

and yet in Leviticus 23:17 it was to be used in the making of the “wave loaves” that were waved by the priest (v. 20), presumably showing that God accepted Israel despite her sinfulness. This sinfulness was coming to a head in Jesus’s day. The religious leaven of the scribes and Pharisees and the political leaven of Herod, symbolised by the three measures of meal, had finally leavened the whole lump. This was the state of the king’s dominion in Jesus’s day, corrupt and full of those who had no vision beyond that of the present. So it was that Jesus could say to his disciples in Matthew 13:11: “it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given”.

Parables to the disciples

It was to the disciples that Jesus spoke the remaining parables. The hidden treasure and the pearl of great price sum up for the disciples just what a great prize they had found, which can be linked to the finding of wisdom, worth more than any earthly treasure. In Job 28:12-28, and in Proverbs 2,3, these things are brought together; the things the world desires are not to be compared to the finding of wisdom and understand-

ing: “the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding” (Job 28:28).

This idea can be taken further; in the book of Revelation the evil harlot woman of 17:4 is arrayed in “precious stones and pearls”, but, as we know, she is full of the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness with God. In contrast, the bride of Christ, represented by “the holy city, new Jerusalem” in chapter 21, is seen as having walls and foundations of precious stones, and gates of pearls (vv. 19-21).

The phrase “The kingdom of heaven is like” links all these parables in Matthew 13 together. The attitude of mind to the wondrous things of God as shown by the “multitude” rendered the ‘kings dominion’ corrupt. The attitude of mind required to obtain and be in that dominion is shown by the reaction of men in the Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price. The same is true for us, and this is a lesson to ponder. We can learn of ‘the Truth’ yet be blind to the wonder of it and not seek first the Kingdom of God. We, like the scribe in verse 52, must be “instructed” in the things of the Kingdom, and out of this treasure bring forth things new and old.



Principles, Preaching and Problems

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God’s purpose with Israel

7. Israel’s return in unbelief

Stephen Green

IN THIS ARTICLE we will look at the significance of Israel’s return over the past century and the status of Israel today. We will consider:

- The accuracy of claims that there is no longer a genuine Jewish race today and the significance of this claim for the people called the Jews;
- Whether the return of Jews to modern Israel is an answer to prophecy and has been brought into existence by God as a deliberate and essential stage in His purpose;
- The significance of their present return in relation to the coming of the Lord.

Is there a Jewish race today?

First we must consider a claim which strikes at the heart of Israel, both in the land and in exile. This is the claim that Jews have intermarried so much with other people among whom they have been dispersed that there are few, if any, full-blooded Jews left. An associated claim is that during the Middle-Ages there was wholesale conversion of the kingdom of the Gentile Khazars to Judaism, and that therefore Ashkenazi Jews from Europe are largely of Gentile origin. It is concluded from these things that there is no longer a Jewish race today, and so, if it comes to Israel being restored to the land, there

are no real Jews or Israelites who could be included.¹

It is very true that a significant amount of intermarriage with local inhabitants has occurred by groups of Jews living in dispersion. But the effect of this and its importance for the nation can be exaggerated. For religious, cultural and tribal reasons the Jews have largely maintained a separateness from other people, and marriage within the group has therefore tended to counteract the effect of marriage outside. This is because it dilutes the foreign blood at each subsequent generation within. It would only be when a strong trend towards marriage outside developed that the problem might become significant.

However, God watches over Israel, and He uses friction with the local population, persecution and emigration to strengthen the forces of separation. Other nations and races when brought together have combined and now it is impossible to untangle them, but the Jew has been preserved. Even the attempts of such as Haman and Hitler to exterminate the Jewish race were frustrated by God.

The case of the Khazars is used by some to argue for a largely non-Semitic origin for Ashkenazi Jews. The kingdom of Khazaria was situated near the Caspian Sea and the northern coast of the Black Sea. According to Martin Gilbert, the Khazars were originally a heathen people, but about A.D. 700 their king converted to Judaism. A later king strengthened the ties with Judaism by inviting rabbis into his kingdom and by building synagogues. The supreme court consisted of seven judges: two Jews, two Christians, two Muslims and a heathen. Religious toleration was maintained for 300 years.²

However, the information given by Martin Gilbert does not suggest a wholesale conversion of the Khazars to Judaism. Even if it did amount to that, it would not have destroyed the Jewish race. It is not the pureness of their blood which defines the continuity of the Jewish people, but their family connection.

