

# CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY, ISRAEL AND THE LAND, AND THE CHRISTIAN-JEWISH ENCOUNTER

by WESLEY H. BROWN

## I. Introduction

Christians who live in Jerusalem, particularly in Protestant circles, constantly encounter those who believe the modern State of Israel is the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. There is certainly much that has happened during the last fifty years which challenges Christians to fresh theological reflection, especially after the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Some have interpreted the events of such great suffering as a prelude to the coming of the Messiah.<sup>2</sup> Has there ever been in history the regathering of a people from over 100 countries such as is the case of Israel? Was there ever a language used for hundreds of years, then largely lost from daily conversation for over a millenium and a half, and then amazingly revived, as is the case of modern Hebrew? How does one explain the survival of this people after repeated massacres and dispersions throughout the world? Does all of this fit in with a

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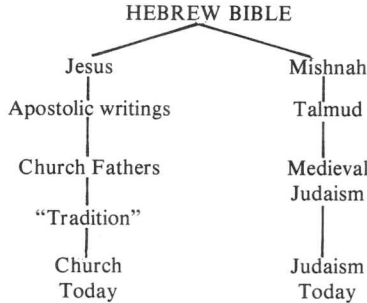
Dr. Wesley H. Brown has been a key figure in the Christian community in Jerusalem over the past six years, serving as a member of the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur, Chairman of the Rainbow Group, Chairman of the Ecumenical Fraternity, as a member of the editorial board of *Immanuel*, etc. As of September 1984, he is President of the American Baptist Seminary of the West, at Berkeley, Cal. This paper was delivered as a lecture to the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Jerusalem on March 29, 1984.

1. Emil Fackenheim, "The Holocaust and the State of Israel: Their Relation," in *Encyclopedia Judaica Yearbook, 1974*, p. 152.

2. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sanhedrin, 98a.

scheme of events predicted in biblical prophecy? How does the thoughtful Christian understand the significance of Israel, while recognizing the immense suffering and tragic loss endured as well by so many Palestinian Arab Christians and Muslims?

In the effort to understand these events of recent history, the Hebrew Bible is often quoted by both Christian and Jew, although often with a different interpretation. One may sketch the divergent paths in which the Christian and Jewish traditions have interpreted their common Scripture as follows:



Can interpreters today return to the Apostolic Writings and Jesus to find a norm for understanding prophecy, Israel, and the Land?

Many Christian writers have interpreted the rebirth of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. This paper will endeavor to examine some of the Christian interpretations of biblical prophecy, Christian perspectives on Israel and the Land and raise questions as to what an appropriate Christian position today may be.

## II. The Challenge of Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

Numerous books have appeared in the last few years which assume that biblical prophecy is entirely or almost entirely predictive in nature, and that one may simply read a passage in the Hebrew Bible and see if the verses can be applied to today's newspaper headlines. It must be admitted that one of the strongest, recurrent themes in the New Testament in its use of the Hebrew Bible is that of promise and fulfillment. Countless quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures are introduced by the gospel writers with the comment that this happened "that it might be fulfilled as was spoken by the prophet..." Thus, it is not surprising that contemporary Christian writers also tend to quote verses with the assertion that it has been or is being fulfilled in one political event or another.

Perhaps the best known among the authors who espouse this kind of interpretation of biblical prophecy is Hal Lindsey, whose books *The Late Great*

*Planet Earth* and *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon* have sold millions of copies. His writings, with the help of C.C. Carlson, is basically a popularization of the dispensationalist view of prophecy. He writes:

What has happened, and what is happening right now to Israel is significant in the entire prophetic picture. Men who have studied events that were to occur shortly before the great holocaust known as Armageddon are amazed as they see them happening before their eyes. Too few biblical scholars pay any serious attention to the proven prophetic content of scripture.... This period will be marked by the greatest devastation that man has ever brought upon himself. Mankind will be on the brink of self-annihilation when Christ suddenly returns to put an end to the war of wars called Armageddon.<sup>3</sup>

The same prophets who predicted the world-wide exile and persecution of the Jews also predicted their restoration as a nation. It is surprising that many could not see the obvious... This restoration was to come about in the general time of the climactic seven year countdown and its finale — the personal appearance of the Messiah to deliver the new state from destruction.

