



God's purpose with Israel

2. Higher-critical views about Israel

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THE HIGHER-CRITICAL view of Scripture is widely promoted, as we frequently see when Scripture is mentioned in the media or literature. It clearly affects an understanding of the Bible's teaching about Israel, and also how seriously the Bible teaching will be taken.

The following characteristics of higher criticism are relevant:

- 1 A strong tendency to leave God out of the origin of Scripture and ascribe the records more or less to the thoughts of the writer or of his people, even when he claims to speak the word of the Lord;
- 2 Explaining prophecy as being written later in Israel's history than the Bible represents—implying that the writer is misrepresenting his part as a prophet;
- 3 Applying the fulfilment of prophecy to a different time from that intended, usually bringing the application forward to avoid long-term prediction, which cannot be explained without the Divine inspiration of the prophet.

The ownership of the land

Examples in the context of God's purpose with Israel can be found in a book entitled, *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*.¹ The author of chapter 6, a Palestinian Christian called Canon Ateek, when discussing the Biblical view of the land, sees "a great difference between the outlooks of the Old and New Testaments" (p. 132). He rightly recognises the Old Testament's portrayal of the land as owned by God, indeed to the extent that God regards the Israelites as strangers and foreigners in His land (Lev. 25:23). Those who live in the land must obey the Owner, otherwise they defile it and in consequence will be thrust out (20:22; Deut. 4:25,26; 28:63; Josh. 23:15,16; Jer. 2:7; 16:18).

Unfortunately, this author does not seem to realise that a statement by God remains true and up to date without having to be repeated again

and again. He points to God's sovereignty over the whole world rather than simply the land (Ps. 24:1), and claims that "some post-exilic prophets . . . put the emphasis, not on the land itself, but on the people who are returning to it; the promises of God to the people after the exile are not about land and nationhood". He then quotes Isaiah 44:3,4: "For I shall pour water on the thirsty soil and streams on the dry ground. I shall pour out My spirit on your descendants, My blessing on your offspring, and they will spring up among the grass, like willows on the banks of a stream" (version not known). Mr Ateek's implication is that, because God mentions the world and people, He must have lost interest in the land and the nation. But there is no Divine comment to that effect.

To claim that Isaiah 44 is post-exilic may have been more common in the higher-critical practice of the past than it is now;² but the important point is that the Lord does not change, nor is the land something which changes in such a complex way as a people may change, and therefore an absence of comment about the land in the latter part of Isaiah is of little significance. There is no reason why God's interest in the land should need mention in this part of Isaiah, which deals with His people's future destiny.

However, the prophecy of Ezekiel, which Christadelphians would place later than Isaiah

1. Editor P. W. L. Walker, Paternoster Press and Baker Book House, second edition, 1994. This source of modern 'Christian' thinking will be used quite widely as one of the references in these articles. Containing the views of eight different authors, there is much that overlaps between them, but also wide variation. This results in a somewhat confused overall picture of 'Christian' thinking.
2. For comment on higher-critical opinions about this point and answers to them, see "Higher criticism and the Bible (5)", David Green, *The Testimony*, Mar. 2000, pp. 73-75.

(and Mr Ateek reckons as post-exilic, see below), does in fact show God's continuing interest in the land. See, for example, 5:11; 17:22,23; 37:22, 25,26; 38:8.

Furthermore, the prophecy of Zechariah, which is truly post-exilic, as higher critics would presumably admit, also shows God's interest in the land and the city of Jerusalem: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion: for, lo, I come, and I will dwell in the midst of thee, saith the LORD . . . And the LORD shall inherit Judah His portion in the holy land, and shall choose Jerusalem again" (2:10,12; see also 1:14,16; 2:4-9; 8:2,3, 8,22; 12:8,9; 13:1; 14:11,16,20,21).

Canon Ateek goes on to say: "Sadly however, many Jews seem not to have been willing to learn that it is wrong to put one's heart on the land. To do so is to invite disaster and another exile" (p. 134). The point we ourselves might deduce from the same passages is that disaster follows, not from putting one's heart upon the land, but from defiling it by disobedience to God. Modern Israel will need to learn this lesson, just as their fathers did.

He passes on to see a contrast between the attitudes of Israel toward the indigenous population of the land following the first and second exoduses, by which he means the exodus from Egypt and the return from exile in Babylon:

"One of the greatest points of contrast between the first and second exodus concerns their respective attitudes toward the indigenous peoples who were already living in the land. In the first exodus, these are entirely negative. Every time the indigenous people are mentioned, the language is very hostile: they are supposed to be displaced or destroyed, and there is no room for them in the land among the chosen people of God to whom the land was promised. The second is totally different. The returning exiles showed greater realism, being far more accepting of the people around them. In fact, one of the greatest biblical passages from after the exile is from the prophet Ezekiel, who spoke this word of the Lord to the people: 'You must distribute this country among yourselves, among the tribes of Israel. You must distribute it as a heritage for yourselves and the aliens settled among you who have fathered children among you, since you must treat them as citizens of Israel. You will give the alien his heritage in the tribe where he has settled' (Ezek. 47:21-23).