Proselytes or converts were allowed under the Law, and many from other races were incorporated into the families of Israel, such as the wives of Jacob's sons and the mixed multitude which came out of the land of Egypt with Israel (Ex. 12:38), though there was some restriction on such being counted as part of Israel; see, for example, Deuteronomy 23:8. Slaves bought into a family were circumcised and treated as part of that family, and therefore became part of the

congregation of Israel (Gen. 17:12,23,27). There were those who were attracted to the God of Israel and to His people in the days of David, and became part of Israel (2 Sam. 15:18-22). If many Khazars became Jews by religious conversion, they became part of the Jewish people. When, after 300 years as a Jewish kingdom, Khazaria was broken up by Russian and Byzantine forces, its people were dispersed in common with other Jews.

At times when Israel have been faithful to God, the conversion of Gentiles to the worship of the God of Israel has been clear cut, and controlled by priests or rabbis in a faithful way. However, when Israel have been separated from God by following strange gods or by unbelief in His Son, or when intermarriage has occurred without conversion, the situation has become less clear. Then, as pointed out in previous articles, faithless individuals have been separated from God's eternal salvation, but the faithlessness of Israel has not cut them off eternally as a family or people (Amos 3:2).³

One further point can be made to show the existence of a direct racial link between modern and ancient Israelites. This is the scientific evidence based on genetic studies of the Y-chromosome, showing a consistency in the priestly descent from Aaron in the male line of those Jews who are today traditionally members of the *Kohanim*. This genetic link holds irrespective of whether they are of Sephardi or Ashkenazi origin.⁴ This is a line of scientific evidence which shows that Jews still show racial consistency.

Israel's return in unbelief political, not religious

The historical facts of Israel's return to their original land during the past 150 years are well known. It commenced with a trickle of colonisers, which became a flood of returning Jews, and eventually created an independent national

1. J. L. Bray, *Israel in Bible Prophecy*, 1983 (reprinted 1995), pp. 33,44,49.
2. Martin Gilbert, *Jewish History Atlas*, third edition, pp. 24,25.
3. It is interesting to note that the fleshly descendants of Abraham are not circumcised until the eighth day, yet they are still part of Israel before then. They have a family connection, but not a religious connection, during the previous week.
4. For more details see "Tracing the descendants of Aaron", Nigel Bernard, *The Testimony*, Apr. 1997, pp. 118-20.

power of some substance in the region.⁵ Many of the events of this period have occurred in opposition to natural expectation and have proved to be dramatic, especially for those with an interest in the Biblical history of the people. They have rightly been seen as God exerting His power on behalf of Israel, and arranging for the progress of their return. Parallels with the Israelites coming out of the land of Egypt and conquering the Promised Land have been noticed.

However, the return has mainly proved to be a politically, not religiously, inspired movement, and many religious Jews themselves believe that national independence should have awaited the return of Messiah. Needless to say, almost all of Israel's Jewish population have returned or have grown up in the land in unbelief of Jesus as their Messiah, and they remain in this unbelief today.⁶ This situation is key to the main discussion of the present article.

Questions need to be asked. Why has God allowed a return in unbelief? Did He intentionally encourage it? Was a return in unbelief prophesied? Alternatively, is this return in unbelief merely a coincidence that God has had no deliberate hand in? Or again, is it a stage in the process of their return which will ultimately lead to the conversion of the nation? In answering such questions we should begin by looking at their status before God.

Israel still under curse

In Deuteronomy 28 we find the conditions for the blessing and cursing of Israel:

“And the LORD shall make thee the head, and not the tail; and thou shalt be above only, and thou shalt not be beneath; *if that thou hearken* unto the commandments of the LORD thy God, which I command thee this day, to observe and to do them: and thou shalt not go aside from any of the words which I command thee this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them. But it shall come to pass, *if thou wilt not hearken* unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field” (vv. 13-16).

