

Publishing Editor's column

EVER since Brother John Thomas gave the title *Elpis Israel* (*The Hope of Israel*) to the book based on the lectures that he gave throughout Britain in 1848, the phrase has been in common use amongst us. Its only New Testament occurrence is in Acts 28:20, where the Apostle Paul says to the leaders of the Jews in Rome, "for the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain". We take the phrase to refer to the fulfilment of the promises that God made to the Jewish fathers concerning His Kingdom, the phrase emphasising the Jewish basis of that Kingdom. This is certainly what Brother Thomas took it to mean, for this was the main thrust of his preaching and writing.

Yet the phrase occurs only in this one place in the New Testament, and the fact that it is used of God Himself in Jeremiah 14:8 and 17:13 has led to it being said that the phrase in Acts refers to Jesus Christ, not the fulfilment of the promises. So is our traditional understanding correct, or have we been wrong all this time? We need to be careful in assuming that, because the phrase occurs elsewhere in the Bible, it must mean the same here, unless there are other links in phraseology to support this; greater priority should surely be given to the context of what Paul himself says in Acts.

Shortly after his meeting with the Jewish leaders, Paul received more of his fellow countrymen, "to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets" (v. 23). It should be noted that the Kingdom of God comes first, as it does in verse 31, and Jesus second; and the reference is to the Kingdom of God as taught in the Old Testament. This indicates that "the hope of Israel" covers both these themes, but first the promises of the Kingdom, then the details of the one who made their fulfilment possible. Earlier, Paul refers to 'hope' in speaking before the Jews. In 23:6 he says, "of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question", whilst in 26:6 he says that he was being judged "for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers". The hope, therefore, is based on the promises to the fathers, and resurrection from the dead to inherit them. Those promises are clearly about an earthly inheritance centred upon Israel, with Jesus Christ as the prime receiver of those promises and the one who enables others to receive them.

The context in Acts does not therefore support the idea that "the hope of Israel" refers to Jesus Christ, though without him there would be no hope. The Kingdom of God fulfilling the promises is the first component of the gospel. It is correct to speak of Jesus as the first in the right context—as the first in God's new order of things, for example—but not to the point where the literal fulfilment of God's promises about the Kingdom become regarded as a secondary thing. In itself, seeing the phrase 'hope of Israel' as applying to Jesus rather than the future fulfilment of the promises may not seem too significant, being merely different aspects of what is essentially the same thing. However, reinterpreting Scripture in this way is surely a dangerous thing, with the potential to lead us away from the true gospel revived by the work of Brother Thomas.

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