

PART I: ISRAEL, THE CONFLICT AND MINISTRY**THE ISRAEL OF GOD:
THE IDENTITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE****by Mike Kuhn**

Following this article are three responses, including two lengthy pro-Israel responses by those who strongly disagree with Mike's perspective, along with Mike's response to them.

*Mike has lived with his family in France, Morocco and Egypt. He now lives in the United States where he serves as pastor of discipleship in a large church in Tennessee. He is the author of **Fresh Vision for the Muslim World**, Authentic, 2009. Mike wrote this article at the request of the editor. You can visit his blog at: freshvisionourworld.blogspot.com*

I lived in Cairo, Egypt for sixteen years. While there, I learned that the subject of Israel is a dangerous topic. An Egyptian acquaintance gave me a private showing of his personal library including a multi-volume history of the people of Israel. I was curious to know the source of his fascination with his Hebrew-speaking neighbour. He confided to me that knowledge of one's enemy is the key to survival. My attempts to defend Israel against such animosity brought a rapid and undeserved accusation of collusion with the 'Zionist agenda.'

I have now lived in the United States for the past four years. As a pastor, I have had numerous opportunities to speak about the Middle East and my mission experience there. I have been surprised at how many times I have been misunderstood simply because I have called attention to the great need of the Arab people to hear and understand the gospel. It seems that pejorative labels are proliferating on both sides of the Atlantic!

I have become increasingly aware of the strong proclivity among American evangelicals for political and economic support of the state of Israel. The roots of this proclivity draw from the Scriptures of the Old Testament and are thoroughly watered by a theological understanding of Israel's identity that is scarcely open to question. The fact that Israel is surrounded by Islamic nations, many of whom have been active aggressors against that state, only serves to cement popular evangelical support of the Israeli state.

Follow me back to the Middle East where one more anecdote will further highlight the critical nature of the situation. Protestant mission efforts since the 19th century have made some inroads in the Middle East as evidenced by the presence of churches with denominational titles not unfamiliar to North American and British Christians—Baptist, Brethren, Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, Christian Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal, etc. Although it is not a blanket truth that one would paint with a broad brush over the entire Middle Eastern church, many have nevertheless observed the reticence of these churches to preach and teach from the Old Testament.¹ The ostensible reason for this reticence is the fact that the Old Testament is often addressed to ‘Israel.’ The presence of a political state by that same title, not to mention a state that is often viewed as a political and military adversary, creates a conundrum for some of these churches. It forces us to ask the question, should we not revisit the assumption that the ‘Israel of the contemporary Middle East’ is also the ‘Israel of God?’ Are the two the same thing or is the name ‘Israel’, as it is now applied to a political state, a false guide in our reading of the Bible?

This article will suggest on biblical and theological grounds that the two are not the same. The Israel of the contemporary Middle East has common military, political and territorial roots with the Israel of the Old Testament. However, it does not share the spiritual roots of faith that are determinative of the identity of God’s people. To use a physiological analogy, we might say that the political state of Israel shares a common blood type with the Old Testament people of God. Contemporary Christians often mistake the blood type for a deep and enduring kinship. Closer analysis, however, reveals a differentiation in DNA (Israel’s spiritual and faith heritage). It is this DNA that demonstrates the political state of Israel to be unrelated to God’s purposes for his Old Testament people. The enduring kinship with the Old Testament people of Israel lies with another—namely Christ himself. Therefore, it is a case of mistaken identity to read the contemporary political state of Israel into the Old Testament. It has disastrous effects on the church and produces massive political fallout.

My reader may already be crying ‘replacement theology!’ Some are concerned that ‘replacement theology’ leads to despising Jewish people and the kind of atrocities that have been committed by anti-Semites throughout history including the horrors of Nazism. The concept I am attempting to get across bears at least

¹ I am aware that the vast majority of the Middle Eastern church is not Protestant, but from Middle Eastern Orthodox roots. To my knowledge, the Orthodox view of Old Testament Israel does not posit a continuing role for those who hail from the Jewish faith while repudiating Christ. Thus, the problem of teaching the Old Testament is alleviated for the Orthodox churches.

two distinctions from what is often pejoratively labelled ‘replacement theology’—so-called because the church is said to ‘replace’ Israel. First, the true fulfilment of Israel is Christ, the true seed of Abraham, who is the head of the church. Thus, this is not a ‘replacement’ at all, as Christ is the final objective of the entire Old Testament revelation. Jesus’ view is that the Old Testament is about Himself (See Luke 24:25-27; 44-49; John 5:39). Secondly, Israel is not replaced, but fulfilled in Christ who becomes the progenitor of a vastly expanded Israel consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. The nations become the people of Israel by adoption into Christ. Furthermore, you might anticipate that this article will advocate that the Jews have no further role to play in God’s unfolding redemption of the nations. That is not at all the intention of this article. Stay with me and we will discover a role of honour and value for those who identify themselves as Jews in our day. Let us begin by examining the biblical identity of the Old Testament people of God known as Israel.

Abraham: Father of Many Nations

I contend that two elements of God’s blessing on Abraham are consistent throughout the entirety of Scripture. These elements are 1) the inclusive nature of the blessing and 2) the expansive nature of the blessing. Leslie Newbigin has pointed out that God’s election of Israel is often misconstrued as an election based on preference—Israel is God’s favourite. However, the text of the

I contend that two elements of God’s blessing on Abraham are consistent throughout the entirety of Scripture. These elements are 1) the inclusive nature of the blessing and 2) the

Abrahamic blessing indicates clearly that God’s election of Israel is based on purpose and that purpose is clearly the blessing of the nations through the election of a particular nation. In the words of Newbigin: ‘The promised blessing is, in the end, for all the nations...and the faithful remnant are the chosen bearers of it... Bearers—not exclusive beneficiaries... Again and again it had to be said that election is for responsibility, not for privilege.’² We might rephrase Newbigin to say that election is a privilege with responsibility. The two imperatives in the Abrahamic blessing of Genesis 12 are ‘go’ (12:1) and ‘be a blessing’ (12:2). Abraham is clearly told that through him, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. This is particularly

striking in the context of the division of the world into languages immediately preceding God’s election of Abraham (Gen 11). The Babel incident is not God’s ruse to destabilize humanity, but his preservation of humanity from a false, self-promoting salvation. His call and blessing of Abraham reveals an unfolding plan that will ultimately lead those nations of Babel back into the blessing of reconciliation with God.

² Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, p 32.

Therefore, God's blessing on Abraham was a blessing through Abraham and his seed to all the nations of the earth. In the words of Christopher Wright, 'Blessing for the nations is the bottom line, textually and theologically, of God's promise to Abraham.'³ I hope that there will be little disagreement on that point. The disagreement comes in identifying the nation of Abraham today. After God has given Abraham's offspring the land from the 'river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,' (Gen 15:18) He appears to Abraham with another significant promise. The promise is simply that Abraham will be the father not of a nation, but of many nations. 'Behold my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.' (Gen 17:4). Notice that there are two planes on which the promises of God are expanding. The first plane is one of geography. Abraham was originally told to go to a land that God would show him (Gen 12:1). The land given to Abraham's offspring is a land that extends from Egypt into Iraq—'from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates' (Gen 15:18). It is not merely the land of Canaan, but also includes the land from which Abraham originated and extends to Abraham's furthest sojourning—Egypt. Later, God's promise to Jacob indicates an even greater expansion of the land. 'The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south.' (Gen 28:13-14) The spread of Jacob's descendants will be universal extending to the four points of the compass.

The second plane is that of ethnicity. Abraham's fatherhood will extend to a multitude of nations. This word can hardly be mistaken for a small number of Middle Eastern ethnic entities each having a blood relation to Abraham. Something much larger is in view here. Abraham had previously received the promise that his descendants would equal the number of stars in the heavens, a sum now known to be virtually infinite. This is the promise that Abraham believed, and it was 'counted to him as righteousness.' (Genesis 15:5-6). Later, the promise is that Abraham's seed will be like the sand on the seashore (Gen 22:17). If we presume that these promises will be fulfilled through the biological descendants of Abraham, Yahweh is making promises to Abraham that are simply too great to come true. If, however, we understand these promises in the light of New Testament realities, their meaning becomes quite clear. Abraham's fatherhood is not merely the fatherhood of his biological descendants, but of all who share the faith of Abraham. The land that is given to Abraham is not merely the land of Canaan, but all the land on which his seed has sojourned. The entire earth is the possession of Abraham's descendants. In summary, God's blessing on Abraham is expansive and inclusive—to all the earth (geographically) and to all

³ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*, p 194.

nations (all ethnicities). I acknowledge that the expansive nature of the Abrahamic promise may be a new concept and difficult for many Evangelical readers. Nevertheless, it is a consistent, though often implicit, dimension of redemptive history. Further on we will consider Jesus' and his apostles' important contribution to the idea.

