

INTERPRETING THE PROPHETS

Lord Bishop of Liverpool
Late Right Rev. J. C. Ryle (19th Century)
(talking to his own fellow churchmen)

I believe it is high time for the Church of Christ to awaken out of its sleep about Old Testament prophecy. I think we have made great mistakes, and it is high time that we should confess it!

I warn you that unless you interpret the prophetic portion of the Old Testament in the simple, literal meaning of its words, you will find it no easy matter to carry on an argument with an unconverted Jew. Will you dare to tell him that Zion, Jerusalem, Jacob, Judah, Ephraim, Israel, do not mean what they seem to mean, but mean the Church of Christ?

[Oh, reader! If you are a man of this mind, take care what you are doing! I say again, take care! I think we should remember that we must reject Protestant traditions which are not according to the Bible, as much as the traditions of the Church of Rome.]

I believe it is high time for the Church of Christ to awaken out of its sleep about Old Testament prophecy. From the time of the Old Fathers Jerome and Origen down to the present day men have gone on in a pernicious habit of spiritualising the words of the prophets until their true meaning has been well nigh buried. It is high time to lay aside the traditional methods of interpretation and to give up our blind obedience to the opinions of such writers as Pool, Henry, Scott and Clark, upon unfulfilled prophecy.

It is high time to fall back on the good old principle that Scripture generally means what it seems to mean, and to

beware of that semi-sceptical argument: "*Such and such an interpretation cannot be correct, because it seems to us carnal.*" It is high time for Christians to interpret unfulfilled prophecy by the light of prophecy already fulfilled.

The curses on the Jews were brought to pass literally; so also will be the blessings. The scattering was literal; so also will be the gathering. The pulling down of Zion was literal; so also will be the building up. The rejection of Israel was literal; so also will be the restoration.

It is high time to cease from explaining the Old Testament prophecies in away not warranted by the New Testament. What right have we to say that the words Judah, Zion, Israel, and Jerusalem ever mean anything but literal Judah, literal Zion, literal Israel, and literal Jerusalem? What precedent shall we find in the New Testament? Hardly any, if, indeed, any at all.

I can only discover three senses in which the word Israel is used: First, it is one of the names of Jacob; Second, a name given to the Ten Tribes which separated from Judah and Benjamin and became a distinct Kingdom, often called Israel in contradistinction to the Kingdom of Judah; Third, the name given to the whole Jewish (sic) or Twelve-Tribed nation.

For centuries there has prevailed in the churches of Christ an unwarrantable mode of dealing with the word 'Israel'; it has been interpreted in many passages of the Psalms and

Prophets as if it meant nothing more than Christian believers. Have promises been held out to Israel? Men have been told continually that they are addressed to Gentile saints. Have glorious things been described as laid up in store for Israel? Men have been incessantly told that they describe the victories and triumphs of the Gospel in Christian churches. The proofs of these things are too many to require quotation.

Against that system I have long protested, and I hope I shall always protest as long as I live . . . What I protest against is the habit of allegorising plain sayings of the Word of God concerning the future history of the Nation Israel, and explaining away the fullness of their contents in order to accommodate them to the Gentile church. I believe the habit to be unwarranted by anything in Scripture and to draw after it a long train of evil consequences.

Where in the whole New Testament, shall we find any plain authority for applying the word Israel to anyone but the nation Israel? I can find none.

We are often told in the New Testament that under the Gospel, believing Gentiles are 'fellow-heirs and partakers of the same hope' with believing Jews (Eph. 3:6), but that believing Gentiles may be called 'Israel' I cannot see anywhere at all.

To what may be attributed that loose system of interpreting the language of the Psalms and Prophets? To nothing so much, I believe, as the habit of inaccurately interpreting the word Israel and the consequent application of the promises to the Gentile churches, with which they have nothing to do.

Beware of that system of allegorising and spiritualising and accommodating, which the School of Origen first brought in and found such an unfortunate degree of favour in the Church.

In reading the words which God addressed to His Ancient People, never lose sight of the primary sense of the text.

THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL

Past, Present and Future

Extract from *Christians Together* (an Inverness newsletter) - Winter 2000/1

The conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians in Israel is one which attracts differing and deeply-held opinions. However it is pointless, for a Christian, to view the situation from the same secular-humanist perspective as most commentators. What follows is a small attempt to clarify the question from a biblical (God's) standpoint.

The Past:

Israel was chosen by God and promised possession¹ of the land if the nation remained true to God. However they did not.

"Son of man, when the people of Israel were living in their own land, they defiled it by their conduct and their actions. Their conduct was like a woman's monthly uncleanness in my sight. So I poured out my wrath on them because they had shed blood in the land and because they had defiled it with their idols. I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered through the countries; I judged them according to their conduct and their actions."

(Ezek 36:17-19)

But God has promised:

"Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant¹ with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord."

(Lev 26:44-45)

Because:

"I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone."(Ezek 36:21)

And thus God said to them:

"I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth--"

(Isaiah 43:5&6)

The Present:

God has - increasingly over the last 50 years - gathered the Jews back to Israel. He has said that he will use "hunters" and "fishermen" (persecution and inducements) in the process.² This has been especially evident in the holocaust and the re-creation of the modern state of Israel through a 2/3rds majority vote by the United Nations in 1947.

However, the Jews have been gathered in unbelief and so God has said of His plans for -

The Future:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."

(Ezek 36:25)

And all for the sake of God's holy Name:

"Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes."

(Ezek 36:23b)

God continues:

"In those days and at that time, when I restore the fortunes of Judah and Jerusalem, I will gather all nations and bring them down to the Valley of Jehoshaphat. There I will enter into judgment against them concerning my inheritance, my people Israel, for they scattered my people among the nations [diaspora] and divided up [partitioned] my land."

(Joel 3:1-2)

He also warns:

"On that day I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem."

(Zech 12:9)

And He will ultimately open the Jewish eyes to the Messiah:

"I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."

(Zech 12:10)

Meanwhile:

GOD has given some guidance to the Gentile church regards what should be the Christian's attitude to his ancient people:

"If some of the branches [the Jews] have been broken off, and you [Gentile Christians], though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!"

(Rom 11:17-24)

Then reinforces:

"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: [know that] Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

And so all Israel will be saved"³

(Rom 11:25,26)

1. Possession of the land was conditional; ownership was and is an eternal and unconditional covenant made to Abraham and subsequently confirmed to Isaac and Jacob. (Gen 17:8; Psalm 105:8-11)

2. But now I will send for many fishermen," declares the LORD, "and they will catch them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks. (Jeremiah 16:16)

3. Nowhere in the New Testament is the word "Israel" used to mean "the church". (cf: The Destiny of Israel and the Church. D.Prince)