Although Israel have received some blessings of preservation and economic vigour since their independence in 1948, it is very clear that they

have been cursed by the antagonism of their close neighbours and have been made subject to terrorism and fear both “in the city” and “in the field”. The Jews still in dispersion are subject to a different mixture of blessings and curses. However, the curses of Deuteronomy still continue for those in the land and those outside. Our conclusion from this situation, that both the positive blessings and the negative curses are being received, should be that God has not forgotten His people, but still affords them special interest and attention. When their hearts turn to Him, then He will remove the curses and concentrate upon the blessings. In the meantime their punishment is not complete. They are cursed, but still watched over (Isa. 49:14-16).

In earlier articles we pointed out Old Testament passages which say that if Israel repent in dispersion, and turn and obey the Lord their God, *then* their captivity will be returned and God will gather them; for example, Leviticus 26:40-42 and Deuteronomy 30:1-5. There are quite a number of such passages.⁷

This fact emphasises the question of why God has allowed Israel to return and set up an independent state today. Three reasons present themselves:

- 1 It is the answer to a different group of Divine prophecies. The prophecies of return following repentance mentioned above must refer to a slightly later period and a different part of the people of Israel;
- 2 Patterns from the past history of Israel show God making similar responses to similar situations;
- 3 The mercy of God required that it should be so.

We will look at these in turn.

An answer to prophecy

The State of Israel as it exists today is clearly not the long-term answer to prophecies about the blessing of Israel during the reign of Christ in

5. John V. Collyer, *Israel: Land and People of Destiny*, 1988; chapters 3-6 provide an historical summary of Israel's return up to recent times.

6. There is a very small number of Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah, but whose teachings, so far as we understand, contain elements of apostate Christianity.

7. Some of these were mentioned in article 4, Nov. 2001, pp. 411-6, to which can be added 2 Chronicles 6:36-39; 30:9; Ezekiel 6:8-10 and Hosea 5:14-6:3.

glory. However, there is prophetic evidence for it being a temporary but deliberate stage in the process leading to that ultimate purpose:

- 1 Ezekiel 36:24,25 puts Israel in the land prior to her cleansing; and it is only after they are in the land that they acknowledge ("remember") their evil ways and loathe themselves (v. 31).
- 2 The two chapters Zechariah 12, 13 speak of a day when the Lord will save Judah and Jerusalem from the people round about, and when He will pour "the spirit of grace and of supplications" upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem when they recognise their Messiah, and they will mourn, and their sins will be cleansed (12:10). These things happen in situ, and therefore the people must be present in Judah and Jerusalem before they are cleansed by God. The salvation and cleansing of Jerusalem follows after that of Judah (12:7; 14:14), showing a progressive activity in the land, emphasising still further their presence in situ.
- 3 Joel 3 presents a similar picture. It starts with God "bring[ing] again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem", and ends with them living in their place on a permanent basis and the Lord being with them (vv. 1,20,21). Between these two events others occur. "All nations" are gathered to the land for war against Israel (vv. 2,9-12), and at the time of God's judgement upon these nations there comes a change in Israel; the Lord becomes "the hope of His people, and the strength of the children of Israel" (v. 16). From then on they know Him, and Jerusalem becomes holy for ever (v. 17). This means that the return of verse 1 must have been in unbelief.
- 4 Christ spoke of the Israel fig tree being permitted a space in the vineyard but destined to be cut down because it had no fruit (Lk. 13:6-9). This tree has sprouted again in modern times (21:29-31). As yet the State of Israel still has no fruit, requiring further cultivation. The re-sprouting was prophesied and we see it. But it is also a sign that the Kingdom of God is near, when the tree will produce its fruit.⁸

Even if a judgement on the present State of Israel for her sins were to involve her complete removal elsewhere, these passages indicate that Judah would need to be returned to the land again before her cleansing could proceed. The Isaiah and Zechariah passages also indicate a strong measure of political independence/isola-

tion prior to the events they describe. This fits with the circumstances of the present State of Israel.

