly a quarter of its population thus surpassing any empire that preceded it. It was said that the sun never set on this vast empire. When one considers it, that was an amazing achievement by what some would call an unimportant and small people.
2. Is it not remarkable that it was 'Greenwich Mean Time' that was set up rather than Paris, Tokyo, Jerusalem or New York? Not only that, but it has put Britain into the centre of world finance, for in London one can trade right across the globe in the same day - from Tokyo to New York. This partly accounts for the large number of foreign finance houses in the City.
3. Another amazing fact is how English rather than another European language has been adopted across the world.
4. When it comes to spreading the Gospel, publishing Bibles in foreign tongues and providing missionary activity, in spite of starting as a small and insignificant people, the British have been in the forefront of nations to do this. It does not stop there, but they have also been at the forefront for defending individual freedoms, fighting unjust oppression, and so on.

Are these not the sort of prophetic hallmarks that would denote the sort of people whom God would call and set apart to fulfil His will?

With all this eminence, the danger is that it portrays a people who have gained greatness by their own efforts, it engenders a sense of pride - a very unpopular thing in 21st c. Britain. So one can see that with the Church claiming to be Israel, the Jews hated because of their claim also to be Israel, and a nation with a sense of pride, these are all a pretty toxic mix in today's reticent Britain. Mention Israel, and you are in trouble, connect them with Britain, and you are asking for double trouble!

HOW DOES SCRIPTURE PORTRAY ISRAEL?

At times Scripture describes Israel as being a 'peculiar' or 'Holy People' both of which have a similar meaning, namely 'separate'.

The Bible goes on to describe what they have been separated for, which in short is Service to God. Sadly, throughout Israel's history rarely have they done this willingly. On the contrary, their disobedience to God in Old Testament times was so frequent that they were banished from His sight. But restoration was promised to them and this was strongly on the minds of the disciples.

'When they [the disciples] therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, **wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?**

And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, ... and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.'

Acts ch.1 vv 6-8

Notice that they neither use the word 'Jews' nor does Jesus correct their question, he merely points them to what they should be doing before the restoration. This is a large subject but for simplicity it may be divided into two distinct ministries.

First, the **Church** on the one hand has a single commission, namely to preach the Gospel to individuals. Second, **Israel** on the other hand, has a multitask calling, that is to serve God on a national basis. So what is that national calling? Briefly it can be seen to have two components as well.

1. To be a blessing, for God said this to them.

'And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and **thou shalt be a blessing:**

And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.'

Genesis ch.12 vv 2-3

It is interesting that scripture says that the blessings of Israel to other nations continue into the future, when other nations turn to God.

'And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and **ye shall be a blessing:** ...'

Zechariah ch.8 v.13 - prophesied during Medo-Persian Empire (6th c. BC)

'And the LORD shall smite Egypt: he shall smite and heal it: and they shall return even to the LORD, and he shall be intreated of them, and shall heal them.

In that day shall there be a highway out of Egypt to Assyria, ... and the Egyptians shall serve with the Assyrians.

In that day shall **Israel be the third with Egypt and with Assyria, even a blessing in the midst of the land:**

Whom **the LORD of hosts shall bless**, saying, Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel mine inheritance.'

Isaiah ch.19 vv 22-25 - prophesied after the Assyrian Captivity (8th c. BC)

2. To be a witness & a servant.

'... O Israel, ... Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and show us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth.

Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: **that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God.'**

Isaiah ch.43 vv 1, 9-12

This is a national commission and to be shown by their lifestyle.

AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF ISRAEL BRITAIN

A sad state of affairs has been reached when leaders in other nations feel called to reprimand those elsewhere. This is what happened in October 2014 when Archbishop Eliud Wabakula, Primate of Kenya & Chairman of GAFCON Primates Council said,

'In the twenty first century it is becoming clear that we must see the once missionary nations of the West as now themselves mission fields. The fact that the United Kingdom came close to breaking up last week is a symptom of the disintegration of what follows when a once common Christian Faith has been lost ...'

(GAFCON - Global Anglican Futures Conference)

It is statements such as this that has caused some people to take stock of their situation and particularly those responsible for mission outreach from the UK. Many of these continue to work on even though others of their generation have passed into retirement. A question often concerning them is, 'I have no successor in sight or mind, so how can this important work continue, particularly in such a needy time as this?'

In answer one must remember that the Lord said this.

'This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.'

There is in fact a threefold witness to this as it is repeated in Matthew ch.24 v.34, Mark ch.13 v.30, Luke ch.21 v.32.

Here then is an assurance that we shall live as long as is necessary, as well as the double meaning that this generation will witness the many signs foretold in the previous words of these passages.

Another remark not infrequently heard is 'Surely the Lord will return soon to sort things out, it cannot get worse, can it?' 'We need Elijah to return and trouble Israel again' (See Malachi ch.4 v.5).

So then, some people labour under the delusion that because they are 'saved and ready for heaven', even 'because they are of Israel', then they have got it made and can rest while it all happens around them. The fact is that we are to be vigilant and 'watch unto prayer'.

As Christians & Israelites we have a job to do. If ever we expected to be about our Father's business, it is now!

What can we do against such a tide of opposition?

Luke ch.19 provides a good worked example to answer this question. It concerns Jesus' journey from Jericho to Jerusalem where he was soon to be crucified. Picture it: for him the blackness of night was about to descend, then Zachaeus enters the scene, a publican, short of stature and rich. Not only that, but Jesus is to be his guest. What does Zachaeus do but appears to justify himself!

'... the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.'

Luke ch.19 v.8

The 'Twelve' on the other hand had another pressing subject on their minds, to wit, 'they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear' (v.11). In spite of these foibles Jesus graciously ignores the concerns of both parties and tells a parable within which the opening words carry the simple but weighty message.

'... Occupy till I come.'

Luke ch.19 v.13

In this parable a nobleman (i.e. Jesus), goes to a far country to receive a kingdom. He calls his 10 servants (i.e. the 10 tribes) and says 'occupy till I come'. Is that not precisely what we should be doing until He returns?

In the same context, James writes specifically to the 12 tribes of the dispersion saying,

'... be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves'.

(ch.1 v.22)

In other words for those who really believe they are Israel, do not waste precious energy on trying to convince people of their identity, or rest on one's laurels whilst the tide of world events sweeps one away.

Instead, there is a clear directive to **get on with the work that Israel has been called to do, by being a blessing and witnessing to the greatness of God.**