There remains but one more event to completely set the stage for Israel's part in the last great act of her historical drama. This is to rebuild the ancient temple of worship upon its old site. There is only one place that this temple can be built, according to the law of Moses. This is upon Mount Morah.... One major problem barred the construction of the third temple remains. That obstacle is the second holiest place of the Moslem faith, the Dome of the Rock.... Obstacle or no obstacle, it is certain that the temple will be rebuilt. Prophecy demands it.... We must conclude that a third temple will be rebuilt upon its ancient site in old Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

In other chapters, entitled “World War III,” “Nuclear Exchange Begins,” and “The Greatest Battle of All Time,” Lindsey forecasts a nuclear war centered around events in Israel, in which mankind's self-extinction is averted at the last possible moment by the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, as predicted by passages in Daniel, Zechariah, Revelation and elsewhere in Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Another popular author with the same dispensationalist approach is Derek Prince. In his most recent book, *The Last Word on the Middle East*, he sees “the central theme of biblical prophecy... being unfolded in our time... [God's] predetermined plan to regather the Jewish people from their worldwide dispersion and restore them to their ancient homeland.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to find the Israel conquest of Gaza and Sinai in 1967 as prefigured in Isa. 11:10–14, while Luke 21:24 was realized in the return of Jerusalem to Jewish control in that same war.<sup>7</sup>

A third dispensationalist author, Mike Evans, sees the nation of Israel occupying all of modern-day Lebanon in this soon-to-be-realized Messianic kingdom, along

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3. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970), p. 34.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 154, 156, etc.

6. Derek Prince, *The Last Word on the Middle East* (Lincoln, Va.: Chosen Books, 1982), p. 54.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 97.

with “utter and total destruction” for Jordan and its people — again, based on Ezekiel 37–38, 47–48 and other biblical sources.<sup>8</sup>

These examples indicate how the dispensational approach interprets Scripture and applies it to the modern situation. Is this an appropriate biblical hermeneutic for our day?

One of the major concerns of many biblical scholars when reading some of the dispensationalist literature has to do with the way in which prophecy is understood. In almost every case, it is assumed that prophecy is predictive in nature and is a predetermined description of future events. I do not deny that God on many occasions granted insight beyond the prophets’ own natural understanding into things that were to come. However, it is important to ask what hermeneutical principles are being followed in the use of the Hebrew Bible in particular. When Mike Evans, for example, refers to four Hebrew prophets who predict the destruction of Edom, one must ask if the destruction foreseen already occurred centuries ago. When one speaks of a return to the land, was that expectation fulfilled in the return from Babylon after the decree of Cyrus? The indiscriminate lifting of verses from the Hebrew prophets and their application to the contemporary scene, merely because one can match up the names of Israel and Lebanon or some other geographical entity with a contemporary event, is irresponsible exegesis. One must ask: What is the context? Of what situation is the author speaking? If it is predictive, was it fulfilled in his lifetime, or at some time thereafter?

One of the most important hermeneutical questions concerns the differentiation between prophecy and apocalyptic literature. R.B.Y. Scott emphasizes the importance of the difference between these two in his book *The Relevance of the Prophets*:

What is prophecy? ...Prophecy must be distinguished from apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic books are often called “tracts for bad times” because they seem to have been written to provide, for people suffering adversity and persecution, the consolation of a great hope in the God who works behind the scenes of history. Most of them are dominated by the conviction that evil is increasing and is approaching a climax which will bring the catastrophic intervention of God and the end of the age. This breaking in of the supernatural into the natural order marks the dualism which is characteristic of apocalyptic writing.

Apocalyptic is presented in pictorial and narrative representation of a reality lying beyond sense experience.... It is to be differentiated from prophecy proper in that its fictitious ascription is commonly to the authorship of another ancient sage or prophet (example: Assumption of Moses).

Apocalyptic literature is a mythology (pictorial and symbolic in its representation) of the end.<sup>9</sup>

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8. Mike Evans, *Israel, America's Key to Survival* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1981), pp. 198, 249, etc.

9. R.B.Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets*, New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 11.

Apocalyptic literature uses symbolic acts or language more extensively than does prophetic literature. When the imagery of apocalyptic is filled with bowls, trumpets, swords coming out of a person's mouth, beasts with various non-human ascriptions, etc., the serious exegete must be careful not to jump back and forth from literal to symbolic interpretation. Many of the dispensational books, even within the same verse, will assert a literal interpretation for one phrase and a symbolic one for the next. Such irresponsible exegesis must be challenged.

Many books on prophecy use the word as if it were equivalent to prediction. Prof. Ernst Simon of the Hebrew University challenges such a supposition:

Prophecy is misunderstood if it is made synonymous with prediction. Prophecy speaks about the future as does prediction, but not about an unconditional future that must inevitably come (bringing either destruction or redemption). Rather its fulfillment is dependent on conditions for it is dependent on human behavior.

All the prophets, from Moses to Malachi, have in common the threatening or promising appeal to the religious-ethical behavior of the people. Only in this sense can we understand the prophets as an institution. With all the changes in historical conditions, and with all the differences of personality among the various prophets, prophecy itself has fulfilled a continuous function — to keep alive the faithful national self-criticism, and to awaken it again and again.<sup>10</sup>

There are voices in Israel today calling people back to the message of truth which the prophets proclaimed, to their call for justice and righteousness, rather than to the predictive element. As R.B.Y. Scott put it:

Nothing could be clearer than that the essence of prophecy is not prediction but the declaration of religious truth.