"What a remarkable contrast with the hostile language of Joshua! With the second exodus there is a new understanding of the people's relationship to the land. There is an acceptance of the changes of history. Certain demographic changes had taken place, and the prophet pronouncing the word of God exhorts the people to accept these changes and to share the land with those who are living on it" (p. 135).

Although it is true that the situation in the days of Joshua was different from what has been the case since, and from what will be when Ezekiel's words come to pass, we should not be left with the feeling that somehow the language of Joshua was wrong for his circumstances. God knew what He wanted and He decided that it was time to remove the indigenous peoples of those days because of their wickedness (Gen. 15:16). He is the One to decide such things, not modern man.

Arguments based on New Testament events

When Canon Ateek reaches the New Testament one is struck by his remarkably cavalier treatment of its teaching about the land, Jerusalem and the temple. He sees in the New Testament a lack of interest in the land compared with the Old Testament. For example, he deduces that the land must have been of very little significance to Jesus and the Gospel writers simply because Jesus refused the devil's temptation for him to take authority over the kingdoms of this world (Lk. 4:5-8)! But this proves the faith and obedience of Jesus in waiting for God to give him the Kingdom rather than seizing it at the time. It does not prove his lack of interest in the land as a place where God chose to put His glory (see Acts 2:34,35).

Because the temple was destroyed as predicted, and is now replaced by Jesus and other Christians in whom the spirit of Christ dwells (1 Cor. 3:16), Mr Ateek thinks it must forever be redundant to the minds of Christians. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, following prediction by Jesus. As a result Mr Ateek sees the whole land of Palestine as no longer of great significance because he thinks no one area of the world is more holy than another, but considers that the holiness of the land is replaced by the holiness and presence of Jesus Christ in the world (p. 137).

In answer to this kind of argument, the rejection of the Jews of New Testament times does

not mean that God changed His declared purpose. Those Jews missed an opportunity then, leading to great destruction and desolation in the land, and also to 2,000 years of distress for their descendants; but it does not prove that there will not be a later opportunity to turn to God and inherit the land. There is a parallel in the generation of Israel who left Egypt and were rejected, but their children of the next generation had the opportunity to enter the land after the wandering in the wilderness. Jesus himself anticipates a similar happy end at his second coming: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Mt. 23:37-39).

At this point Mr Ateek's views are closely approaching those of many other Christians today, even those who are not ostensibly higher critical, and therefore we will have occasion later to answer similar ideas in more detail. Nevertheless, the main point to be made here is that a large class of Christians are very limited in their recognition of the Divine inspiration of the Old Testament and the permanence of God's promises. They seem to think of the God of the Old Testament as of a man.

Again, in common with many Christians, Canon Ateek restricts Jesus's preaching of the 'Kingdom of God' to a gospel of the reign of God in the hearts and minds of people and therefore independent of geographic location (p. 138). In seeing God's concern for one land and one people expanding to include all lands and peoples he rejects a continuing and underlying concern for the Jewish people and their land, replacing it with the spreading of a gospel of things that God has already completed in Christ (p. 139). Sadly, he offers no message of future activities of God in the world to be focused upon this people and their land, and therefore offers no specific hope to the present unhappy constitution of the world.

Prophecy about Israel will yet be fulfilled

This is where the prophecies concerning Israel score. We know from the New Testament itself that Old Testament prophecy is "more sure", is

"a light that shineth in a dark place", and "came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:19-21). Certain aspects of Old Testament prophecy have already received remarkable fulfilments in the history of the Jewish people and in the first coming of Christ. These fulfilments are not evidence that the rest of prophecy will not be fulfilled, as some seem to take them, but rather that God has the power and also the will to honour all His promises. As compared with other nations, Israel are to be made the centre of a happy world:

"and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the LORD, and to seek the LORD of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you" (Zech. 8: 21-23);

"Give the king Thy judgments, O God, and Thy righteousness unto the king's son . . . His name shall endure for ever: his name shall be continued as long as the sun: and men shall be blessed in him: *all nations* shall call him blessed. Blessed be the LORD God, *the God of Israel*, Who only doeth wondrous things. And blessed be His glorious name for ever: and let the whole earth be filled with His glory; Amen, and Amen" (Ps. 72:1,17-19).

These prophecies offer, not some unknown destiny for the world, but a hope for all nations and the earth filled with the glory of the God of the nation of Israel. Jesus tells us that God is "not a God of the dead" (Lk. 20:38), so we know that Israel must be a living nation at the time when the above words become a reality in the earth, and that, at this still future time, God will be "the God of Israel" in a more special sense than the God of other nations.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

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