Patterns of the past

There are two lines of historical evidence showing by analogy God's hand behind the creation of the modern State of Israel. The first is God's blessing of Israel at times when they have been unfaithful to Him. The reign of Jeroboam II is a good example of this. Bible history records that "he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD: he departed not from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin" (2 Kgs. 14:24). Yet God enabled Jeroboam II to restore the coasts of Israel: "For the LORD saw the affliction of Israel, that it was very bitter: for there was not any shut up, nor any left, nor any helper for Israel. And the LORD said not that He would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven: but He saved them by the hand of Jeroboam the son of Joash" (vv. 26,27). God is not obliged to treat Israel, or indeed anyone else, after their deserts (Deut. 32:36). Events since the holocaust have been an opportunity for Israel and the world to see God's hand at work on Israel's behalf following a very bitter period. Unfortunately both have failed to see His hand, and in Israel's case they have ascribed success to their own capability.

A second pattern has been the way in which God has brought Israel into the land to Himself in stages. This was perhaps most obvious at the return from Babylon. Here was first a politically oriented phase under Zerubbabel, followed by a spiritually oriented phase under Ezra the priest, although of course God was behind both (Ezra 1:1; 7:6).⁹ Thus Cyrus king of Persia

8. Another example of this type of prophecy may be Isaiah 17, which describes the people in the land as having "forgotten the God of [their] salvation". They had followed their own desires, but the fruits of their labours would be "a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow". But this is followed by God's rebuke of the nations ("the rivers") who are robbing Israel (vv. 10-14). Although in the first place this prophecy has application to the Assyrian invasion, no doubt it also has a secondary application to a northern invader of the last days, in which case the passage implies that Israel is present in the land in unbelief before they are plundered by nations who are consequently judged for their action by God.
9. The prayer of Daniel (Dan. 9:1-21) could have been the means of triggering God's action of stirring up Cyrus.

stimulated the first phase as part of a political policy, to which many of the Israelite captives responded, and which eventually culminated in the rebuilding of the temple (1:2,3). The emphasis in Ezra's return was on teaching the law of God, enquiry of God concerning Judah and Jerusalem, and reformation of the people (7:10,14; ch. 10).¹⁰

Similarly Israel today is in a politically motivated stage of their return, which is due to progress through more than one phase. It is currently a stage which overlaps with the long period of Jewish unbelief and of Gentile influence over Jerusalem. When Israel's eyes are opened and Gentile times are ended, then we will know they have returned to God and to the land in the fullest sense. May this time be soon!

God's mercy to Israel

It is true that the old national covenant for Israel's inheritance of the land has been broken (Deut. 29:1; Jer. 31:32), and therefore they have no right under that covenant to return to the land. They await the making of the new covenant with them before they have any such right, which involves them repenting, knowing God, and having their iniquities forgiven (Jer. 31:33,34). This must happen before Israel can be restored to be God's kingdom. However, it does not mean that God is unable to return many of the Jews to the land earlier, as He obviously wishes to do, for this is for the sake of their fathers, if not for Israel themselves (Deut. 9:4,5), and for the sake of His holy Name (Ezek. 36:22).

Is Israel's return in unbelief part of God's purpose? Most readers will recognise that nothing occurs which is contrary to the Creator's absolute will, but sometimes the claim is made that Israel is only occupying the land just as any other nation might, by negotiation or conquest. It is seen as a matter of "time and chance" (Eccl. 9:11), but not as part of the deliberate, maintained purpose of God.

This view is a clear attempt to play down the facts and the importance of Israel's present-day return. But when we look at the Biblical background to the departure of Judah from the land, we find Jesus speaking of "the days of vengeance" and "wrath upon this people", and he mentions them being "led away captive into all nations" (Lk. 21:22-24). The pronouncements of Jesus bore fruit a generation later. However, the events of the past century have been a reversal of nearly 1,900 years of history, and so totally in

contrast with the above words of Jesus that they must signal a countdown to the end of the days of God's vengeance.