The timelessness of the prophets is related to the spiritual truth of their message. Prophets were primarily preachers rather than foretellers.... They did make predictions but these often were only incidental to their message. Their relevance today is therefore not that they foresaw the course of events in the modern world. They do not speak *of* our age, but *to* it, because our age also is critical and the issues at stake are spiritual and moral.... They face us again with the responsibility of decision in response to God. Their prophecies express their moral certainty and spiritual understanding of what will be because of what is.... They are the contemporaries of every generation because the truth they declare is permanently valid.

The great prophets without exception were tremendously concerned with social conditions and public issues as marking a spiritual crisis.<sup>11</sup>

Some prophecy may be characterized by prediction, but, contrary to its being a pre-determination, even that which is predicted as a consequence of sin and immoral behavior may be modified by repentance and faith. A classic example is that of Jonah's warning of impending judgment on Nineveh, which was altered because of the people's repentance. Scott expresses it this way:

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10. Ernst A. Simon, "The Strength for Peace," in *Oz ve-Shalom Bulletin* #1 (March, 1982), p. 5.

11. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

Predictions are not glimpses of a predetermined future which is shortly to pass through the present moment into the past, like a motion picture film passing the lens of the projector. The future is not so mechanically determined. What is about to happen is the *necessary consequence of a moral situation*.... Predictions are integrally related to the spiritual situation of those who hear them; furthermore, they are morally conditioned by that fact.... This moral conditioning and immediate reference explains how a prophetic forecast, far from being inevitably fulfilled with literal exactness, can be modified or withdrawn altogether.

Predictions are usually clothed in the language of poetic imagery and hyperbole which no one but the most prosaic literalist could insist on taking as exact description....<sup>12</sup>

What hermeneutical principles may be suggested for those who are studying passages which appear to contain predictive prophecy? Colin Chapman suggests the following guidelines:

- A. In what kind of language is the prophecy expressed? Is it a simple prediction of an event? Does it describe a future event in poetic language? Does it describe a vision — given with an interpretation, or just a vision?
- B. Can a literal fulfillment be seen during or soon after the time of the prophet? If not, is it fulfilled now or is it still future?
- C. Does the prophecy itself give a clue to its interpretation?
- D. Does the prophecy allude to or relate to other divine promises (such as the promises to Abraham)?
- E. How did Jesus and the apostolic writers interpret this prophecy (if he or they alluded to it)?<sup>13</sup>

### **III. The New Testament and the Understanding of Israel**

Is the New Testament normative for Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible? Most Christian interpreters assert that their guidelines for understanding the Hebrew Bible and God's revelation are based upon the New Testament, beginning with the teaching of Jesus and further guided by the Holy Spirit in the apostolic writings. It seems legitimate to ask how Israel and the Land are understood in the New Testament and to ask whether those understandings are relevant for us in the contemporary situation.

It should be remembered that, in the first century of the common era, Jesus was not living in an independent Jewish state, but under the domination of Roman military occupation. How did he use the word "Israel" then, and how is it used in other passages in the New Testament? There are some 67 references to "Israel." Only three of them are clearly and specifically references to the land. In seven of the references it is possible that the reference to Israel is both to the land and the

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12. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 11.

13. Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1983), pp. 233–237.

people. There are a number of references to “the God of Israel,” “the tribes of Israel,” “the sons of Israel,” “the King of Israel” (referring to Jesus), “the men of Israel” and “the house of Israel.” In the overwhelming majority of cases, “Israel” refers to a people, the Jewish people.

What is the link in the New Testament between Israel and the Church, if any? Alan Richardson asserted:

Israel was the chosen instrument of God’s purpose (cf. esp. Amos 3:1f.) amongst the nations, but she failed to carry out that purpose, as the prophets so often lamented. Therefore, they look forward to the day in which God shall fashion a new instrument, more adequate to his purpose. All the NT writers regard the Church of Jesus Christ as this new instrument, and see the true fulfillment of Israel’s destiny in the new covenant which had been made and sealed through the death of God’s Messiah. The Christian Church is, in fact, the New Israel, though this expression is not actually found in the NT (or for that matter in the OT).<sup>14</sup>

John Koenig, on the other hand, says:

One of the words occurring most frequently in the New Testament is “Israel.” By my count there are 67 distinct references. As far as I can tell, not one of these describes the Christian church (as in the unfortunate and non-biblical expression, “New Israel,”) or even those ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus’ messiah-ship. Instead, the term everywhere denotes *empirical Israel* (emphasis is mine); that is, the Jewish nation that once covenanted with God at Sinai and/or its physical heirs in first century Judaism. At certain points this predominant meaning is supplemented, though not replaced, by an eschatological one. In such cases, we might translate our word “Israel as it will become at the end of time” (see Mt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rom. 11:26). The point here is that while no New Testament writer wished to give up continuity with the original people of God, neither did any of them make that continuity into a simple equation between Israel and Church.<sup>15</sup>

It seems to me that when Jesus refers to going “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” he is referring to his own people, and I do not believe there is scriptural support in the Gospels for the idea that there is equivalence between Israel and Church in the teaching of Jesus.