Israel: What is in a Name?

Jacob's name is changed to Israel after the wrestling match in which Jacob declares that he has seen God face to face. Who then might this God be other than the same person who appeared to Jacob's father Abraham, enjoyed a meal with him by the oaks of Mamre and ultimately became the object of his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah as Abraham boldly requests that Yahweh spare the city for the sake of a minority of righteous people (Genesis 18)? Jesus, the supreme interpreter of the Old Testament, makes clear that Abraham rejoiced to see *his* day (John 8:56), that the Old Testament bears witness of *him* (John 5:39), that the law, the Prophets and the Psalms, which are *about him*, must be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). We can come to no other conclusion than that Christ himself, in a pre-incarnate appearance, was revealing *himself* to the patriarchs. The change of Jacob's name to Israel could not be more revealing of God's true purposes for this people related to him by covenant.

The name 'Israel' consists of two words: *yisra'* and *el*. The first word can be translated 'he contends' or 'he strives.' The second word is the pronoun referring to God himself. Thus, it is possible to translate the name Israel in one of two ways: 'God contends' or 'He contends with God.' While the first rendering is possibly the most straightforward translation, a contextual factor favours the second rendering. Genesis 32:28 asserts, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.' Thus, Jacob is 'one who strives with God,' and this is the commonly understood meaning of the name Israel. However, it is possible, and, I contend, probable, that a double meaning is intended by this name.⁴ Clearly, Jacob did not prevail against God. In fact, it was a mere touch from God that crippled Jacob, presumably for life, leaving him to walk with a limp. Thus, Jacob's prevailing was a gift of God; it was, in fact, God's contending on his behalf that allowed him to prevail both in his human struggles with the likes of Esau and Laban, and in his spiritual struggle with God Almighty. Jacob walked with a limp to remind him and all who saw him that his striving would prove fruitless. God's striving on his behalf would prosper him and bless him, securing for him the fulfilment of God's promises to his fathers. Jacob was wrestling with one who would ultimately prevail and secure the blessing for Jacob's seed.

⁴ See *The Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol 2: p 304-316.

Much is at stake in this name 'Israel.' Is it the striving of Jacob that produces the fulfilment of God's promise or is it God's contending on behalf of Jacob that secures the blessing for him and his descendants after him? The Old Testament is clear that God has favoured Israel, not because of her righteousness, size or status (See Deuteronomy 9), but for the sake of His glory and fame. He will demonstrate his power and glory through his indwelling of a people—Israel. The very name of Israel provides for us a key to interpreting the identity of this people. Israel is the people for whom God contends.

A Few Surprising Israelites

It is instructive to note that Israel was never identified solely along lines of biological descent. Paul made a similar argument in Galatians 3. However, is there Old Testament evidence to support our thesis? Incidentally, the evidence of the inclusion of non-ethnic Jews in Old Testament Israel should give great impetus to the 'all-nations' missionary vision of the contemporary church.

We are not arguing that all of these individuals became Jews. It might be helpful to envision concentric circles. Israel itself is the innermost circle with Yahweh's enthronement above the cherubim as the heart of Israel. The presence of Yahweh among His people attracts the people of the nations. The Old Testament is replete with stories of individuals and nations who were either drawn into the orbit of Israel or who moved into the outer rings of our concentric circles and closer to a true faith in Yahweh through Israel's instrumentation. Examples of those who actually became part of the Jewish people include Ruth the Moabitess, Rahab the harlot and Israel's slaves who were circumcised and became partakers in the covenant (Gen 17:11-13). A little further from the centre circle are others who worshipped Yahweh, Israel's God, acknowledging that He alone is God. These include Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, Naaman the Syrian, Nebuchadnezzar, the mariners who cast Jonah into the sea and the Ninevites. There are many others who witnessed the greatness of Yahweh and acknowledged Him even though we do not know the depth of their faith. Examples of these include the Egyptians⁵ after the Exodus, Cyrus the Mede, the widow who served Elijah and the Queen of Sheba.

The Old Testament is replete with stories of individuals and nations who were either drawn into the orbit of Israel or who moved into the outer rings of our concentric circles and closer to a true faith in

While this is a cursory overview, the evidence is strong to indicate that inclusion in the covenant people of Israel was not solely on the basis of

⁵ It is revealing to note the number of times in which either Yahweh or Moses states that the Egyptians will know that Yahweh alone is God because of the plagues. I counted at least nine times in the early chapters of Exodus.

biological descent. In fact, there were those who were biological descendants of Abraham who were excluded from the covenant.⁶ Others who were clearly not of ethnic Israel were included in the covenant people. The law of Moses does not insist on the ethnic identity of the people to participate in the Passover and Israel's other feasts. It does insist on the sign of the covenant—circumcision—as the criteria for covenant participation. All of ethnic Israel was to be circumcised, but others who joined themselves to Israel could be circumcised irrespective of their ethnic identity.⁷

We could easily go into much more detail on how the Psalmist and the prophets foresaw the worship of Yahweh by the people of the nations. One stunning prophecy among many others is Isaiah's declaration 'blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork and Israel my inheritance.' (Isa 19:25) After a long litany of Yahweh's chastisement of Egypt, the tone of this prophecy begins to change as the prophet pronounces the phrase 'in that day' a total of six times. With each pronouncement, the unfolding grace of God is revealed to Israel's enemy. They will tremble with fear before the Lord (v. 16). They will swear allegiance to Yahweh and among them will be those who speak the language of Canaan—perhaps this is a reference to Israel's fulfilling her priestly role to the nations (v. 18). There will be an altar to Yahweh in the midst of Egypt (v. 19). They will know Yahweh (v. 21) and they will worship and make vows to Yahweh. Imagine the shock such a prophecy would cause to a native Israelite. How could the prophet use these monikers for Egypt—Israel's enslaver—and Assyria—Israel's exiler? Surely Israel alone is Yahweh's people! Israel alone is Yahweh's handiwork! Yet Isaiah prophesies of a day when Israel will be joined with Egypt and Assyria as God's people in the earth.

Another stunning example is Isaiah 49:5-6—one of the 'suffering servant' songs of Isaiah. The servant of Yahweh, said to be Israel in verse 3, is told that it is 'too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel.' The prophet says this magnificent cause of restoring Israel and Jacob is simply not enough. 'I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.' God's clear intention for Israel is that she be a vessel to bring his saving power to all the nations of the earth! Matthew identifies Christ as this suffering servant (Matthew 12:18-21) and Christ lays claim to the words of Isaiah's song when he declares

⁶ Consider the story of Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16 or that of Zimri in Numbers 25.

⁷ I am aware that certain nations were excluded from Israel based on their response to the Exodus. However, these were specific cases in point, not the general rule.

himself to be the 'light of the world' (John 8:12). These are but two examples of a multitude of prophecies that indicate God's expansive work among the nations.⁸

The point is simply this: Although Old Testament Israel is broadly identified as the physical descendants of Abraham, exceptions abound. We find non-Jews entering the covenant people. We find Jewish people being excluded from the covenant people. Thus, biological descent is not the sole criterion for becoming an Israelite.

The exile is a tragic story of Israel's failure to live in covenant relationship to Yahweh. Ezekiel and Jeremiah clearly show that Yahweh will no longer treat Israel as His people. They will be cast off the land, they will be taken into exile, their homes and temple will be destroyed, cannibalism will take place in the streets of Jerusalem and ultimately the presence of God's glory will depart from Israel. (Jer. 25; Ez. 21) Could it be more clear that the covenant relationship with Yahweh is not a most-favoured status for the nation to enjoy? It is a purposeful calling characterized by covenantal relationship. When that covenant is broken, the covenant status is transformed to shame and disgrace. Yahweh acted for the sake of his name: 'But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations.' (Ezekiel 20:9, 14, 22; 36:22)

However, what about God's clear and persistent promises that He will never forget or forsake Israel His people? 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.' (Isaiah 49:15-16) Is it not true that Ezekiel and Jeremiah, although they prophesied disaster for Israel, also prophesied of a new covenant when God's laws would be written upon the peoples' hearts and He would dwell among them? (Jer. 31:31-37; 32:36-41; Ez. 36:22-36) The new covenant promises the return of Israel to the land where Yahweh had planted her. Thankfully, God's covenant is a covenant of grace from beginning to end. Israel has not been forgotten even though she miserably failed to keep the covenant. The people did return to their land, and even though that return was less glorious than hoped, it was the necessary preparation for the coming Messiah.

