



God's purpose with Israel

3. His purpose not ended

Stephen Green

IN THE FIRST two articles we looked at the early Christadelphian view of the 'Hope of Israel', with its considerable Scriptural basis, a view which is still largely intact among us today. This short review was followed by a consideration of views which reject the detailed Divine inspiration of the prophecies, and ascribe much to human origins, rejecting these prophecies in favour of what are seen as later and more spiritual teachings. We answered this kind of argument.

We now begin to look at those 'Christian' views which, in contrast to higher criticism, claim to accept the Divine inspiration of the prophecies, but reject their future application to Israel for various other reasons, such as:

- The prophecies have already been fulfilled and demand no further fulfilment
- The prophecies were conditional and the conditions were not satisfied
- Natural Israel did not satisfy the conditions and are therefore replaced by 'spiritual Israel'.

In this article we look at the first of these claims.

An extreme form of the argument that the prophecies about Israel have been fulfilled claims that all prophecy about Israel had its fulfilment initiated in New Testament times or before. Nothing, according to this view, remains to be fulfilled in modern times, now or at the time of Christ's return. We will look first at a passage used to argue this view directly, and afterwards consider how unsatisfactory this idea is when applied to other prophecies.

"The days of vengeance"

"For these be the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled" (Lk. 21:22). This passage from the Olivet Prophecy is taken to mean that "all things" prophesied about

Israel, both good and bad, were or are completed in "the days of vengeance", in the "tribulation" (Mt. 24:21) or "affliction" (Mk. 13:19). One particular author, J. L. Bray, sees "the days of vengeance" as lasting from the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans to the holocaust in Europe.¹ He says: "There now seems to be NO OTHER PROPHECY concerning the Jews to be fulfilled!".

In answer to this argument we can say that the prophecy is specifically speaking of "all things which are written" with respect to vengeance. It is not a comment on the good things which are written. Happy prophecies must receive their fulfilment too, but at another time, mainly after the unpleasant ones have been finished. At the end of the treading down of Jerusalem (Lk. 21:24), which in my view has not yet been reached, God's vengeance will be complete.²

Afterwards, all the prophecies of Jerusalem's peace and prosperity will be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus in "the name of the LORD". This is foretold in Psalm 118: "Save now, I beseech thee, O LORD: O LORD, I beseech thee, send now prosperity. Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the LORD: we have blessed you out of the house of the LORD. God is the LORD, Which hath shewed us light" (vv. 25-27); and is confirmed by the words of Jesus (Mt. 23:39).

David's throne

A prophecy about Israel that is claimed to be already fulfilled is the promise given to David

1. *Israel in Bible Prophecy*, 1983 (reprinted 1995), pp. 62,63,75.
2. The "days of vengeance" are mentioned in Hosea 9:7 (LXX), and many Old Testament passages relate to them. They are sometimes called 'the days of visitation' or 'recompense', and they are not restricted to Israel.

about his throne over Israel being inherited by his Son, as in the following quotations:

“And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build an house for My name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever” (2 Sam. 7:12,13);

“And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever” (v. 16);

“The LORD hath sworn in truth unto David; He will not turn from it; Of the fruit of thy body will I set upon thy throne” (Ps. 132:11).

It will be rightly accepted that these promises are fulfilled in Jesus, as announced by the angel at his birth (Lk. 1:31-33), but it is also wrongly claimed that their fulfilment is now completed. The words of Peter in Acts 2:29-36 are used to argue that this prophecy was fulfilled at the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to heaven:

“It was WHILE David was in the grave, sleeping with his fathers, as Peter also emphasized (Acts 2:29) . . . that Christ would be exalted to his throne and kingdom. This was fulfilled in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus while David was still dead. So the prophecy of the coming kingdom of Christ COULD NOT mean in the future at the second coming of Christ, for then David would be resurrected and no longer sleeping with his fathers”.³

However, in verses 33 and 34 Peter is saying that it is to God’s throne that Christ has already been raised, not to David’s throne nor to Christ’s own throne: “Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on My right hand”.

Compare also, “Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (5:31, NKJV). Verse 35 of chapter 2 goes on to point out that Jesus waits upon his Father’s throne until the time should come that God will make his foes his footstool. Then he can reign on the throne of David.

At the same place J. L. Bray ignores the two thrones, and says:

“. . . Christ reigns until all His foes become His foot-stool. Is this reigning a future mil-

lennial reign following the second coming of Christ, or is it a present-day reign in heaven? . . . This is NOW, in the PRESENT, while Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven . . . The kingdom of Christ is a present reality, and He reigns from Heaven as He sits on the right hand of God the Father”.⁴

But how do we see Christ reigning now? And how do we see his enemies being made his footstool now? We see no glorious reign of Christ yet, as we look at the world about us. And if the present state of affairs are what the reign of Christ means, the basic promise of the reign of David’s Son offers no further hope for a war-torn and evil-filled world.

However, the promise of Christ’s reign as King of Israel remains to be fulfilled, together with all the wonderful blessings of peace and righteousness associated with it (Ps. 72). A promise was made to David that his kingdom would be set up for ever before him. David continued to be the faithful king of Israel to the end of his life, and this personal promise to David therefore remains perfectly valid. God “will not turn from it” (Ps. 132:11).