What understanding of Israel do we find in Paul? The late Peter Schneider wrote in his article, “The Meaning of ‘Israel’ in the Writings of St. Paul,”

The pivot of the Apostle’s teaching on Israel rests on the differentiation between the empirical and the true Israel. He points out that the extent of the true Israel has never been determined simply on physical descent from Abraham, but rather on spiritual affinity to Abraham’s trust relationship. He now sees the Israel of God as composed of those Israelites who, due to their spiritual past, have extended their trust relationship in dependence upon Jesus as Lord, plus the Gentiles who have entered into the covenantal relationship by their acceptance of Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Alan Richardson, “Israel,” in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 115.

15. John Koenig, *Jews and Christians in Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), p. 13.

16. Peter Schneider, “The Meaning of ‘Israel’ in the Writings of St. Paul,” in *Face to Face*, X (Fall 1983), p. 14.

Notice how Schneider appropriated Paul's expression "the Israel of God," mentioned only in Gal. 6:16!

Romans 9–11 remains a focus of exegesis for countless Biblical scholars, and it is certainly a vitally important passage for any Christian understanding of "Israel." As I understand it, in the phrase "mystery of Israel" there, Paul is using "Israel" in two distinct ways:

- a) to denote the remnant of the Jewish people who have come to believe in Jesus (as in 9:6),
- b) to refer to the Jewish people as a whole, the majority of whom rejected Jesus and thus were "hardened" (11:7 and 25); their rejection constitutes a "trespass" or a "failure" (11:11–12).

Despite the rejection of a part of Israel so that Gentiles might be brought into the covenantal relationship with God, Paul foresees Israel's future acceptance, which is a part of his eschatological hope. Great debate continues to surround Romans 11:12 and 25. What is meant by the "full" (Greek: *pleroma*) inclusion of Israel or the statement that "all Israel will be saved"? Dale Moody points out that John Calvin identified Israel with "all the people of God."<sup>17</sup> But that would "violate the meaning of 'Israel' in the other ten places in the context."<sup>18</sup> L.S. Chafer wrote that it means "the nation of Israel," C.H. Dodd that it means "the historical nation of Israel" combined with the "full number of the Gentiles" (11:25). Basing himself on Romans 9:6, Moody believes that it refers to "all the believing Gentiles and all the believing Israelites."<sup>19</sup> Time and space do not permit a more extensive discussion of this passage and its interpretation. I would like to suggest that what is important to note is that, despite the rejection of Jesus by many of the Jewish people in Paul's day, their future full participation in completion of God's purposes is anticipated.

Did the early Christians perceive themselves as something separate from Israel? The best study of this question is probably Peter Richardson's *Israel in the Apostolic Church*. He concluded:

During apostolic times the church never actually saw in itself a real third race/people (separate from Jews and Gentiles — ed.); rather it was constituted a band *within Israel*, conscious of its function as a purifying remnant and aware of its special status, but never appropriating to itself terminology of identity relating to the whole. According to Richardson, not until Jesus was clearly seen as personally embodying all of the corporate character of Israel, a tendency perhaps implicit in Johannine theology, but not made explicit

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17. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1981), p. 573.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 538.



until the mid-second century (Justin Martyr, AD 160), was the Church itself identified with the “Israel of God”...<sup>20</sup>

During the post-apostolic period, the church gradually came to claim for itself all of the promises made to ancient Israel. Finally, writers called the church “the new Israel.” Eventually, a full-blown replacement theology developed in which the church was viewed as *replacing* Israel as the people of God.

Hendrikus Berkhof, in his article, “Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church,” calls on Christians to put away language which defines the church as the “new Israel”:

Insofar as Israel is obedient to the call of its Messiah and his apostles, it changes from an isolated people into the nucleus of the now universalized people of God.... Israel continued and consummated its long history of rebellion against God’s grace by denying its Messiah. So it denied its vocation and role in the universalized stage of God’s work and condemned itself to becoming the last instead of the first... the name “Israel” is never used in the N.T. for another, more spiritualized community apart from Israel.<sup>21</sup>

I believe that the churches today must reject “replacement theology” on the basis of New Testament exegesis of the word “Israel.”