Thankfully, God's covenant is a covenant of grace from beginning to end. Israel has not been forgotten even though she miserably failed to keep the covenant. The people did return to their land, and even though that return was less glorious than hoped, it was the

⁸ The best treatment I have found of the 'all-nations' vision of the Old Testament is Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God*.

Jesus: The Completed Israel

Jesus' title 'the Son of God' has been the subject of great debate in the Middle East. Muslims presume the title indicates a physical act of procreation on the part of God or they view it as a reference to a pre-Islamic concept of lower gods and goddesses who were known as the sons and daughters of God. Such a concept is rightly rejected by Muslims. In this article, we will not presume to unpack fully the theological meaning of the title, but to point toward one aspect of its meaning, which has particular bearing on our question of the identity of Israel.

Yahweh instructed Pharaoh to let Israel go in order that the nation might serve him. He referred to the nation as 'His firstborn son.' (Ex. 4:22-23) The plagues visited upon Egypt reach their climax in the death of Egypt's firstborn in return for Pharaoh's belligerence and refusal to release Israel. The lesson could not have been more poignant for Egypt. 'Oppress my firstborn son (Israel) to your peril!' The prophet Hosea confirms the imagery: 'Out of Egypt have I called my Son' (Hosea 11:1). Matthew, whose gospel is punctuated with not-so-subtle challenges and reprimands to Israel's leaders, quotes Hosea and applies that quote

The apostles understood Jesus to be the Son of God—the Israel of God, the true embodiment of God's contending for his people. Where Israel failed, Christ succeeded. Israel

directly to Christ's sojourn in Egypt (Matt. 4:11). Is this mere coincidence? Does Jesus have an uncanny similarity to Israel, or is Matthew, along with the other apostles, pointing us to some deeper significance? Further examination demonstrates deeper affinities between Jesus and His ministry and Israel. For instance, commentators have noticed repeatedly that Jesus stood upon a mount (as did Moses) to give his discourse—the Sermon on the Mount—which stands as a further elucidation and authoritative interpretation of the Law of Moses. Consider

also Jesus' selection of the twelve apostles. Without doubt, the number twelve recalls the twelve tribes of Israel. Again, is this mere coincidence, a type of literary parallelism that mirrors the Old Testament? Or is there greater significance to these intentional references to Israel's history?

New Testament scholar Gary Burge has pointed out that John, in his gospel, shows Jesus' superiority to the land of Israel. The land held the temple, but Jesus' body was the real temple (Jn. 2:21-22). Jacob's well in Samaria offers water that satisfies only temporarily. Jesus' living water satisfies eternally (Jn. 4:10). Jesus heals conditions that the pool of Bethesda cannot heal (Jn. 5:1-9). Jesus radically redefines the concept of holy place by telling the woman of Samaria that true worshippers will worship 'neither on this mount nor in Jerusalem.' For John, Jesus is the new Moses (Jn. 1:17). He feeds his people the true manna from heaven (Jn. 6:1-34). He leads his people to their final dwelling place (Jn. 14). The vineyard, a symbol of the land of Israel (Isa 5), is refined by Jesus who points to himself as

the source of true rootedness for Israel—the vine (John 15). When John says, ‘the word became flesh and dwelt among us,’ he uses a special term: *dwelt*, which is the same word used for ‘tabernacle’ throughout the Old Testament. In effect, Jesus is the new place of God’s dwelling.⁹

Jesus’ view of the Old Testament surprises us as well. Jesus stated categorically that the Old Testament was about Him. He charged the Jewish leaders with searching the Scriptures to find eternal life, and yet not realizing that those Scriptures give testimony to *him* (John 5:39). He instructed his disciples that the Old Testament in all of its parts (Law, Psalms and Prophets) are about him and must be fulfilled. Furthermore, they point to his suffering, death and resurrection. We presume that Jesus’ unpacking of the Christ-centred implications of the Old Testament comprised much of Jesus’ post-resurrection teaching of the disciples, since that element is pre-eminent in the teaching of the apostles (Acts 4:12 and Acts 5).

What is the point? The apostles understood Jesus to be the Son of God—the Israel of God, the true embodiment of God’s contending for his people. Where Israel failed, Christ succeeded. Israel broke the covenant. Christ kept the covenant. Israel embraced the nations’ idolatry, which led to the departure of God’s presence and glory from her temple. Christ loved the Father with perfect love and was perfectly one with the Father such that He could declare, ‘he who has seen me has seen the Father.’ Jesus’ selection and commission of the twelve disciples is a reconstituting of Israel. He is known as ‘the messiah’—the anointed one. His anointing as prophet, priest and king witnesses to the fact that he has been given pre-eminence over all. His passion and crucifixion is a parallel of Israel’s exile.¹⁰ Jesus is the Israel of God. As such, he is gathering the people of Yahweh into his sheepfold—both Jews and Gentiles (John 10:16)—so that they will be **one flock with one shepherd**. He will not fail to do this. It is vital to see this Christ-centred understanding of the Old Testament. If we fail to understand Christ as the final interpreter of the Old Testament, we will fail to see the fulfilment of the Old Testament story in Christ. Perhaps this is why so many see a duality in the people of God with the ethnic

The leadership of God's people was indeed taken from the hands of the Scribes and Pharisees and given to the apostles of Christ. Those apostles produced fruit among the Jews and the nations. Christ's desire was that His vineyard be tended and cared for in order to produce the fruit he intended—the purpose of

⁹ Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?* pp. 176-177.

¹⁰ Christopher Wright’s *The God I Don’t Understand* explains this idea in the third section of the book on the crucifixion.

nation of Israel continuing to hold a central place in God's unfolding story. Those who see the Old Testament as being about Christ will have no difficulty seeing that Christ majestically accomplishes what Israel did not. It is not a 'sell-out' of the Old Testament to see it as Christ's story, nor is it an 'over-spiritualization' of the Old Testament. It is Christ's own understanding that leads us to see him as the final fulfilment of all God's purposes through Israel. He is the seed of the woman who crushes the head of the serpent. He is the seed of Abraham through whom the nations are blessed. He is the seed of David—the exalted king over a multitude of nations!

Jesus' Teaching on Israel

Perhaps the question 'what would Jesus do?' has lost some of its appeal due to a surfeit of Christian trinkets that constantly invoke the question. Nevertheless, it is instructive to ask how Jesus responded to the legitimate leaders of Israel in his day.

In Matthew 21:33-45 Jesus relates the story of a vineyard—imagery that the Old Testament used for the nation of Israel (Isa. 5:1-7)—in response to the questioning of his authority by the chief priests and elders. The tenants were expected to be stewards of the precious fruit that was the sole possession of the owner of the vineyard. Unbelievably, they beat, wound, mock and abuse messenger after messenger sent from the vineyard owner. In a final attempt to rectify a desperate situation, the vineyard owner sends his very son. The response of the tenants defies imagination. They beat the son and kill him! What then will the vineyard owner do when he returns? He will cast out those wicked men! In the same way, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders of His day, the vineyard will be taken from you and given to a people producing its fruit. The leadership of God's people was indeed taken from the hands of the Scribes and Pharisees and given to the apostles of Christ. Those apostles produced fruit among the Jews and the nations. Christ's desire was that His vineyard be tended and cared for in order to produce the fruit he intended—the purpose of the Abrahamic covenant, the blessing of all nations. May I be clear to suggest that this parable does not teach the rejection of the Jews, but the replacement of the Jewish leaders by the apostles who would carefully tend the vineyard of His people whom we know to include both Jews and Gentiles.