“They shall look upon me”

In Zechariah 12 and 13 we have a prophecy of the repentance of Israel, which is claimed to have been fulfilled at Christ’s first coming (though it was clearly not), and therefore, it is said, there is no further application to follow.⁵ The prophecy reads:

“And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn” (12:10);

“In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness” (13:1).

The argument is based on the quotation of Zechariah 12:10 in John’s Gospel: “And again

3. Bray, pp. 63-4.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

5. His hands and his feet were also pierced, of course, when he was nailed to the cross (Ps. 22:16).

another scripture saith, They shall look on him whom they pierced" (Jno. 19:37). This passage is mentioned with reference to Christ's side being pierced by the soldier's spear after his death (v. 34); therefore, it is argued, its fulfilment must have been completed at that time.⁶

But John only quotes the part about the piercing, he makes no reference to "the spirit of grace and of supplications" which Zechariah said prophetically would be widely prevalent among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, or to their intense mourning, because these aspects were not fulfilled at that time, and in fact still remain to be fulfilled to this day. If that spirit had been present among the Jews at the time of Christ's trial, then Pilate would not have been forced against his own inclination to crucify Jesus.

Words from Zechariah 12:10 are quoted by John because the piercing was truly fulfilled at that time, although very few watched it. The wording of Zechariah 12:10 taken as a whole shows many Jews reacting to the living presence of one who has been pierced a while in the past, a fact which they now greatly regret. It can only be fulfilled after his resurrection from the grave. And as in those days relatively few from Israel repented (Acts 4:4), and practically none of them "look[ed] upon" the resurrected Christ, it is clear that the new spirit, which would be general among the Jews and was anticipated by Zechariah, is yet to come.

"Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen" (Rev. 1:7). This passage extends the picture of Zechariah to include not only the kindred which pierced Christ, but all kindreds, who will share in the new, widely present, "spirit . . . of supplications" to come. By all counts Revelation 1 must have been written well after the time of the crucifixion itself, and therefore puts the seeing of the pierced one in the future.

Again, the fountain for sin and uncleanness of Zechariah 13:1 has been ascribed to the first century, which is when it first became available, and was used by a few. But Zechariah 12 and 13 is speaking of a thorough cleansing of Jerusalem, the whole nation and the land (12:11-14; 13:2,8,9), which did not occur in the first century. There must be a change still to come, a change which many alive at the time will not survive, in accordance with the ominous words of Zechariah at the end of chapter 13.

The need for faith

Widening the line of argument just countered, the same source asks, How could anyone be saved by looking at Christ when he comes in glory? Luke 16:31 is quoted: "And he [Abraham] said unto him [the rich man], If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead". It is further argued that the idea that all living Jews will be redeemed at the sight of the returning Lord is preposterous, in view of the fact that the Bible teaches that salvation is by faith, not by sight; and "faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

There are a number of misunderstandings in these arguments:

- 1 Not all Jews living when Christ comes in glory will be redeemed. Many will be removed in the process of the nation being cleansed.
- 2 Initially the nation rather than individuals is redeemed, as Israel was when she came out of Egypt. Subsequently all the individuals will need to work out their personal salvation by demonstration of faith (Isa. 12:1-3).
- 3 The mode by which faith operates is not fully understood. The statement that salvation is by faith not by sight is an allusion to 2 Corinthians 5:7, but this reads: "for we *walk* by faith, not by sight". It says nothing about sight not being involved in the creation of faith, and therefore in the development of salvation, but rather that we are required to live at least part of our lives without obvious demonstration of God's power and presence, so that our faith can be tested.

Paul was one of those whose belief and faith were generated by the glorious appearance of Jesus and his words to him on the road to Damascus. But he also wrote the above words to the Corinthians, and includes himself in the "we". He showed his faith by what he suffered for Christ's sake when no open manifestation was shown. Something similar will apply to Israel after Christ comes. We are told that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). Israel will hear the Lord when He makes a covenant with them and puts His law in their hearts (Jer. 31:33).

The meaning of the words quoted from Hebrews 11:1 is similar, as is shown by the examples given later in that chapter. Thus God warned

6. Bray, p. 56.

Noah (v. 7), and because of his faith Noah continued over a long period of strenuous effort to prepare an ark for events of which no physical sign was seen. Faith is shown by what we do with God's Word after it has been taken in.

The new covenant

"Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that 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 that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which My covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:31-34).

One might think this prophecy of a new covenant most obviously received its fulfilment in the first-century work of Christ. The New Testament uses the term "new covenant" with respect to the remembrance of Christ's death (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), and Paul viewed his own work as a ministry of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6).⁷ In particular, the letter to the Hebrews quotes the above passage from Jeremiah at length as it considers the "better covenant" in Christ (Heb. 8:6-13). And further, this theme is picked up again in chapters 9, 10 and 12. It is clear from the evidence that the prophecy in Jeremiah of a new covenant was either fulfilled by the first coming of Christ or is at least highly dependent on the first coming for its fulfilment.