#### **IV. The New Testament and the Land**

Since Israel is so deeply linked to the Land, it seems wisest to turn next to a discussion of the scripture and the Land. One of the most striking differences between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (or Apostolic Writings, if you prefer van Buren’s term) is the centrality of the Land in the Hebrew Bible and the apparent indifference to it in much of the New Testament. The most important study on this subject to date is W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*. In it, Davies asserts:

Jesus, as far as we can gather, paid little attention to the relationship between God, Israel, and the Land....<sup>22</sup>

In the last resort, this study drives us to one point: the person of a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, who proclaimed the acceptable year of the Lord only to die accursed on a cross and so to pollute the land, and by that act and its consequences to shatter the geographic dimension of the religion of his fathers. Like everything else, the land also in the New Testament drives us to ponder the mystery of Jesus, the Christ, who by his cross and resurrection broke not only the bonds of death for early Christians, but also the bonds of the land.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Carl Armerding, “The Meaning of Israel in Evangelical Thought,” in *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation*, ed., Tanenbaum, Wilson & Rudin (Ann Arbor: Baker Book House, 1978), p. 125.

21. Hendrikus Berkhof, “Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 6 (Summer, 1969), p. 335.

22. W.D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 365.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

Some suggest that the comments of Jesus to the woman of Samaria in John 4, “Neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father...” clearly imply the universalization of his message and worship and a loosening of the tie to the land.

Scholars debate whether or not there are *indirect* references to the land in certain passages in the Synoptic Gospels. In the parable of the fig tree, for example (Luke 13:6–9; Matt. 21:18–18; Mark 11:12–14), there are differences in the way in which the synoptic writers recount the parable, with an unusual addition found in Luke. W.D. Davies comments:

Only in Luke is found the following regarding the tree: “Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?” Only in Luke is there a direct reference to the land on which the fig tree (Israel) grows. Matthew merely states that the fig tree withered immediately, but Mark notes later, in 11:20, that it was withered from the roots. Did the land refuse to sustain it? This question cannot be pressed. But are we to ascribe any special significance to Luke’s reference to the Land? Did he here mean to claim that for Jesus the judgment on Israel included or would incur separation from the land?<sup>24</sup>

David Flusser, in his critical review of W.D. Davies’ study, wrote that he believes:

Jesus mentions the eschatological re-assembly of the dispersed Jewish people; “There will be wailing and grinding of teeth there, when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrown out. From east and west people will come, from north and south, for the feast in the kingdom of God” (Lk. 19:28–29).<sup>25</sup>

Matthew, Flusser asserts, turns the logion about the return from the diaspora into the election of the Gentiles and a verdict against the Jewish people.<sup>26</sup>

In the Pauline epistles, there is an absence of express references to the Land. Is this because so much of Paul’s time and writing is in a diaspora setting where the Land already has less importance for people? Davies believes it is more than that:

Christ has become for Paul the “locus” of redemption here and in the world to come. “The land” has been for him “Christified.” It is not the land promised, much as he loved it, that became his inheritance, but the living Lord, in whom was a new creation.<sup>27</sup>

Once Paul had made the Living Lord rather than the Torah the centre in life and in death, once he had seen in Jesus his Torah, he had in principle broken with the land.... His geographical identity was subordinated to that of being “in Christ” in whom he was neither Jew nor Greek.<sup>28</sup>

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24. *Ibid.*, p. 355.

25. David Flusser, “The Land and the Promise,” [a critical review of Davies’ *The Gospel and the Land*], in *The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, March 7, 1975, p. 18.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

These New Testament attitudes are intensified in their alienation from the importance of the land as the church becomes more dominated by Gentiles. As Davies describes the process:

One of the startling aspects of early Christianity is that, at a very early date, Gentiles, for whom the question of the Land could not possess the interest that it had for Jewish Christians, soon became the majority... the rapid spread of Christianity into the Gentile world carried with it the demotion of the question of the Land, even though that question did not die out entirely but persisted in later periods.<sup>29</sup>

In the light of all of this, is there a valid application of the early Christian position, and the attitudes of Jesus and the Apostolic Writings, to what ought to be a Christian attitude to the land today? If Christ became supremely important for those early believers, so important that the Land lost its centrality and significance, should that also guide a Christian's perspective now? Of course, the Land is historically important as the scene of revelation and redemptive acts in Jesus, and for that reason it is potentially enriched as the locus of pilgrimage and spiritual renewal. But, it must be remembered, it is viewed very differently by Jews who cherish their scriptures.

W.D. Davies acknowledges that the traditional Jewish attitude to the land is far different, and he documents this in the first 160 pages in his book. A number of Christian documents about the Jewish people also underscore the link between God's covenant, the people, and the land. The German Evangelical Church, for example, summarizes that tie as follows:

In the book of Deuteronomy, the thesis is emphasized that Israel can be completely obedient to God only in its own land. Israel's prophets promised the return of the people to the Land in which the Torah (God's revealed will) can be fulfilled and in which God will build his kingdom.

