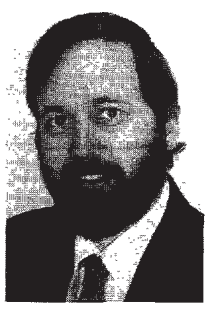
The Bible and the Middle East

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The dangers and opportunities in preaching on Israel's role in biblical prophecy



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Does the Bible offer any insight into the Middle East crisis? Is the current situation in Israel related in any way to biblical prophecy? The issue may be examined under four sections: What does the Old Testament say about the future of Israel? How do dispensationalists approach the question of Israel? How should prophecies concerning Israel be interpreted? Are those prophecies relevant to today's Middle East problems?

The future of Israel in the Old Testament

Of all the prophets, Zechariah and Ezekiel portray the future of Israel in explicit detail. Zechariah 14 provides an exposition of many of the main points. The chapter deals with the day of the Lord (verse 1) when God will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle. The city will be conquered and nearly destroyed, the houses will be plundered, the women ravished, and half the captives will go into exile (verses 2). At this bleakest hour of her history, when all appears to be lost, the Lord will begin to fight against the nations (verse 3). The enemies of Israel will meet a terrible end: their flesh will rot as they stand, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths (verse 12). Those few enemies who survive will come up to worship the Lord at Jerusalem (verse 16).

At this time the geography of the Holy Land will change. When the Lord descends, His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which will be split in two (verse 4). From Jerusalem will flow two rivers, one to the western sea (the Mediterranean), and one to the eastern sea (the Dead Sea) (verse 8). Presumably, the one to the eastern sea will flow through the gap in the Mount of Olives. Not only will the Mount of Olives split in two, but the whole country will become a plain. Only Jerusalem will remain a high point.

Such is Zechariah's startling picture. Something more than political warfare is in view. The enemies of God almost overtake the holy nation, but when God steps in, the whole earth will be reformed to make Jerusalem its focal point. The enemies will be no more. The nations of the earth will come to Jerusalem to serve the Lord there.

Not only Zechariah but Ezekiel too describes the future of Israel. He devotes much of the last half of his book to this theme. Chapters 38 and 39 portray the alliance of all the enemies of Jerusalem, and the intervention of God to bring about their miraculous destruction. The enemies of God will become food for the birds, and all God's people will be returned to the Promised Land. Ezekiel is then shown a vision of the new temple. This vision, extending for several chapters (Eze. 40-48), gives great detail as

to the dimensions and allocations of the new temple. Flowing from the eastern gate of the temple is a river, that gets broader and deeper as it goes (Eze. 47:1-5). It restores life to the desert and makes fresh the salty waters of the Dead Sea, although there will be some areas of salt left to provide minerals (verses 8-12). Land allocations for the 12 tribes, the priests, the princes, and the temple are listed (Eze. 47:13-48:35).

While Ezekiel provides more details than Zechariah, the picture is remarkably consistent between the two. The enemies of God's people come against the Holy City. When all appears lost, God Himself intervenes and destroys His enemies. The land is restructured. Jerusalem becomes the worship center for the whole world.

The same picture is to be found in other prophets, although not in such detail. Isaiah 2:2-4 speaks of Jerusalem "established as the highest of the mountains . . . and all the nations shall flow to it."* The Lord will rule from Jerusalem, and there will be peace (see verses 3,4). Obadiah speaks of the destruction of the heathen nations, and safety in Mount Zion (see verses 15-21).

The interesting thing about all these prophecies is that none of them have been fulfilled. Many of the nations that surrounded ancient Israel are no more (in fulfillment of many of the prophecies), but the promises concerning the future of Israel have not yet come to pass. This raises the issue of how this should be understood.

The dispensationalists' approach

Dispensationalism is probably best known for its doctrine of the secret rapture. This doctrine more or less grows out of dispensationalism's interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies about Israel. Its line of reasoning goes something like this: A true prophet does not make a prophecy that fails to be fulfilled (see Deut. 18:22). Zechariah and Ezekiel were true prophets of God, so therefore what they said must come true. It has not yet come true, so it must come true in the future. There will come a future time when the nation of Israel will rebuild the temple. All her enemies will surround Jerusalem and almost take it. It is at this time that God will intervene. Jesus will come back to earth. His feet will touch the Mount of Olives, which will be split in two, and rivers will begin to flow from Jerusalem out to the two seas.

There is a problem here, however: the problem of the Christian church. What is happening to the Christian church while all these things happen to Israel? The church is in heaven! It has been raptured. All the Christians have been snatched up from the earth and are now in heaven. While they are in heaven, all the Old Testament prophecies will be fulfilled. When Jesus came to earth He preached the kingdom of God. He offered this kingdom to the Jewish nation, but they rejected Him as the Messiah. The Christian church was then inaugurated, but this church is not something that was known in the Old Testament. The church is the mystery that God revealed only after Jesus had been rejected. In dispensational thinking, the Old Testament does not deal with the period of the church at all. Thus, it is only with the rapture of the church that the prophecies can be fulfilled.