The following are additional reasons why God might have wished to return the people to the land:

- 1 to provide them some relief from oppression, particularly the holocaust; this is part of God's mercy toward them;
- 2 to demonstrate God's continuing interest in the people and the land in a world less and less interested in Israel's Biblical history;
- 3 to reduce assimilation of Jews into Western nations during a period of their loss of belief in the reality of the God of Israel;
- 4 to be in the land ready for later events culminating in Christ's return to them, for example Ezekiel 38:8,16, Joel 3 and Zechariah 12-14;
- 5 to provide a stimulus to Gentile belief and faith.¹¹

We note that some of the reasons in this list are made more efficient by the fact of Israel's independence and sovereignty, which could be why God has provided it.

The coming of the Lord

Finally, we look at the significance of Israel's present return in relation to the coming of the Lord. Given the existence of the modern State of Israel, and a recognition that it is the fulfilment of prophecy as outlined above, this establishes it as a sign pointing to the early completion of the prophecy that remains. The coming of Messiah to the aid of Israel in her time of trouble will be the great event for which this nation has been praying for so long.

The words of Jesus in the Olivet Prophecy are relevant to the urgency of the times in which we live:

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10. Another example of this pattern was Israel's entering the promised land by the guidance of the angel of God's presence and by the work of Moses and Joshua. This also operated in two stages. First, Israel sent spies in the days of Moses' leadership, and, after initially rejecting the land, changed their mind and attempted to go up without Moses' leadership or God's blessing (Num. 14:40-43). This was unsuccessful. However, after a generation of wandering in the wilderness, they went up a second time and were able to enter under the leadership of Joshua.
 11. Unfortunately, events which to a generation looking for them seemed remarkable, and were most stimulating when they occurred, can seem long ago and of small significance to us now.

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken: and then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt. 24:29,30);

“And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh . . . when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled” (Lk. 21:28,31,32).

The heavens of Israel have been darkened for many centuries, but in 1948 the democracy of the State of Israel entered those heavens as a bright meteor, and has since been the sign of a sequence of events soon to culminate in the reappearance of Christ in power and glory. Having a human basis, the State of Israel can only be a shadow of what will come, and is due to be eclipsed, probably broken up by the destructive power of an invader, and then replaced by the glory of the Sun of righteousness when he comes to save the refugees of Judah and to commence his reign from Jerusalem (Zech. 12:7; Mal. 4:2).

God willing, the final article will consider Israel's special place in God's purpose.

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



Science

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Science update

Recent news from the world of science

David Burges

Recognising faces

THE RECOGNITION of faces forms a vital function in our daily lives, and studies of the human brain have revealed that many areas in addition to the visual system are activated when we study a face. We are in fact very good at memorising facial features, and most of us will admit to being much better at recognising faces than at recalling the names that are attached to them! Which of us has not experienced the embarrassment of talking to another brother or sister in Christ, perhaps at a gathering, whose face is perfectly familiar but whose name is completely forgotten?

We are generally quite unaware of the astonishing processes taking place in our brains that allow us to perform these feats of visual memory. Much scientific research is currently taking place to elucidate the methods by which the brain functions to achieve such results, often by studying the brains of patients who suffer particular de-

fects as the result of disease or injury. One notable case¹ is that of a man who survived a car accident and recovered from his injuries but was left unable to recognise faces, a condition known as prosopagnosia, caused by damage to a particular part of the visual cortex in the brain. His condition is illustrated by an incident when he entered a room, and, seeing a man he thought was a friend, greeted him. But there was no response, and he realised he was looking at a mirrored wall and a reflection of himself.

Recent research by scientists at the University of Sheffield and University College, London,² has compared the facial recognition capabilities of babies and adults, using analysis of eye movements and patterns of brain activity. The tests produced the surprising result that babies seem better at facial recognition than adults. Babies as

1. *Brain Story*, Susan Greenfield, 2000, p. 71.
2. "Babies recognise faces better than adults", BBC On-Line Network, Health section, 16 May 2002, reporting work published in *Science*.