Judaism has held to this connection between people and land. Even after the two Jewish revolts... Jewish teachers urged the people to remain in the Land as far as possible, or to return to it. In their daily prayers, Jews still say: "Bring us together from the end of the earth." The liturgy for the celebration of Passover reaches its climax with the call: "Next year in Jerusalem!" Not only many details of the fulfillment of the commandments, but also all the feast days of the Jewish year, derive their meaning from the connection between people and land, so that Jewish existence according to the traditional interpretation can only be fully realized in the Land of Israel...<sup>30</sup>

## **V. Prophecy, Israel, and the Land in the Christian-Jewish Encounter Today**

In the Christian-Jewish encounter today, there are probably no more important topics on the agenda than prophecy, Israel, and the Land. This area of discussion is a veritable mine-field of potentially explosive debate, for the issues at stake are

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29. *Ibid.*, pp. 369–370.

30. "Christians and Jews: A Study by the Council of the Protestant Church in Germany" (Gerd Mohn: Gütersloher Press, 1975), p. 22.

more than theoretical academic propositions. For the Jewish people, they are believed to involve their very survival. For Christians, they raise issues that have caused church divisions and mutual accusations of having misunderstood the purposes of God or even of heresy.

Many responsible Jewish scholars are either ill-at-ease or deeply upset by the way in which dispensationalist Christians use the Hebrew prophets. It seems to them that insufficient care is taken in examining the context of prophecy, of distinguishing between prophetic and apocalyptic literature, of asking if fulfillment (if there be such) has already taken place in the prophets' time or thereafter. Furthermore, they have the feeling that Christians' rejoicing in their return to Zion is purely utilitarian, that is, that the Jewish people are pawns on the chessboard of history being used to accomplish a disastrous scenario in a predetermined game plan. The casualness with which certain interpreters of prophecy talk of the approaching death of 2/3 of all Jews in the "Tribulation" (as if the Holocaust had been insufficient tribulation) appears to present-day Israelis as a questionable use of their Bible, at the very least.

Yehezkel Landau expressed the concern of many when he wrote:

When an evangelical preacher uses this End-of-Days symbolism, Jews and less enraptured Christians can understand it as part of his vocation to reassure the faithful. But when an incumbent president of the U.S. uses such imagery in referring to the power struggles in the Middle East, one has good reason to be concerned, even alarmed. For he is one of the two human beings on this earth with the power to turn such apocalyptic fantasies into reality by unleashing an arsenal of doomsday weapons.

In Jewish tradition, biblical prophecy is *not* a foretelling of inevitable doom or destruction. Rather it is a timely warning combined with promise based on the covenantal bond between God and His people. The prophet chastises his own community, above all the corrupt establishment, for the sins which have estranged the people from the Almighty.<sup>31</sup>

I recognize that the majority of New Testament references to the Hebrew Bible are used as examples of promise-prediction/fulfillment. It seems to me that we need to recognize that a great deal of the New Testament has an apologetic context, where the authors want to either convince the reader of the validity of the Christian claims or confirm the convictions of the faithful. Our study and use of the Hebrew prophets can be freed of that motivation. We can and should be helped in our exegesis by Jewish scholarship. There is an urgent need to hear the timeless exhortations of the prophets to righteousness and justice, and not to focus exclusively on prediction.

There is an urgent need for Christians to re-examine the theological and

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31. Yehezkel Landau, "President and Prophets," in *Jerusalem Post*, Nov. 4, 1983; reprinted in *Christianity and Crisis*, Dec. 12, 1983, pp. 474-475.

eschatological presuppositions that they bring to their interpretation of “Israel.” There is something irresponsible in the tendency to automatically apply every desired mention of Israel in the Hebrew prophets or in the New Testament to the State of Israel today.

In the Christian-Jewish encounter today, there is a danger of missing real communication because of the differing connotations subsumed for “Israel.” In the light of its usage in the New Testament generally as a reference to the Jewish people as a whole, it is important to recall that “Israel” today is almost never used to speak of all the Jews in the Soviet Union, the United States, elsewhere in the diaspora and the State of Israel — except in theological discourse! Can the theologian avoid confusion when the New Testament has such a different usage than the contemporary political one?

How should the Christian understand Israel today? Hendrikus Berkhof asserts that “the only European theologian who has given something like a theology of Israel is Karl Barth. In his *Church Dogmatics* II, 2, 34, he defines the divinely given role of the present Israel as representing God’s wrath and judgment which we all have deserved.”<sup>32</sup> Berkhof insists that this is not so negatively meant as it sounds. Barth’s later conversation with Jakob Petuchowski appears to show a change in his thinking. Speaking about the State of Israel, he said:

A possible explanation is that it is another and new sign of the electing and providentially ruling grace and faithfulness of God to the seed of Abraham, a very visible sign, visible for every reader of the papers, the whole world — a sign which is not to be overlooked.... The reappearance of Israel, now as a nation in the political realm, even as a state, may well be called a miracle for those who have eyes to see this evidence...<sup>33</sup>

Berkhof himself sees “the continuance of Israel throughout the ages primarily as a powerful demonstration of God’s faithfulness.”<sup>34</sup> For some theologians, it is more than that: “the Jews are witnesses of God’s truth to us not only by their existence but also by their own experiences and convictions.”<sup>35</sup> That witness at times comes through insights into the Hebrew scriptures both in rabbinic tradition and in more recent independent thinkers such as Buber.

