

God's Purposes for the Jews and the Arabs

by G.D.

Introduction

For eighteen years I have worked among the Palestinians endeavoring to share the Gospel with them in a way that is both reasonable and persuasive. This is not an easy task, but I believe it has become a bit easier since I dealt with a theological problem that was hindering my efforts. The problem I am referring to is this: How do I reconcile two apparently contradictory scriptural truths? On one hand, God abhors injustice and on the other He has promised to bless Israel. Those of you who are familiar with the plight of the Palestinian people will appreciate the difficulty of reconciling these two statements.

What I am about to present then is the result of a personal quest for understanding to meet my own needs. However, I think that anyone who is trying to share the Gospel with Arabs in these troubled times will eventually have to deal with this issue. So I thought it might be useful for others who find themselves in a similar situation to have the benefit of the insights the Lord has given me on this subject.

The Correct Approach

Let me put this issue into perspective by making some general observations:

- 1) Christians often seem incapable of making objective judgments about Israel because of their failure to distinguish between the modern

State of Israel and the biblical Kingdom of Israel.

- 2) Christians often allow their perceptions of Israel and the Arab world to be colored by historical factors such as the Holocaust and political factors such as the current war on international terrorism.
- 3) Christians often formulate their views about Israel on the basis of Old Testament prophecies without giving due consideration to the teachings of the New Testament.

In view of these complicating factors let me propose what I believe to be a proper approach to this question. First of all, we should try to identify and set aside the theological, historical, and political influences that shape our views about the Jews and the Arabs and then evaluate and, if necessary, reformulate our views strictly on the basis of Scripture. Secondly, as Christians we should rely primarily on the New Testament to help us interpret what the Old Testament says about the Jews and the Arabs (based on the principle of progressive revelation).

Does God Have a Plan for the Arabs?

Scripture does not have as much to say about the Arabs as it does about the Jews. However, what little it does say clearly indicates that God intends to bless the Arab people. The earliest evidence of this may be found in Genesis 17 where God tells Abraham, *"As for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful*

and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation" (v. 20). The fact that God chose to establish his covenant with Isaac rather than Ishmael does not invalidate or diminish the importance of this promise. Later on the prophet Isaiah provides us with a clearer picture of God's plans for the descendants of Ishmael. In chapter 60 Isaiah prophesies that *"All Kedar's flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple"* (v. 7). The fact that the offerings of Nebaioth (a descendant of Ishmael) are accepted by God indicates that those who brought the offerings offered them in faith and that they themselves were accepted by God. Based on these two passages then, we can conclude that God intends to bless the descendants of Ishmael, not only in an earthly way, but also in a spiritual way.

What is Israel's Current Status?

This is a more complicated matter than it may appear. On one hand, we know that God chose to establish his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants and that He also chose not to establish his covenant with Ishmael and Esau. On the other hand, Scripture also tells us that Israel violated that covenant when it rejected Jesus and at that point ceased, in a sense, to be the people of God. This is what Paul means in Romans 11 where he likens Israel to an olive branch and declares that *"They were broken off*

because of unbelief" (v. 20). Paul then goes on to say that Israel will continue in this state of unbelief for a long time because, in his words, "Israel has experienced a hardening" (v. 25). If this is the case, how then should we relate to non-believing Jews? Paul gives us the answer in verse 28: *"As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs."* To summarize, Israel currently finds itself in a strange situation – it has been cut off from God's covenant community and has ceased to be the people of God (i.e. partners in a covenantal relationship), but it continues to occupy a special place in God's heart.

Does God Have a Plan for the Jews?

While Paul's assessment of Israel's current status is rather bleak, his prognosis for the future is much more encouraging. In Romans 11:23 he offers this assurance: *"If they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again."* Paul is so positive about Israel's future, in fact, that he is willing to predict that *"All Israel will be saved"* (v. 26). Why is Paul so optimistic? His optimism, it seems, is based on a promise he found in Isaiah: *"The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob"* (v. 26). And it's also based on his knowledge of God's character since, in his words, *"God's gifts and his call are irrevocable"* (v. 29). So on the basis of the assurances that Paul gives us in Romans 11 we may conclude that Israel's

hardening is temporary and that a remnant will indeed be reincorporated into God's covenant community.

Who Are the People of God?

It may sound confusing to say that Israel ceased to be the people of God but will once again become the people of God; however, this is the clear and unmistakable teaching of Scripture. How can we make sense of this? If we hope to unravel this mystery we must first try to understand what the Bible teaches us about membership in God's kingdom. In Matthew's account of John the Baptist's ministry we learn that there was a popular belief that membership in God's kingdom was a matter of natural descent and thus came about as a matter of course. But John corrected this misconception when he told the Sadducees and the Pharisees: *"Do not think you can say to yourselves 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham"* (Mt. 3:9). Later on Paul picks up this idea and develops it in Romans when he writes: *"Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are Abraham's descendants are they Abraham's children"* (Rom. 9:6). So if, as Paul asserts, natural descent is not the decisive factor, what is? Paul provides us with the answer to this question in Galatians where he writes: *"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs to the promise"* (Gal. 3:29). According to Paul then, it is faith in Jesus and not natural descent that qualifies us to enter God's kingdom. What is more, through faith

in Jesus we become partakers in the covenant that God made with Abraham and thus heirs to all the blessings promised to his seed.