The Romans were a non-Jewish occupying force. Doubtless, their presence ran roughshod over Israelite sensitivities and religious preferences. One might well anticipate that the Jewish Messiah would prophesy the removal of Rome from the ancient homeland of the Jews. Such a prophecy is conspicuously absent from Jesus' teaching. In fact, to my knowledge, Jesus never once reprimands Rome or its rulers for their usurpation of the Jewish homeland; nor does he endorse it, of course. Jesus' preoccupation is not with a political entity, an earthly realm or a geographically defined homeland (neither Israel nor Rome). He came proclaiming

the Kingdom of Heaven—the Kingdom of His Father. That was his preoccupation throughout his public ministry.

In this atmosphere of military and political exploitation, the Roman centurion stands out as a refreshing counter-example. We find his story in Matthew 8:5-13 and the parallel passage in Luke 7:1-10. Apparently, the centurion loved the Jewish nation and had constructed a synagogue. His statement is a startling recognition of Jesus' authority: 'For I too am a man under authority.' Jesus specifically declares that He has not seen such faith in Israel. Furthermore, He declares that the Kingdom of Heaven will be populated with such people who will come from the east and the west, and recline with Abraham in the Kingdom of heaven while 'the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside.' Jesus elevates the criterion for entry into the Kingdom of God beyond the status quo of the day. The criterion is not birthright. It is faith in Him, as the Roman centurion so aptly demonstrated. The sharing of the family meal with the patriarch will be enjoyed by such people irrespective of birthright or religious pedigree.

Many other facets of Jesus' life and teaching suggest a re-envisioning of the identity of God's people. These include:

- The inclusion of Gentile women (Rahab and Ruth) in Jesus' genealogy. (Matt. 1:5)
- Jesus' delight in the ready response of the Samaritans. (Jn. 4:34-38).
- The geographic spread of Jesus' ministry into Tyre and Sidon and the Greek Decapolis.
- Jesus' harsh denunciation of the Shepherds of Israel—the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 24.
- Jesus' willingness to defile himself by drinking from a Samaritan vessel and sleeping in a Samaritan village. (Jn. 4)
- Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem coupled with the warning that Jerusalem had failed to recognize her salvation. (Matt. 23:37-39; Lk. 19:41-44)
- Jesus' cleansing of the temple quotes Isaiah 56:7, which states that the temple is to be a house of prayer for all peoples. (Lk. 19:46)
- Jesus' insistence that he has other sheep not of this fold, and that He must go and bring them in to be one sheepfold with one shepherd. (Jn. 10:16)
- Jesus is portrayed as the fulfilment of the suffering servant (Matt. 12:18-21) whom Yahweh would use to bring his light to the nations and his salvation to the Gentiles. (Isa. 46:5-6)
- Jesus' identification of his own family and people as those who 'hear the word of God and do it.' (Matt. 12:48-50)

In summary, we contend that Jesus, in word and action, gave sufficient indication that the true people of God are those people who believe the testimony about him and join themselves to him to become one with him. Jesus is the spiritual progenitor of a new people, a new nation consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. This nation is the inclusive and expansive continuation of Old Testament Israel. The difference is that now the anointed prophet, priest and king has appeared. God's eternal purpose for His people is fulfilled in Christ. To use the language of Hebrews, the shadow has now given way to the reality. In Christ, God's purposes are not merely proclaimed, but achieved. Christ is the Israel of God.

The Apostles' Understanding of Israel's Identity

This Christocentric understanding of the Old Testament and Israel is clearly discernible in the apostles' teaching. Paul refers to the body of Christ as the temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph 2:21). We recall that it was the Old Testament temple—the heart of Old Testament Israel—that was to be the dwelling place of Yahweh. The new temple is made of living stones that are the dwelling place of the Spirit of Yahweh. This building is founded upon the cornerstone—Christ himself—with the foundation stones being the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20-22). Furthermore, in this temple, the veil of separation has been torn asunder. In terms of participation in this Kingdom, there is no further differentiation between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, barbarian, Scythian, male and female (Gal 3:28-29). Paul's unflinching conclusion: 'If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.' His words are unequivocal, stunning in clarity and poignancy.

It strains the mind to realize that a Jewish apostle is applying these words, originally addressed to Old Testament Israel, to Christ's Kingdom—His followers comprised of

Paul is not alone in highlighting the identity of Israel in God's new covenant people. Peter quotes from Exodus 19—the prologue to the Decalogue—to make a startling identification of God's new covenant people with Old Testament Israel: 'But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation that you should show forth the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.' It strains the mind to realize that a Jewish apostle is applying these words, originally addressed to Old Testament Israel, to Christ's Kingdom—His followers comprised of people of all tribes, tongues and nations.

Consider Paul's statements in Romans 2 and Galatians 3, which leave no margin for doubt as to how Paul identified the Israel of God. 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men but from God.' This is a key passage that must be reckoned with in any attempt to

identify the true Israel. Paul clearly indicates that the outward sign of circumcision (presumably including an ethnic identification with Israel) is not the deciding factor. Who then is the Jew? It is the person who is inwardly circumcised (see Jeremiah 9:24-26). Paul spells this out even more clearly in his passionate plea to the Galatians: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.' (Gal 3:28-29) It is the believer belonging to Christ that identifies him or her as Abraham's seed.

The reader may well object: 'Yes, but Paul clearly sees a future for Israel in Romans 9 through 11.' Paul argues that the ethnic descendants of Abraham are included in the identity of Israel. His famous analogy of an Olive tree that contains both wild branches, which have been grafted in (representing the nations), and branches native to the tree (representing the Jewish people) is critical to understand. The tree is one tree which includes both the ethnic descendants of Abraham—the Jews—and the seed of Abraham by faith—the nations. The point of the analogy is the inclusive and expansive nature of the new entity. The people of God are one people that include Jews who are 'in Christ.' These Jews have a place of distinction in the one tree of God's people because, as Paul says, 'the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises' come through them (Rom. 9:4-5). It is an honourable distinction that is drawn from the Old Testament. Paul states that God has not forsaken his people as is indicated by the fact that Paul himself is a Jew (Rom 11:1-2). The inclusion of the Gentiles is not tantamount to the rejection of the Jews, as some have argued. Paul seems to anticipate a greater inclusion of the Jews in the future based on Romans 11:15: 'For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' This is the place of honour given to the Jewish people, to which I referred earlier. Jewish Christ-followers are our older brothers. We honour them, since the law, the worship, the covenants and ultimately the Messiah came to us Gentiles through them. Personally, I also anticipate and pray for many Jewish people to find life in Christ. I believe Romans 11:15 suggests this anticipation. The dividing line between a theology of replacement (which I reject) and a theology of inclusion (of which I am a proponent) is this. An inclusive theology of Israel maintains a place of honour and hope for the Jewish people. It clearly recognizes the indebtedness of the Gentiles to the Jewish nation and passionately yearns for the return of all Jewish people to their Messiah—Christ. The church does not replace Israel. Rather, Israel is expanded to include the nations.

Is it any wonder that Paul would send his final greeting to the Galatian church using the moniker 'the Israel of God?' (Gal 6:16) It is the natural and anticipated result of all we have been saying. God is bringing his eternal purposes for Israel to fruition. He is contending for a people. He is indwelling that people

by His Spirit and thereby bringing blessing to a multitude of nations who will rise up to be called by his name.

Missional and Political Implications

If such an understanding of Israel were embraced, what implications might we see as this understanding of Israel spreads through the church?

First, this understanding of Scripture must never be used to justify anti-Semitism. I want to say explicitly that this is not an attempt to justify the tactics of terror that have been used to take innocent Israeli lives. I am not in solidarity with the Egyptian acquaintance that I quoted earlier. The state of Israel is certainly not my enemy. I pray for the peace and security of the people within that state and I hope and pray for political solutions that honour that people as well as the surrounding Arab nations. Objective observers of the Middle East will readily admit that atrocities have been committed against Israel. Christ-followers must stand against those atrocities as well as the injustices that have been committed against the Palestinian people.

Nevertheless, I believe that this understanding of Scripture would assist the church to identify the Kingdom of Jesus as its first loyalty and priority rather than a political state with geographic borders in the Middle East. The regathering of Israel might instead give great impetus for intercessory prayer and incarnational ministry. The *state* of Israel, as a geopolitical entity, is a present reality in our world but is not synonymous with God's Kingdom. That role belongs to Christ alone, not to any political entity anywhere in the world. One missiologist friend referred to the current state of affairs in Israel and Palestine as a missiological emergency. Muslim nations are deeply offended by what they perceive as impartial political, military and economic support of the Israeli state by Western Evangelicals. Some may see this as a purely political issue without reference to the church. However, the truth is that the Western church has become enmeshed in the political and monetary support of this state. The church must realize that her theology of Israel implicates her in responsibility for atrocities committed against Palestinians and Israelis. Many have pointed out the complacency of the church as the Third Reich began to perpetrate injustices against the Jewish people. Can we not learn the lesson of history to examine the claims of all peoples in the light of what is just and equitable? This calls for deep contrition and humility on the part of the church.