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The dispensationalist interpretation of the prophecies allows the current crisis in the Middle East to be immediately relevant as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. The nations around Israel would like to destroy her. Her enemies are Syria, Iraq, Jordan—just new names for Syria, Babylon, Ammon, Moab, and Edom. The enemy coming from the north can easily be understood as Russia. One can tune into the religious telecast channels in the United States and, on several different occasions each day, see a preacher pointing to a map of the Middle East to show what will happen to Israel when World War III breaks out. While not all dispensationalists would go along with such sensationalism, these are the kinds of accounts that naturally grow out of dispensational understandings of prophecy.

Dispensational interpretations of the Old Testament prophecies have strong appeal to conservative Christians who respect the Bible as the word of God. It is easy to see why. Dispensationalism takes the Bible as the word of God and says, "If God said it, it is true. God said that this will happen to Israel in the future, and happen it will, because God does not tell a lie." In other words, a dispensationalist would think that arguing against this position is arguing against both the plain meaning of Scripture and its authority as the inspired word of God. However, I have some serious reservations about a dispensationalist approach to the Old Testament.

First, where does Christianity fit into the dispensational scheme? Where does the cross fit? In dispensationalist thinking the cross cannot be crucial, because dispensationalism envisions the reinstatement of the temple and the animal sacrifices after the rapture. Christianity thus becomes an anomaly. One wonders what Paul would have thought of this (vis-à-vis Rom. 10:4)! Is Christ the ultimate revelation of God for dispensationalists, or is the temple and sacrificial system more important?

Second, one has to ask about all the prophecies concerning the future of Israel that the dispensationalist ignores. Good things were promised to Israel, but so were bad things! Foreign enemies were not the only ones who received threats of judgment—Israel did also! Ezekiel promises a glorious future, but Ezekiel 23 threatens Judah with the same fate that had befallen Israel. Jeremiah 11 threatens Judah with the curses of the covenant,

not the blessings. Amos 2:4-11 threatens Judah and Israel with severe punishments. The dispensational reading of prophecy is far too selective. It reads only the positive, not the negative. Israel was promised both blessings and cursings. They could choose either. The prophecies were not given to determine that only blessing would come; instead, Israel and Judah were offered a choice between two possible futures. They stood at a crossroads. As Jeremiah 36:3 says: "It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." These prophecies did not predetermine the future—they were conditional. Indeed, when the Messiah came, Israel did reject the offered kingdom, and hence rejected the possibility that the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament would be fulfilled.

Third, the coming of Christ has made a dramatic difference in God's relationship with His promised people. The New Testament shows that while there is continuity with the Old, there is also a dramatic difference. This difference will be further explored in the next section.

Interpreting the prophecies

If the dispensationalists are wrong in their interpretation, how then should the prophecies be understood? Are there any general principles that will guide us in our interpretation of the predictions of a glorious future for Israel? There are many, but for the sake of brevity I would like to comment on three: one from the Old Testament, and two from the New Testament.

1. *The covenant of the Old Testament.* The covenant concept promised rich blessings on the people of Yahweh. The covenant, however, was a two-way obligation. Yahweh would bless His people only if they remained faithful to His covenant. If they did not, then the covenant provided for cursings, not blessings.

Deuteronomy 27:1 to 29:1 speaks of this dual aspect of the covenant, a point the prophets pointed out when condemning the sins of the nation. They repeatedly warned that if the nation continued in sin, then the curses of the covenant would descend on them. In other words, the promised future blessings of the Old Testament were conditional. They were conditional on Israel remaining in the covenant. Since Israel did not remain true to the covenant, the promised blessings were not fulfilled. Rather, the threatened punishments transpired.

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2. *The place of Israel in the New Testament.* With Israel's rejection of Jesus a new element was added vis-à-vis Israel's position. Matthew, for example, speaks of the threat of Jesus to the Jewish leadership: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it" (Matt. 21:43). To the nation Jesus had come proclaiming the kingdom of God. By rejecting Him the nation was rejecting the kingdom. The kingdom was henceforth to be associated not with the Jewish nation but with the Christian church. When the word of the kingdom is preached, it is the Christian church that does the preaching, and this preaching is received in different ways (c.f. Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23). While the church is not to be equated with the kingdom of God, it is nevertheless intimately associated with the proclamation and spread of the kingdom. The promised kingdom now belongs to those who accept Jesus, not to ethnic Jews or national Judaism.

In Romans 9-11 the apostle Paul deals with the role of Israel in terms of the concept of the remnant, which he explains by the image of the olive tree. Some branches have been pruned off the olive tree, but that does not mean God has rejected His people. Other branches have been grafted in, but again that does not mean that God has rejected His people. Some proved unfaithful, and were pruned off. Others proved faithful, and were grafted in. In this regard the church is the true Israel.

Paul is not alone in identifying the church as the true Israel. Peter, in 1 Peter 2:9, also applies titles of Israel to the church: a chosen race (cf. Isa. 43:20), a royal priesthood (cf. Ex. 19:6), and a holy nation (cf. Ex. 19:6).