Armerding says something similar when he remarks that the present state of Israel is “first and foremost a remarkable witness to the continued existence of God’s ancient people.... In the mysterious outworking of God’s total plan of

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32. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

33. Jakob J. Petuchowski, “A Jewish Response to ‘Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church,’” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 6 (1969), p. 349.

34. Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

35. *Ibid.*

redemption... who is to say that the land of Israel will not again be the focal point of his activity?"<sup>36</sup> "Israel is an expression of a people beloved by God. One cannot, on the other hand, give blanket approval to the actions of any one government, any more than we might expect Jews as a community blankly to endorse the actions of a government predominantly made up of Christians."<sup>37</sup>

Israel in its present reality presents a continuing challenge to Christian reflection. Marcel Dubois expressed it this way:

The question before the Christian conscience can be finally resumed thus: the people chosen by God had a religious vocation that was to be lived out in history, a divine destiny rooted in an historical destiny — that of a human community gathered together as a people and called Israel. As we Christians see it, this mission was to announce the Messiah and to prepare for him; it is now ended; we believe that Jesus is the Christ and that He has fulfilled the Scriptures. His coming was the decisive act in the history of salvation. Yet "the gifts of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). "God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew." (Rom. 11:2). In all the phases of her history Israel remains mysteriously marked by this election. What, then, is the effect of the divine destiny on the historical destiny of the Jews, with its various developments and experiences, and on the destiny of the State of Israel in particular?<sup>38</sup>

John Koenig feels that there is a sense in which the Christians' special relationship to the Jewish people may be spelled out by speaking of "Israel Without and Within."

The ongoing struggle of the Jewish people for survival and authentic life ('Israel' probably means 'he who strives with God') is a constant source of blessing for us *if* we acknowledge our unique kinship with them and honor them as elder brothers and sisters. Empirical Israel, embodied in the Jews and Judaism of our day, is a concrete sign of God's presence with us.... If we Christians are a charismatic people (I Cor. 12:1-7), Israel has been one much longer. The God who bestows His spirit on us is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's; and He does not forsake their descendants by creating the church. In blessing us Gentiles through Jesus, God means always to bless His ancient people as well. Though we Gentile Christians are not, strictly speaking, members of Israel, we nevertheless carry a living and passionate link with Israel in our hearts. If we ally ourselves with the struggle of contemporary Jews (Israel without) and attend to the voice of God's Spirit (Israel within), Jewish-Christian dialogue will bear wondrous fruit.<sup>39</sup>

While many Christians have expressed their identity with Israel for a variety of theological reasons,<sup>40</sup> the whole relationship has undergone a severe strain over

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36. Armerding, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

37. *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

38. Marcel Dubois, O.P., *From the Paradoxes of Israel to the Mystery of Israel* (Jerusalem: St. Isaiah House, 1968), p. 36.

39. Koenig, *op. cit.*, pp. 156-157.

40. See Simon Schoon's doctoral dissertation, *Christlijke Presentie in de Joodse Staat* (Kampen, Holland, 1982), for an analysis of these reasons. For a summary of the above in English, see my article in *Immanuel* 15 (1982), pp. 97-101.

the past two years because of the events in Lebanon and in the West Bank and the Gaza strip (or Judea and Samaria, if you prefer). The underlying issue, apart from the debate about security, is the question of the Land. Should the Christian today hold the extra-territorial attitude which seems reflected in the New Testament, or is he/she called by God to be supportive of the claims to the Land by the Jewish people or the Palestinian Arabs?

Walter Brueggemann in his book, *The Land*, concludes with some hermeneutical reflections that relate to this issue:

It is clear that, since the recent wars of the state of Israel, Christians cannot speak seriously to Jews unless we acknowledge Land to be the central agenda. While the Arabs surely have rights and legitimate grievances, the Jewish people are peculiarly the pained voice of the Land in the history of humanity, "grieved Rachel weeping." Unless we address the land question with Jews, we shall not likely understand the locus of meaning or the issue of identity. The Jewish community in all its long, tortuous history has never forgotten that its roots and its hopes are in storied earth, and that is the central driving force of its uncompromisingly ethical faith.

Obviously, Christians have failed to understand that immense and costly stance. Not only have we misunderstood Jewish perspective, but I should argue, we have misunderstood our own scripture which is also about the Land of Promise.<sup>41</sup>

Christians often differ on how they believe they should respond to Jewish affirmations of their covenantal link with the land. There appear to be two basic issues at stake: 1) the political issue, in which Israel's right to exist and her security needs are confronted by a recognition that Palestinian Christians and Moslems have also suffered great loss and injustice and have a deep love for the land; and 2) the question of the relationship of the land and the Kingdom of God.