The missional implications for the current state of affairs are staggering. The Muslim world perceives, rightly or wrongly, a perpetual repression of the Palestinian people and a solemn denial of injustices committed against that people. If we as the church are unwilling to consider both sides of this ongoing struggle in the light of Biblical justice, we lose credibility as ambassadors of Christ. Is the contemporary church guilty of the same gross misrepresentations of the gospel that our forbears

expressed in the Crusades and the Inquisition? Has the contemporary church resorted to faith in a military solution to bring lasting change to the Middle East? Do we really believe that transforming the Middle East will be wrought by a 'free market economy?' This writer does not. Elisha struck the water with Elijah's mantle and asked, 'Where is Yahweh, the God of Elijah?' The contemporary church would do well to ask itself, 'Where is the power of the gospel?'

Secondly, equipped with this Biblical understanding of Israel, the people of Christ would seek to be effective peacemakers in the current conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people and perhaps gain credibility as peacemakers in countless other irascible conflicts that cover our globe. Perhaps the church could make a tangible contribution to the peace of earthly Jerusalem, at long last. 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God.'

Third, Christians would begin to return to the study of the Old Testament, not just for its Jewish background, but also for discipleship. The church would seek to learn the lessons of Israel in its mission in the world. A Christocentric hermeneutic could re-energize the preaching and teaching of the Old Testament. The church's eschatology would also take a different shape. The limited scope of this article prohibits further discussion of eschatology, but suffice to say that a paradigm shift in our understanding of the Biblical Israel will have profound implications on our eschatology.

Finally, the body of Christ universal would be armed with an innate understanding that the final Kingdom of Christ cannot be identified with any nation or its capital—Washington, DC, Mecca, Jerusalem, Geneva, etc. The capitol of our Kingdom is a heavenly Jerusalem where Christ is enthroned at the right hand of God the Father. We await the promised descent of this Jerusalem to earth (Rev 21:2)—the consummation of the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated during his earthly ministry. 'Your Kingdom come.'

Conclusion

The Israel of God is Christ. Those who are in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are fully embraced in the Israel of God. They are those for whom God has contended in Christ. We reject the title of 'replacement theology' with its pejorative connotations and suggest the title 'Inclusive Israel' or 'the expansive people of God.' It is a reading of Scripture that holds the Jewish people in high esteem and anticipates their eventual embrace of the Messiah. It refuses to elevate ethnic descent over faith or any earthly political entity above the Kingdom of Christ.

Is the contemporary church guilty of the same gross misrepresentations of the gospel that our forbears expressed in the Crusades and the Inquisition? Has the contemporary church resorted to faith in a military solution to bring

FIRST RESPONSE TO MIKE KUHN

by Abu Roo

Five years ago Abu Roo and his family began ministry in the ME following many years as pastor of evangelism in a large American church. Having found Christ as an adult, his life-long passion and central gifting is in evangelism. He serves in a regional leadership role.

Mike Kuhn has written a scholarly and well-thought-out Biblical treatise validating the danger of elevating ethnicity or an earthly political state above faith in Christ and the Kingdom of God.

The Biblical and theological understanding of the nation of 'Israel in contemporary Middle East' is definitely an emotionally charged topic for the evangelical church, the Arab world, and of course for Israel itself. Mike tackles the subject with grace for those of different views while carefully arguing from Scripture (in both Old and New Testaments) that the true seed of Abraham, and thus heirs of promise, are followers of Christ. He emphatically rejects replacement theology and speaks out against anti-Semitism (which I do also), while properly outlining the Biblical history of God's purpose for the man Israel, then the nation of his descendants to usher in the Messiah who is the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

Mike carefully avoids the emotional landmines associated with the question of the modern nation state of Israel being true representatives of 'God's people,' but rather correctly focuses his attention on the Biblical importance of the inward nature of Christ-followers. He accurately points out from Scriptures that 'biological descent is not the criteria for becoming an Israelite.' Living in the Middle East myself for the express purpose of bringing the Gospel to the Arab world, I am constantly caught between the plight of the Palestinian people as inflicted by the modern state of Israel, and the unjustifiable acts of terrorism and violence aimed at Israeli innocents by Palestinians. I support neither, and view the situation unsolvable apart from Christ. I agree with Mike's conclusion that 'Those who are in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are fully embraced in the Israel of God.'

All-in-all, his article is thought-provoking and Scripturally justifies the need to re-examine our view of the nation state known as Israel, and what it means to be 'of the seed of Abraham.'

SECOND RESPONSE TO MIKE KUHN

by David Parsons

Rev. Parsons is media director for the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (icej.org)

Most evangelical Christians assign great biblical significance to Israel's modern-day restoration. Yet a growing number of Evangelicals today are sympathetic to Palestinian suffering and nationalist claims. They are finding a theological footing for their position in the trendy new answer of Fulfillment theology, rather than the traditional Replacement concept. This is, nonetheless, a view that sees natural Israel as having already 'fulfilled' her redemptive purpose with the coming of Jesus, leaving the Jewish nation with no future role to play.

Mike Kuhn has ably presented the Fulfillment position, laying much emphasis on the ever-expanding 'inclusiveness' of God's salvation plan. Indeed, the universal nature of God's intended family is such an elemental truth of Scripture that no Christian can rightly contest it. On the other hand, the Apostle Paul says there is a certain 'mystery' to natural Israel that has survived the cross and the birth of the Church. So while Fulfillment theology makes valid points, it is not the full counsel of Scripture. That is to be found in Covenant theology.

The great covenants of the Bible tell the story of God's salvation plan, beginning with His covenant with Abraham, which serves as the foundation for the Mosaic, Davidic and New covenants. Each was built upon or 'added to' prior covenants and did not nullify any preceding one (Gal. 3:16-19).

In the Abrahamic covenant, God offers salvation to 'all the families of the earth' through faith in Him. But the world did not know it needed to be saved, so in the Mosaic covenant the Ten Commandments were given to tell us we are sinners (Gal. 3:24). Under the Davidic covenant, we are assured of a King from David's lineage who will be the Righteous Judge of the whole earth.

In the New covenant, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus enables Gentiles to be 'adopted' as 'sons of Abraham' and 'heirs of the promise' of salvation (Rom. 4:1-16; Gal. 3:6-14, 29). The sinless life of Jesus also satisfied the just requirements of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 8:1-4; Col. 2:11). His perfect obedience to the Father, even to the point of a cursed death on a tree, earned Him the right to ascend to the throne of David (Ps. 110; Eph. 1:15-23; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb. 5:5-10).

Now notice all of these covenants were established with natural Israel. In fact, Paul describes this using possessive terms. In Romans 9:3-5, he explains the covenants 'pertain to' or 'belong to' his fellow Israelites. Earlier in Romans 3:1-4,

he insists the very oracles of God were ‘committed’ or ‘entrusted’ to natural Israel. Even Jesus told the Samaritan woman that ‘salvation is of the Jews’ (John 4:22).

This all describes natural Israel’s unique covenant relationship with God, who made them custodians of world redemption. God called Israel to be a trustee of salvation, with the beneficiary being the world. Even title to the Land of Israel was vested in Abraham’s progeny in the nature of a trust so Israel could become a nation that over time might birth into the world all the things we need for salvation.

In serving this role, Israel did not enjoy ‘most favored nation’ status. Rather, they were called to be suffering servants, even to the point of being hardened by God towards their own promised Messiah. Paul tells us this was for the sake of the Gentiles, expecting us to be grateful (Rom. 11).

Therefore, God called natural Israel in order to birth spiritual Israel—the one ever-expanding household of the redeemed. We Gentile believers do not replace natural Israel, we enlarge spiritual Israel (Eph. 2:11-22).

Yet God has always worked out his salvation plan through natural Israel, using their belief and their unbelief in equal measure to produce the one family of the redeemed. This is even true for the ‘new covenant,’ which was established by Jesus with twelve Jewish disciples gathered for the Last Supper. Hebrews 8 adds that it was ‘made with the house of Israel.’ Moreover, even the Church was birthed through 120 Jews gathered at Pentecost in that same Upper Room.