If that is the case, who are the people of God? Based on Paul's teaching in Romans and Galatians, we must conclude that the people of God are simply those who have faith in Jesus whether they are Jews or Gentiles. Notice that I am not saying that the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God, but what I am saying is that the New Testament definition of God's people includes both Jewish believers and Gentile believers. In Ephesians Paul describes it this way: *"For he himself is our peace, who made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law and its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility"* (Eph. 2:14-16). What Paul is saying then, is that there is no longer any basis for separating believing Jews and believing Gentiles theologically. God does not have two different peoples with two different programs. These two groups who were previously hostile to each other have been reconciled and united in one new entity, namely, the body of Christ.

Does Israel Have Any Claim to the Blessings of the Covenant?

The modern-day nation of Israel is made up of a variety of subcultures with different customs and beliefs.

Nevertheless, the fact that they have chosen to make Israel their home means that the majority endorse the belief that the biblical land of Canaan or Israel is their homeland and that they have a historical right to reclaim it; in other words, they are Zionists. And those who describe themselves as religious Zionists would go even further and say that they have a God-given right and even a duty to reclaim the land on the basis of promises God made to Abraham when He, God, established his covenant with him. Now it is the beliefs of the religious Zionists that concern us here, because they are not satisfied with simply having a homeland but insist on reclaiming all of the biblical land of Israel no matter what it costs the Palestinian inhabitants of the land. The question that we must ask ourselves then, is this: **Can we, as Christians, endorse the claims of the religious Zionists and should we support their efforts to achieve them?**

As we consider our response we should keep in mind that we need to address two different audiences – Jews and Christians – and that each group will require a response suited to its own beliefs. What follows then are the arguments I would present to each group.

To the Jews I would say: No, I cannot endorse your claims or support your efforts for the following reasons:

- 1) Your appeal to the Abrahamic Covenant does not necessarily validate your claim to the land, because it is based on the assumption that God will fulfill his promises to this particular generation, whereas the

biblical record shows that God is free to discipline Israel by sending her into exile and then fulfill his promises to another generation that is more worthy than you are.

- 2) Your appeal to the Abrahamic Covenant does not necessarily validate your claim to the land, because it ignores the fact that possession of the land was one of the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant. And inasmuch as the Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant, you cannot expect to claim the blessings of that covenant unless you fulfill its conditions. However, by your treatment of the aliens living among you (viz. the Palestinians) you have violated the conditions of the covenant in the following ways:

- You have mistreated and oppressed aliens (cf. Ex. 22:21, Lev. 19:34).
- You have created one legal system for yourselves and another for aliens (cf. Lev. 24:22).
- You have illegally confiscated land (cf. Deut. 19:14, 2 Sam. 24:24).
- You have shed innocent blood (Gen. 9:5, Deut. 21:1-9).

- 3) Your appeal to the Abrahamic Covenant can never validate your claim to the land, because according to the Law the land belongs to God and you are merely his tenants (Lev. 25:23).

And to the Christians I would say: No, we should not endorse their claims or support their efforts for the following reasons:

- 1) The Mosaic Covenant is obsolete and defunct, and it has been replaced by the New Covenant.

Therefore it would make no sense for Christians to endorse claims made by Israel on the basis of the Mosaic Covenant (Heb. 9:26-27).

- 2) Under the New Covenant those who believe in Jesus are considered to be the true seed of Abraham and heirs of the promises. Therefore it would make no sense for Christians to endorse claims made by Israel on the basis of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:29).

In light of the testimony of Scripture, we may conclude then, that Israel has no greater standing before God and no greater claim on his blessings than any other nation. Nevertheless, they do have a greater responsibility to do what is right because of the knowledge that has been entrusted to them.

**Is there any Difference Ultimately
between God's Plans
for the Jews and the Arabs?**

Once we recognize that Israel is a nation like any other nation, then we can appreciate the fact that God's plan for the nations of the earth, including

the Arabs, also applies to Israel. By this I mean:

- God's desire that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:4).
- God's plan to save a portion of every nation (Rev. 5:9).
- God's desire that all men come to him through His son, Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

Conclusion

My studies on this subject have reinforced a biblical principle that I find particularly relevant here, namely, that **"God does not show favoritism"** (Rom. 2:11). To put it simply, He loves the Jews and He loves the Arabs, and He wants both nations to be saved. Therefore we should not apologize for taking the Gospel to the Arabs, as if they were obstacles to the fulfillment of God's prophetic plan. On the contrary, Jesus said that He will not return until every nation (including the Arabs) has heard the Gospel (Mt. 24:14). So it is my contention that the best way to speed the return of Christ is to continue doing the work I am already doing.