The best illustration of the conflicting sense of loyalty and response to divergent claims of attachment to the land is what happened to the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue, first prepared by the consultation on the Church and the Jewish People, who voted approval of it in June 1981. It was ultimately revised following immense political pressure, before final approval by the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches on July 16, 1982. The earlier draft approved by the CCJP contained a significant section endeavoring to help Christians understand, as a preparation for dialogue, how fundamental the Jewish attachment to the land is. However, the feelings of deep attachment and love for the land are also characteristic of the Palestinians, and under Arab Christian pressure, the final version took on a much different character. It read:

Jews differ in their interpretations of the State of Israel, as to its religious and secular meaning. It constitutes for them part of the long search for that survival which has always

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41. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 190.

been central to Judaism through the ages. Now the quest for statehood by Palestinians — Christian and Moslem — as part of their search for survival as a people in the land — also calls for full attention.

Jews, Christians and Moslems have all maintained a presence in the land from their beginnings. While “the Holy Land” is primarily a Christian designation, the land is holy to all three. Although they may understand its holiness in different ways, it cannot be said to be more holy to one than to another.

The need for dialogue is the more urgent. When under strain the dialogue is tested. Is it mere debate or negotiation, or is it grounded in faith that God’s will for the world is secure peace with justice and compassion?<sup>42</sup>

Those of us who live here in the land feel this tension in a very existential way as a result of our friendships with both Jews and Arabs. It is heightened by the realization that, while Jews have survived a long, horrible history of anti-Semitism, usually (and tragically) at the hand of so-called “Christians,” Palestinian Arabs have also experienced injustice and great suffering.

So the question must be faced: How can Christians understand and appreciate Israel’s right to exist and security needs, while at the same time being supportive of efforts toward reconciliation and justice for all peoples? Yehezkel Landau, of the religious Zionist peace movement, *Oz ve-Shalom*, urges Christians to find ways which “serve the cause of truth, justice and peace by channeling support to groups in the Middle East, especially in the Israeli and Palestinian communities, who are struggling for reconciliation.” He emphasizes that “strident, accusatory newspaper ads are generally not effective in working for peace and justice.”<sup>43</sup> But supporting those who are true prophetic voices in the Middle East, calling their people to righteousness and justice, is one of the best responses a Christian can make.

The other issue at stake in a Christian response to the Jewish attachment to the land and belief in their covenantal relationship to it, has to do with a Christian understanding of land, eschatology, and the possible divine purpose of Israel’s presence and rebirth.

Did Jesus anticipate the rebirth of Israel in its ancient homeland? Many Bible teachers like to quote Luke 21:24, where Jesus says: “They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” This verse anticipates the dispersion after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., it is suggested, and the domination of Jerusalem by non-Jews until a later period. But it does *not* speak of any restoration or rebirth of the nation.

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42. “Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” in *Christian Jewish Relations*, 16:3 (Sept. 1983), pp. 23–31.

43. Yehezkel Landau, “A Letter to Dutch Christians,” in *Oz ve-Shalom English Bulletin* #3, June, 1983.



Does Acts 1:6 imply the disciples' belief that Israel would someday regain her sovereignty? It is interesting that the disciples' last question to Jesus related to Israel: "So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?'" How is "Israel" used? Does it allude to both land and people? David Pawson suggests that the verse implies three assumptions that Jesus did not challenge:<sup>44</sup>

- 1) Israel once had the kingdom. (You cannot restore what did not exist. Is the reference to a restoration of Israel's sovereignty as the New English Bible suggests?)
- 2) Israel did not at that time have the kingdom. (It needed to be restored, and implies the disciples' expectation that it would be.)
- 3) Israel would one day have the kingdom. (Jesus didn't say no, just that they couldn't know at that time; God had such matters under His control.)

The disciples also implied that Jesus would be the agent of that restoration. (Will *you* restore?)

Jesus' answer was that these things weren't for them to know or to be concerned about. Their task was to be his witnesses. Is his reply also an exhortation to avoid speculative eschatology? That seems a reasonable conclusion, and it is certainly a much needed application to our situation today.

The divergent opinions on these issues, held in good conscience by sincere people, remind all of us of the importance of humility and the avoidance of arrogance. Christians need to constantly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as they continue to study the Scriptures. The encounter with Jewish scholars can be a helpful experience and force reflection on suppositions that too often remain unchallenged. Conversations with thoughtful Arab Christians can also give people from the West a perspective that may further illumine their study.

Finally, the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples must remain upon our lips and in our hearts: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6.10).

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44. David Pawson, "Lord, Will You at this Time Restore the Kingdom?" Taped lecture delivered at the Conference of Prayer for Israel, Summer, 1983.