God called Israel to be a trustee of salvation, with the beneficiary being the

Thus, Paul bases his ‘mystery’ upon God’s irrevocable covenant with Israel, which is still in operation even through their unbelief. Romans 11:25 essentially says that as long as natural Israel rejects their Messiah, there is still time for Gentiles to be saved.

So while I agree with Kuhn that Israel’s calling involved divine purpose and not preference, the New Testament says that redemptive purpose is on-going even in the Jewish rejection of Jesus, so that Gentiles might accept a Gospel message that is otherwise ‘foolishness’ to us (1 Cor. 1:23). What is more, while Kuhn sees Paul ‘anticipating’ Israel’s future collective salvation, the Bible actually assures it.

We know this as well from the preaching of Peter in Acts 3:17-21, where he proclaims that all the prophecies concerning the things Messiah must suffer have been ‘fulfilled,’ but that there are still many other things spoken by the prophets yet to come. Peter is drawing here from Hosea 5-6, which refers to Israel’s promised national repentance and restoration in the last days. The prophets all agree this will entail a physical return to the Land in unbelief and then a spiritual return to God and His Messiah (see, e.g., Jer. 31, Ez. 36). Peter even declares that Christ is ‘received’ (or ‘retained’) in heaven until all this is accomplished.

Jesus also alludes to this future ‘regeneration’ of Israel in Matthew 19:28, when his disciples will ‘sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’ He also foresees the physical return of the Jews to Jerusalem (Luke 21:24) and their spiritual turning to Him as their Messiah (Luke 13:35).

These passages all speak of the future timing of the Davidic covenant, when Christ will take up David’s throne in Jerusalem, to rule over the earth in righteousness and peace. Moreover, since the covenants were entrusted to natural Israel and always find their outworking through them, this means that the Jewish people still have a redemptive role to fulfill for the benefit of the world.

Plainly stated, the modern-day restoration of Israel is destined to birth the world into the Messianic Age in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. In this process, natural Israel will be absorbed into spiritual Israel and will finally enter her promised rest in the Land.

This may frustrate some Christians, as it takes certain matters out of their hands. We Evangelicals think if we only preach the Gospel in all nations, then ‘the end will come’ (Matt. 24:14). This is true, but it is equally true that natural Israel also has a role to play. This demands that we respect Israel as still elect of God, even in her unbelief (Rom. 11:1, 11, 29).

Over the centuries, far too many Gentile Christians have failed to appreciate this mystery of Israel’s enduring election. We tend to reject the Jews because they rejected Christ, and we fail to see the redemptive purpose of God in ‘committing them all to disobedience’ for our sake (Rom. 11:28-32).

In addition, confusion often comes when we read that the ‘old covenant’ was passing away (Heb. 8:13). However, that refers only to the ritual Mosaic laws, which were but foreshadows of Christ. It does not refer to the Abrahamic covenant, which is the genesis of Israel’s relationship with God as well as our own salvation as New Testament believers. Otherwise, we are all in trouble!

The reason is spelled out in Hebrews 6, which tells us that the same unchanging God Who swore by an oath to Abraham likewise swore that Christ is our High Priest forever (Ps. 110:1-4). So if God has finished with natural Israel or vacated His promises to Abraham, including the land promise, then could He not also change His mind about the blood of Jesus?

Ultimately, a Christian’s view on Israel has to do with their view of the character of the God we serve. Is He absolutely faithful to His covenant promises, or can we reinterpret them to suit our shifting political sentiments? God is completely trustworthy, and we see this in the historic justice of God re-gathering the people He scattered so they may fulfill their prophetic national destiny. This process presently involves a very complex and painful conflict over the Land, yet

His ultimate purpose remains to bless the world—including Arabs and Muslims—through Israel's acceptance of the rightful heir to the throne of David. What a powerful message to share with the peoples of the Middle East!

RESPONSE TO DAVID PARSONS

by Mike Kuhn

I appreciate David Parsons' thoughtful reply. I read it with great interest, especially because I am indebted to covenant theology for an understanding of the unity of the Bible. He articulated his response well and I acknowledge the depth of thought that went into his reply. I am in solidarity with him on many points such as the unfolding nature of the covenant and the fact that each covenant builds on the previous one to point us forward in anticipation of the Messiah. The covenants were made with the Jewish people and we Gentiles are indebted to them. He makes the point well and forcefully that 'Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.' (Rom. 11:25) We agree that, in God's mysterious providence, through Israel's rejection of Messiah the day of grace has dawned for the Gentiles.

Furthermore I recognize that any human perspective will fail to grasp the 'full counsel of God.' By writing this article I hope to join in a conversation with many serious students of God's word who are pouring over this very topic. I recognize that my views are liable to error. However, I hope the reader will agree that my views are not born out of the shifting political winds of the Middle East or an attempt at a trendy new 'fulfillment theology.' Perish the thought! If the Scriptures do not teach what I am proposing, then I will happily walk away from it and stand corrected.

The basic premise of David Parsons' reply is that there remains a distinction between 'natural Israel' (I presume this would be all Jewish people, not only the state of Israel) and 'spiritual Israel' (I presume this to be all Christ-followers, Jews and Gentiles). The promises made to 'natural Israel,' including the promise of land are still in force. These promises were made to Old Testament Israel (natural Israel) and will be kept with 'natural Israel.' Thus, the promises made to 'natural Israel' (e.g. land) do not apply to 'spiritual Israel,' at least not to the Gentile believers of spiritual Israel. In the words of Mr. Parson's response: 'We Gentile believers do not replace natural Israel, we enlarge spiritual Israel.'

On what Biblical basis do we hold that some promises are valid only for those who are ethnically and religiously Jewish? Paul unpacks the mystery of the gospel as follows: 'This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs

together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.’ (Eph. 3:6 NIV) If the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, why should Gentiles be excluded from certain promises? Paul tackles this issue head on and is absolutely clear that the Gentiles now become full members of God’s covenant people with all rights and privileges pertaining thereto: ‘Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, ... remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both [*Jews and Gentiles*] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, [*again, Jews and Gentiles*] so making peace, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.’ (Eph. 2:11-15,19 ESV).

Positing a distinction between ‘natural Israel’ and ‘spiritual Israel’ is misleading. The Scriptures do suggest a distinction, but it is a distinction *within* the one family of God—his covenant people. It is a distinction that looks back in history in grateful recognition of how God has used his old covenant people to bring Messiah and salvation to the nations. Jewish followers of Christ are our older brothers and maintain that place of honor. We are the adopted siblings who have been brought into the family by the love of God. We are now full members of the Israel of God. If this is not the case, then the very nature of the gospel is compromised. As Paul says ‘For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ.’ (2 Cor. 1:20 NIV) God has not vacated his promises and He certainly has not changed His mind. He has simply enlarged the promises and given them to us Gentiles as well. So, Biblically, Gentile Christ-followers have rights to the land as well. This may strike modern-day evangelicals as ludicrous—how can I claim to have a right to the land of Israel? But recall that the land promises were expansive. Jesus promises the meek that they will inherit the land (the earth) (Mt. 5:5) and his faithful followers that they will rule cities (Lk. 19:17,19).

If the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, why should Gentiles be excluded from certain promises? Paul tackles this issue head on and is absolutely clear that the Gentiles now become full members of God's covenant people with all rights and privileges

Now on to a few of the passages mentioned in Rev. Parsons’ response. Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 are referred to as promising ‘a physical return to the Land in unbelief and then a spiritual return to God and His Messiah.’ Both passages refer to a new covenant and both passages refer to Israel’s being returned to the land of promise and cleansed from all their sin. Ezekiel 36:27

states 'I will put my Spirit within you.' Jeremiah 31:34 states: 'for they shall all know me... For I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more.' Again, we follow our hermeneutic and inquire how Jesus and the apostles understood these prophecies of a new covenant. We can agree that Jesus inaugurated this promised 'new covenant' (Lk. 22:20). The writer of Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 practically verbatim insisting that 'Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.' (Heb. 8:6) Later the same book affirms: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a *new covenant*,' (Heb. 12:22-24 ESV) Note that the writer of Hebrews is writing to Hebrew Christians and urging them not to abandon the faith. He does not point them to an earthly Jerusalem as the locus of their hope, but to the city of the living God where Christ reigns.