Thus we have the second interpretive principle. The chosen people, according to the New Testament, are not literal Israel of the Old Testament, but the followers of Christ. Christians are the true inheritors of the chosen nation. Any prophecies as to the future of Israel would have to be read in the light of this new reality.

3. *New Testament reinterpretation of the Old Testament prophecies.* The principle of applying New Testament interpretation to Old Testament prophecies would indeed be difficult were it not for the fact that the New Testament itself provides clear guidelines on how this principle can be implemented. The most explicit example of such an interpretation is found in Revelation 20:7 to 22:15. In this passage we find that the enemies of God surround God's people. For a moment it looks as if all is lost, and evil will triumph. But then God Himself intervenes, and destroys His enemies. Then Jerusalem becomes the center of the worship of the whole world. God Himself dwells there. From Jerusalem a river flows outward to bring healing to the nations.

While some of the details are different, there is a remarkable similarity between Revelation on the one hand, and Zechariah and Ezekiel on the other, in the broad development of what happens. What has been provided is a Christian reinterpretation

of the Old Testament promises to Israel.

Bible's relevance today

Is the Bible still relevant to the Middle East crisis? Yes, but not in the way proposed by some dispensationalists. We are not to look for the nations of Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (or even Russia) to fulfill these prophecies. They will be fulfilled in terms of spiritual Israel (the true Christian church), and in terms of the re-creation of the earth, which will happen at the right time subsequent to the second coming of Jesus.

While Old Testament prophecies may not be directly related to today's political upheavals, their message is surprisingly relevant at a deeper level. The prophets spoke against injustice, demanded protection of the poor and defenseless, insisted on religion of the heart, preached against oppression, and proclaimed an ideal society of equality, justice, love, and peace. They indicated the deeper causes of social unrest: injustice, selfishness, and sin. They pointed to a glorious future, when God will intervene again in human affairs. Yes, the prophets are relevant to today's crisis in the Middle East!

Thus the prophetic message is relevant to the issues raised by the continuous crises in the Middle East. Not only that. There is still a prophetic voice that needs to be raised. However, in proclaiming this voice there are both dangers and opportunities.

Dangers in proclamation

1. *Sensationalism and lack of credibility.* Happenings in the Middle East provide a high level of interest. In an effort to make these more interesting, more is claimed than the circumstances warrant. If predictions made about the current crises do not come true, then this can only cause a loss of confidence in the overall credibility of the speaker.

2. *Misuse of Scripture.* A key concern of Christian proclamation is promoting proper understanding of Scripture. This does not take place when a biblical text is read to fit a current crisis, ignoring some of the wider issues of scriptural interpretation.

3. *Lack of truthfulness.* A Christian commitment to truth cannot be sacrificed to short-term success that comes from sensational interpretations. The kind of solutions advanced in this article require some effort to understand and communicate the real intent of Scripture. Such an effort lacks the immediate impact of pointing to a map and saying that Russia will attack through the Baltic, make an alliance with Rome, and then come to the valley of Megiddo to fight the combined forces of Israel and the United States. This scenario is easy to understand, sensationally interesting, but unbiblical.

4. *Lack of long-term stability.* The Bible's relevance to a crisis is a good way to get the attention of the unconverted or the backslidden, but it may not be an adequate basis for a long-term Christian commitment. Long-term Christians are those who are rooted and grounded in Scripture, and who have a deep love relationship with their Master. Their commitment will carry them through all kinds of crises—personal, national, political, or whatever. Their Christianity is not based on excitement, but on a sense of deep commitment to the One who is to return and a sense of urgency to be ready for that event.

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The opportunities

The dangers associated with preaching on the role of Israel in biblical prophecy might lead the preacher to turn aside from this topic, but there are also great opportunities that might be missed. They include:

1. *Topicality.* The Middle East continues to be of topical interest. In speaking to this issue the preacher addresses the concerns of today, and shows that the Bible is relevant to the questions that humanity faces.

2. *An opportunity to approach an important Old Testament theme.* The concept of the covenant, so prominent in the Old Testament, is not one that naturally arouses interest, but seen in the context of this issue, it becomes an exciting solution to a real dilemma. The topic also provides an opportunity to speak in an interesting manner on all kinds of issues—the faithfulness of the covenant community, God's expectations of His covenant community today (that is, God's expectations of the church), and the like.

3. *A distinctive contribution to Christian thought.* Those who speak most about the role of Israel fall into either the dispensational camp or the liberal camp (which says, essentially, that these predictions were pipe dreams that have no meaning). We can present an approach that is distinctive and provides a viable alternative to the sensationalism of dispensationalism and the despair of liberalism.

4. *The presentation of strong ethical dimensions of the covenant.* The concept of covenant provides a richer way to read the Old Testament than a "this is fulfilled in that" kind of approach. The issues of justice, righteousness, God's will for humankind, and of personal and corporate response find their appropriate expression in the concept of covenant. Preaching on the role of Israel provides an ideal vehicle for approaching these matters.

Such preaching enables the prophetic voice to be heard with a new relevance and urgency, and can bring renewed interest in the long-awaited and soon-to-be-realized consummation, when Jesus will return to make all things new. ■

* Scripture quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.