So why should this passage be evidence of a future restoration of the Jews and of special blessings in the land? The answer is that the prophecy was never fulfilled in its detail at the first coming, or indeed since. True, the basis of the new covenant was laid in Christ, but it never extended to the hearts of more than a small number in Israel. There was never a time when they "all" knew the Lord, and therefore no time when, as a nation, their iniquities were forgiven, and their sins remembered no more.

The prophecy is directed at "the house of Israel, and . . . the house of Judah" (v. 31), while the context which follows speaks of "the seed of Israel" and the permanence of its existence (vv. 36,37). The nation of Israel is intended as the primary recipient of the blessing. Although they rejected this covenant when Jeremiah first promised it, and also later when Christ came to fulfil the promise, this does not prevent a subsequent generation from welcoming the new covenant, nor God's promise from being fulfilled, every word (Prov. 30:5), at some time in the future.

It is claimed that "After those days" (v. 33) refers to the time after their punishment had been completed during the Babylonian captivity. But it is more natural to take it as referring to a time after the days which are mentioned in verse 31, that is, after the new covenant had been confirmed in Christ's first coming, but when its characteristics become more understood by the houses of Israel and Judah and they take hold on it.

The following chapter contains a similar prophecy concerning Jerusalem, the people, and the "everlasting covenant" God will make with them (32:36-40). It is the same covenant, and the people are brought back to Jerusalem (v. 37). But they are made to fear God with one heart and for ever (v. 39). Never since Jeremiah spoke his prophecy has this been a characteristic of Israel, nor, may we say, of the Gentiles, nor indeed of the church with true consistency. As with chapter 31, important prophecy awaits fulfilment.

It was because Israel did not respond to the mercy of God that He saw fit to offer the Gentiles a part in the new covenant, and by means of it they are adopted into the true Israel of God. This does not mean that the original and natural seed of Israel were replaced on a permanent basis.⁸

Conclusion

In this article we have examined four prophetic passages about Israel's future, and shown that God's interest in Israel has not ended. These passages cannot be explained as being completed

7. 'New testament' in the AV.

8. The idea of Gentile replacement of Israel is often built into something far more permanent than explained in Scripture, and is implied by technical terms such as "Replacement theology" and "Supersessionist". A later article will consider these ideas more carefully.

in the days of Christ's first coming, or soon after. They are prophecies about Israel's future blessing, and are still valid today, awaiting their fulfilment. Attempts are wrongly made to explain many other prophecies in a similar way, and we hope to find space to consider more of these later

in the series. In the next article, however, we look at prophecies which are said not to have any fulfilment at all because they were conditional, and check whether this is a fair deduction.

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



Encounter

Reprinted items from earlier issues, chosen by the Publishing Editor

The Law given through Moses

6. Sabbaths and jubilees*

Islip Collyer

THE LORD JESUS said that the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath (Mk. 2:27). Perhaps some students might find it difficult to reconcile this with the severity of the Mosaic regulations. It was decreed that anyone performing servile work on the sabbath day should be put to death, and readers may remember that there is one instance recorded of a rebel being stoned for gathering sticks on the sabbath day (Num. 15:32-36).

On reflection we realise that severity is often necessary even in conferring a blessing on humanity, for if rebels were allowed to have their own way the law would be spoilt for everyone. A definite rule was necessary, and when God was the Lawgiver any deliberate repudiation of that rule called for severity. This was not one of those matters in which a man with good intentions might fail through the weakness of the flesh. We cannot imagine any man feeling an overmastering urge to go out gathering sticks on the sabbath day. The stick gatherer was a rebel against Moses and against God, deliberately breaking a law which had just been given. His action was the expression of a strong and rebellious spirit and of stubborn flesh, not of a willing spirit and weak flesh.

Repeatedly God has shown a readiness to forgive the sins of human weakness, even when they are very evil; but there is no mercy for the cold rebellion of scornful men who despise the Divine law. There are some terrible penalties imposed by nature, which we come to recognise

and respect. When we are cold we can make a fire and draw near to its cheering and comforting warmth. If we plunged into the fire we should be burnt. It would be hard if we were forbidden to draw near, but it is no hardship to be warned against falling into the flames. We have learned the law and we respect it. So men could be warmed and cheered by the seventh day of rest. There was no reason for them to repudiate that rest, unless they were rebels desiring to treat the Law with contempt.

Clearly this law of the sabbath made a tremendous impression on the Jews. It was observed through the centuries, and still holds its place in their economy even after thousands of years of dispersion and persecution. In the last days of their life in Palestine there was a tendency with some of them to make the sabbath needlessly strict, and that was the reason for the protest of the Lord Jesus.

God will not tolerate a scornful flouting of this beneficent law, but He certainly did not desire that humble and obedient men should be tormented by man-made technicalities which would make the sabbath a day of fear rather than of rest. If a fellow creature or one of the animals suffered accident on the sabbath day it was right to give the necessary help. If men were hungry, and in accordance with the Law they took a handful of grain to eat (see Deuteronomy 23:25), they were not to be condemned on the ground that rubbing the ears of wheat in the hand amounted to forbidden work. As for the