However, a careful reading of the passage makes clear that Jesus does not promise that the Jews will return to the land. Luke 21:24 simply states that Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the

We therefore understand the new covenant as having been inaugurated in Jesus as He forgives his people of their sin and sends the promised Spirit to indwell and empower them. The perfect fulfillment of this covenant takes place in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the place of Christ's reign and the city that descends upon the earth in Revelation 21. Is there hope that the Jewish people will return to Christ in

this life? I have made plain my anticipation that the number of Jewish Christ-followers will continue to increase and will bring great blessing to the entire Israel of God. Furthermore, it is crucial to see that many Jews believed the preaching of the apostles and were enfolded into the early church (Acts 21:20). Thus the blessings of the new covenant have already come to a multitude of Jewish people. Paul pointed to a remnant of Jewish believers as an indicator that God would keep his promises (Rom. 11:5). Indeed He has and He will.

Finally, in his response, Rev. Parsons mentions the New Testament affirmations of a coming renewal of Israel. The first passage is Matthew 19:18 which states: 'Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."' (Mt. 19:28 ESV) This is not a prophecy of a coming renewal of Israel. It is a promise to the apostles that they will be appointed to judge the twelve tribes. It gives no indication of the spiritual state of those twelve tribes.

The second passage cited is: "They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Lk. 21:24 ESV). Rev. Parsons states that this is a New Testament promise of a return of the Jews to the land of Israel. If this is the case, we must conclude that the New Testament does in fact promise the Jews that they will return to the land. However, a careful reading of the passage makes clear that Jesus does not promise that the Jews will return to the land. Luke 21:24 simply states that Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. In fact, the context makes clear that the signs of the end will then take place and then, 'At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.' (Lk. 21:27 NIV). If we take the text for what it says, there is no mention of reoccupying of the land prior to the events of the end times and the appearance of Christ in glory.

Luke 13:35 (ESV) is also cited: 'Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"' The fulfillment of this prophecy is found, not in a future renewal of Israel, but in Luke 19:38 as the crowds call out 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' only one week prior to Jesus' crucifixion. The cry did not reflect the condition of their hearts, obviously. Matthew's gospel (23:39) quotes Jesus as saying the same thing, only in this context Jesus is teaching about his second coming. Thus it is preferable to understand this saying, not as a promise of Israel's renewal, but as a statement of Israel's reaction when Christ returns in glory.

As stated previously, I think the Biblical affirmation of the anticipated repentance of the Jewish people is found in Romans 11:25-32. However, neither this passage nor any other New Testament promise links the Jewish repentance to a return to the land.

Maintaining a separate category for natural Israel and spiritual Israel with certain promises applying only to natural Israel, reflects in my opinion, a misunderstanding of not only the New Testament but also of the Old. We have tried to show that many of 'natural Israel' in the Old Testament failed to inherit the promises for the simple reason that they broke the covenant with Yahweh. For this reason, some were exiled and lost their land. Some were carried away into slavery. Some were punished directly by God and perished from the earth. God's covenant promises were fulfilled for those who, by faith, remained within the covenant by practice of the covenant signs which included the sacrifice of a Passover lamb as a redemption of Israel. The fulfillment of that redeeming

sacrifice is Christ. The fulfillment of the covenant promises are for those who embrace the Messiah—Jew and Gentile alike.

Does it matter? That is the question. Does it really make any difference how evangelicals understand the question of the Jewish return to the land? I think it matters. Evangelicals have a tendency to support the state of Israel (spiritually, financially, morally and politically). That support is too often misdirected or out of balance. As a result we skew the message of the gospel and the universality of it to all peoples of the Middle East—Muslim peoples, Christian Arabs and the Jews. Arabs often perceive the message of the gospel as a political and national threat while Jewish people may perceive it as a statement of political solidarity. In both cases, the true message of the gospel of the Kingdom is misconstrued. The hope of all people is the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom alone offers *shalom* to the peoples of the Middle East. That Kingdom is already present in our world and it is not based in any earthly capital. Christ rules that Kingdom from the heavenly Jerusalem. All people are welcome and invited to enter that Kingdom through the grace of God in Christ. Yes it matters.

THIRD RESPONSE TO MIKE KUHN

by Dr. Stephen Baruch

Stephen Baruch holds a PhD in Jewish Studies. Dr. Baruch also earned rabbinical ordination from an Orthodox Jewish institution. After coming to faith, he completed a Master's of Divinity, with an emphasis in Biblical Languages. He served congregations in the United States from 1986-2001 before immigrating to Israel in 2002. There he works teaching and discipling both Jewish and Arab individuals. All of his work is done in the Hebrew language.

There are many points in Mike Kuhn's article with which I agree. Even though I work primarily with Jewish individuals, I acknowledge the great need for the Arab world to hear and understand the Gospel. I also agree that God's call of Israel does not imply a favoured status, but it is a call based upon purpose that carries a great responsibility. In other words, the ultimate purpose in God calling Israel is not only for Jewish individuals, but that, through Israel, all the other nations would also respond.

Mr. Kuhn's use of Isaiah 49 is of great importance. The section that he uses reveals that it was always God's purpose to include Gentiles in His Kingdom. Hence, the proper picture of the Kingdom of God is that of both Jew and Gentile together worshipping the Lord. Faith in Messiah Jesus does not remove one's ethnicity. Rather in Christ, the body of believers from every nation, tribe and language standing before the Lamb confirms the faithfulness of God. An issue of

concern for me is when one wants to conclude that because the vast majority of Jewish individuals reject Jesus as the Messiah, that God has written off the Jewish people and the unique call that the Sovereign God has placed upon them. I am not saying that Mr. Kuhn takes such a position, yet I would like to interject into this subject a very important Biblical truth.

Mr. Kuhn states that after the Babylonian exile, 'the people did return to their land and even though that return was less glorious than hoped, *it was necessary preparation for the coming Messiah*' (my emphasis). I suggest that in the same way that Mr. Kuhn states Israel had to be back in 'their land' for Messiah's first coming, so too is it an absolute necessity for Jewish people to be dwelling in the Land of Israel for Jesus to return and establish His Kingdom. The Prophet Obadiah makes it most clear that before the Millennial Kingdom will be established, Jewish individuals must dwell not only in the borders that the modern State of Israel currently possesses, but even in places that currently belong to Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt (See Ob. 1:18-21). The Prophet Isaiah states that Jewish individuals will return and rebuild the desolate places (See Is. 54:1-3). It is important to remember that this prophecy of Isaiah comes within a group of chapters that clearly have end times implications.

This is the reason why it is so vital to watch Israel—the land and the Jewish people, because when the world sees the faithfulness that God will display to Israel, it will be a strong statement to the Gentiles. When the Gentiles see how the Lord deals with Israel, redeeming a remnant of them, many Gentiles will likewise place their faith in Jesus. This is the proper understanding of verses like Ezekiel 37:28 which says, '*And the nations shall know (Me) when I the LORD sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary shall be in the midst of them forever.*'

Mr. Kuhn makes a distinction between the Israel of the Bible and the modern State of Israel. He also warns that failure to make such a distinction can have serious and negative results. It would seem that his concern lies in the fear that failure to make this distinction could cause one to accept or encourage the modern State of Israel committing acts that are Biblically and morally unacceptable. I agree that simply because the State of Israel today has the same name as the people of God in the Old Testament, one should not accept the behaviour and actions of the State of Israel as approved by God. The modern Israel should **not** be given a free pass, but be evaluated based on Biblical standards.

I agree that simply because the State of Israel today has the same name as the people of God in the Old Testament, one should not accept the behaviour and actions of the State of Israel as approved by God. The modern Israel should not be given a free pass, but be

My impression is that the support that Mr. Kuhn is referring to is based on a few Biblical principles. First, there is a Scriptural priority on sharing the Gospel to Jewish individuals. Paul is most clear about this when he writes, *‘For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Messiah—for it is the power of God to each person who believes; to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (the non-Jew)* (Rom. 1:16). There are those who want to say that the proper interpretation of this verse is that the Gospel was first offered to the Jews and was rejected and now it is also for the Gentiles. However, such a view is not in line with Paul's statement that one of the purposes of the Church is to provoke Jewish individuals to jealousy, that is to have the same relationship that believers in Christ have with the God of Israel (See Rom. 11:11). Therefore, the priority to share the Gospel to the Jew is still one of the primary calls of the church.

I commend Mr. Kuhn for recognizing that there is indeed a future day of redemption for a great number of the sons of Jacob and that this redemption will have a mighty and positive result in the world. I believe this is a reference to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. I fully agree when Mr. Kuhn writes, *‘An inclusive theology of Israel maintains a place of honour and hope for the Jewish people. It clearly recognizes the indebtedness of the Gentiles to the Jewish nation and passionately yearns for the return of all Jewish people to their Messiah—Christ. The church does not replace Israel. Rather, Israel is expanded to include the nations.’*

An additional reason why some evangelicals support Israel lies firmly in what I previously commented upon, the role that both the Jewish people and the Land of Israel will play in the last days in bringing the nations to salvation. It is clear that much of mainline Christianity, as well as the Catholic Church, reject the right that the modern State of Israel has to the land, which the Bible calls Judea and Samaria (what the world refers to as the West Bank). This issue is usually linked to the creation of a ‘Palestinian’ State, which brings much of the support among evangelicals to which Mr. Kuhn maybe referring. Evangelicals support Israel against the ‘Palestinians’, neither because Jews are more important to God than Gentiles; nor because the suffering of the ‘Palestinians’ are less important to the sufferings of any other people including the Jews, rather because it is simply not the will of God for Israel to be divided into two modern states.

The Prophecy of Joel, which is thoroughly eschatological in nature, states: *‘For behold in those days and in that time I will return the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem. And I will gather all the nations and bring them to the valley (called) the LORD JUDGES and I will be judged with them, there concerning My people and My inheritance Israel which they scattered among the nations, and My Land which they divided’* (Joel 3:1-2). Joel mentions the valley of Jehoshaphat, which means literally ‘the Lord Judges’. This valley is in the Jezreel valley and is known in the New Testament as Armageddon.

Joel reveals that in this place God will also be judged, that is His character and purposes will be recognized by the nations. This will be made known when He judges those of the nations that go up to Jerusalem to make war with Israel. Please note that the Lord will also judge those who divided His Land. Hence, even though it is not His will for a 'Palestinian' state to be created, Joel seems to be revealing that this will occur. Once again, one should not be against the 'Palestinian' people nor ignore their sufferings, but establishing a state in Judea and Samaria is not the solution to their sufferings. Although it is very easy to blame the State of Israel (**I am not in any way implying that Mr. Kuhn is doing this in this article**), one should be aware that it is Muslims who administer both Judea and Samaria as well as the Gaza Strip who are guilty of gross violations of human rights. My complaint against Israel is not for what they have done (although Israel is not without some blame), as much as what they are failing to do. What is this? They are failing to enforce the laws of Israel in these places and are not coming to the aid of those Arabs who are suffering for not supporting the leadership of Islamic terrorists.

In conclusion, I too look forward to the New Jerusalem, but do not want to ignore the Biblical significance of the Jerusalem today in God's prophetic plan and the fact that Messiah Jesus will rule from an earthly Jerusalem for a thousand years. It is often the failure to emphasize the earthy reign of Christ from Jerusalem in the last days that keeps one from emphasizing the Jewish people and the Land of Israel now.

RESPONSE TO DR. STEPHEN BARUCH

by Mike Kuhn

I appreciate Dr. Baruch's response to the article and am gratified that there is much we can agree on. I am also grateful for his commitment to Biblical truth and ministry of that truth in Israel to both Jewish and Arab peoples.

Our conflicting reading of the Old Testament prophecies is apparent in three areas. The first is the ongoing literal validity of the land promises to ethnic Israel—a view held by a large percentage of evangelicals worldwide. Many believe that the contemporary state of Israel has a divine right, not only to the land they currently occupy (Israel and the West Bank), but also to land currently occupied by other sovereign states of the Middle East such as Jordan, Egypt and Syria. While I disagree with this reading of the Old Testament promises, I understand why sincere readers of Scripture would arrive at this conclusion. The response

referred to three primary Old Testament passages. I will briefly supply an alternate understanding of those passages.

Obadiah 18-21

First, Christ is the ultimate interpreter of the Old Testament. After Jesus himself, we look to the apostles to supply their understanding of the Old Testament. Their approach to the Old Testament scriptures must inform and direct our approach. Obadiah is a prophecy against Edom—Old Testament Israel's nemesis who rejoiced at her demise and exile. The first part of the book promises God's judgment on Edom and states that Israel will be used of God to mete out that judgment. The final 3 verses (18-21) promise Israel that she will possess Edom and occupy her land, thus vindicating Israel against Edom.

Obadiah is not the only Old Testament prophecy against Edom. A parallel promise is given in Amos 9:11-12: 'In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name,' declares the LORD who does this.' Now the question is: does Jesus—or his apostles—help us understand how this prophecy of God's punishing Edom and Israel possessing Edom's land is to be understood? The answer is yes. In Acts 15:16-17, James quotes this very passage from Amos. He amends the latter part of the prophecy from what we read in Amos to say: 'that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things.' (Acts 15:16) To our modern ears, this seems a rather strange shift from James. How does he equate Israel's punishing of Edom and possessing her land with the Gentiles coming to faith in the Messiah—the subject of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15? Did James take the Scriptures out of context? Has he misapplied the prophecy? Our confusion betrays our failure to understand the nature of Jesus' Kingdom and the epoch-making changes that Christ's announcement of the presence of the Kingdom entail. The enthronement of Messiah as the nations bow their knee to him is the vindication of Israel. These are the nations that are called by the name of Yahweh (Amos 9:12). As the nations acknowledge the Messiah of Israel, they become the subjects of the expanded Israel. Israel—the Messiah—is now in fact possessing the nations, including Edom.

Isaiah 54:1-3

'Sing O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song...' Paul quotes this passage and relates it directly to 'the Jerusalem that is above' (Gal 4:27). Paul's understanding of this passage helps us understand that it should be applied to the heavenly Jerusalem where Christ is enthroned, not the earthly Jerusalem.

Joel 3:1-2

First, Joel's prophecy pertains to conditions when the prophecy was given—the time of Joel. We must avoid assuming that these prophecies refer to events in our day (2000 + years after the prophecy). God declares that 'in that day' He will enter into judgment against those people who have divided Israel's land, traded boys for prostitutes and girls for wine to drink, etc. God did judge nations for their severe mistreatment of Israel prior to Christ's coming. Secondly, does this prophecy point toward a return of Jews to the land of Israel in the 20th century? It is noteworthy that this promise of Israel's vindication against the nations for 'dividing up the land' immediately follows the prophecy of the outpouring of God's Spirit on all flesh fulfilled in Pentecost. Contextual evidence strongly suggests that any future application of the passage should be made, not to the 20th century, but to Pentecost—the great expanding event of Israel. Again, we see the Old Testament threat of judgment on the nations transformed into a promise of grace for all who are 'in Christ'—the Israel of God. Peter urges the Pentecost observers to save themselves from this corrupt generation. The modern day application of this text is that God is still to enter into judgment with all who have abused and torn apart his covenant people. However, that covenant people is not a political state in the Middle East, but the seed of Abraham by faith, the followers of Jesus. Thus God promises to execute judgment on all who abuse, threaten and persecute His covenant people.

The second area of conflict is the view that ethnic Jews must occupy the land before Christ's return. Our principle is that Christ is the authoritative interpreter of the Old Testament. Neither Jesus nor his apostles preached his return in glory on the presence of ethnic Jews in the land of Israel or the re-establishment of an Israeli state on the ancient land of Israel. This is not an attempt to dispute the legitimacy of the Israeli state. It is rather a recognition that the legitimacy of that state must be demonstrated on pragmatic and political grounds, not Biblical or theological grounds.

The third area is the nature of the Kingdom of God. Jesus announced, not a future coming kingdom, but a present kingdom proclaiming the kingdom to be 'at hand' or to have 'drawn near.' (Mt. 3:2, 4:17; Lk. 17:21) Christ-followers are not waiting for Jesus to begin to reign. We are invited to live in the reality of His reign—subjugating ourselves and our loyalties to any human institution to the primary loyalty of Christ and His Kingdom. The Kingdom was inaugurated in Christ's first coming and will be consummated in his second coming. This reign of Christ subsumes every political state and every earthly institution. That reign will be brought to a renewed earth as the heavenly Jerusalem descends to earth as the consummation of Christ's reign (Rev 21:2).