

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 19 No 2 • Mar/Apr 2013

The following three articles by Alan F. H. Wisdom are adapted with permission from a forthcoming book to be published by Bristol House Publishing.

Lands of Promise and Conflict: The Middle East in Biblical Context

by Alan F. H. Wisdom

Anyone seeking to understand the Middle East cannot avoid this fact: it is the region where the events of the Bible took place. Jews remember God's words and actions in what are now Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Israel/Palestine. This is where God constituted them as a people, gave them a law to guide their lives, and promised them a homeland in which they might live out that law. Their efforts to claim that homeland have provoked conflict in both ancient and modern times.

Christians—the world's largest religious community, and very much present in many parts of the Middle East—often speak of “the Holy Land.” This is the place where the Creator God intervened decisively in human history, becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Church was born in Jerusalem and first grew in cities like Antioch, Damascus, and Alexandria. Christians see themselves as spiritual heirs to the history of ancient Israel.

Muslims—the world's second largest religious community, and by far the largest in the Middle East—make the same claim. They count themselves as children of Abraham and followers of the prophet Issa (Jesus). It was in the Arabian cities of Mecca and Medina that Muhammad first presented himself as the

oracle of God's final revelation. Islam, the movement that he founded in 622 A.D., quickly swept over most of the Middle East and is still dominant to this day.

Most Muslims dispute the historical accounts of the Old Testament, preferring instead the markedly different narratives contained in the later Qur'an. By contrast, the mainstream of the Christian tradition has always recognized the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative. Those Scriptures are the first lens through which Christians see God's providential purposes in the Middle East. In those Scriptures we learn the historical patterns that stretch forward to today: how a gracious God reaches out to a fallen humanity, how he enters human history and makes covenants with particular people at particular times and in particular places, how he remains faithful to his covenants despite human faithlessness and its tragic consequences, how he moves to extend his covenant love to all people.

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The first 11 chapters of Genesis set the global context in which we are to see the subsequent history of Israel and the surrounding peoples. God creates the world and humankind “very good” (1:31). He blesses the first humans and bids them “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28).¹ The man and woman take comfort in one another and are comfortable in God’s presence.

But temptation and sin mislead the couple into mistrusting God and breaking his command, imagining that they would thereby become “like God” (3:4). The necessary consequence is their expulsion from the garden where they had lived with God.

The exiles try to deflect blame for their misfortune. One of their sons becomes envious of the other and murders him. The guilty Cain denies responsibility, asking contemptuously, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:9) God confronts Cain: “What have you done? Listen: your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground.” (4:10) The murderer is condemned to exile as “a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (4:12).

As “people began to multiply on the face of the ground” (6:1), the scene is grim: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence” (6:11). God sends a flood to wipe out all but a few. Nevertheless, he makes a covenant with the survivors and bids humans again “be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth” (9:7).

Yet human arrogance rises up again. The builders of Babel are ambitious for glory: “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (11:4). Once again, exile is the consequence as “the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (11:9).

Promises to Abraham

It is in this context that God takes a new initiative. In a world where all humanity has departed from its proper place, he proposes to make a new home for the family of one individual—Abram, an apparently obscure native of the city of Ur in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). God speaks to Abram:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed. (12:1-3)

Abram obeys and travels about 400 miles across the desert to the land called Canaan. God then invites Abram to look in all directions, “for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.” The offspring will be countless, “like the dust of the earth” (13:15-16). Sometime later, God reiterates the covenant more emphatically:

You [Abram] shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God. (17:4-8)

Abraham is promised four things for himself: (1) numerous descendants; (2) a people formed from those descendants who will be “a great nation”—indeed, “a multitude of nations”; (3) a special relationship between Abraham’s offspring and the God who called him, such that they will be “his people” and he will be “their God”; and (4) a land where Abraham’s people can live out that special relationship. In addition, God promises that Abraham’s blessings will overflow onto others. “All the families of the earth” will somehow benefit. Their fortunes will depend to some extent on their response to Abraham: blessed if they bless the patriarch and his progeny, cursed if they respond with hostility. The Genesis text stresses that these promises are “everlasting.”

Much is left unclear in these chapters of Genesis. The old and childless Abram does not understand how he is to have any descendants—much less “a multitude of nations.” The boundaries of the land are vague and expansive: “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (15:18).

In any case, Abraham does not possess any of this land in his lifetime. He moves through Canaan as a nomad. The only real estate that he owns is the gravesite in Hebron that he purchases for himself and his wife Sarah. The text explains the delay in fulfillment of the land promise, commenting that “the iniquity of the Amorites [the current inhabitants] is not yet complete” (15:16).

Most mysterious is the nature of the blessing that Abraham would transmit to “all the families of the

earth.” Later generations of Jews would venture many speculations on that point.

God reaffirms the covenant to Isaac, Abraham’s son by his wife Sarah. But the covenant does not cover Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his servant Hagar. In the next generation, the covenant goes through one of Isaac’s sons, Jacob, but not through the other, Esau. Clearly, biological descent is not sufficient in itself to inherit God’s promise.

Abraham’s descendants have to wait long generations before receiving the promised land. Finally, after 400 years in Egypt as guests and then slaves, God brings them out in the Exodus. The Israelites make a false start at entering the land of Canaan. First they turn back in fear of the inhabitants’ strength. Then they impetuously attempt to conquer the land in their own strength, suffering a disastrous military defeat. God sends the people back into the wilderness of Sinai for 40 more years, in which he will prepare a new generation.

The Terms of the Covenant

As the new generation stands ready to cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan, they are reminded of the terms of God’s covenant with them. The book of Deuteronomy, in the form of a farewell address by the Israelite leader Moses, sets forth the terms under which Israel is to take and possess the land.

It is “a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing” (8:7-8), according to Moses. He urges the people to note that they did not plant the vineyards and olive groves from which they will harvest, nor did they hew the cisterns from which they will drink or build the houses in which they will dwell (6:11). The appropriate response is gratitude: “You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you” (8:10).

The land belongs to God, and the people will have to depend upon God to sustain them in it. In a rugged country with irregular rainfall, human ingenuity and labor will not be sufficient:

For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys,

watered by rain from the sky, a land that the LORD your God looks after. (11:10-12a)

That God is the owner of this land, and the Israelites merely his tenants, is expressed in various practices that are mandated. Moses commands the people to bring the “first fruits” of each year’s crops and flocks as tribute to God. He orders that the land shall have rest from cultivation on the Sabbath day, and in the sabbatical (seventh) year, in conformity with God’s pattern of resting on the seventh day of creation. The land is divided among the twelve tribes of Israel by lot—a method believed to convey God’s choice.²

Moses warns the people against crediting their possession of the land to their own power or virtue. “It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their [the Canaanites’] land,” he says; “but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (9:5). It is by God’s grace that Israel lives in the land.

Nevertheless, continued enjoyment of the land is contingent upon Israel’s obedience to God’s commands. In the closing address of Deuteronomy, Moses poses the alternatives:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. (30:15-18)

In Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Old Testament histories, the land has two aspects. It offers blessings, but it also presents temptations. Moses worries that in their prosperity the people will forget God and the marvelous things that he has done for them. They will settle into complacency and set aside the demands of the law. They will cease to walk forward in covenant with God. They will come to think of the land as their rightful possession and seek to secure it by their own means. They will covet land and grasp after it, rather than receiving it gratefully as a gift from God.³

The Danger of Assimilation

The danger cited most often is that the Israelites will assimilate the ways of the people around them. Moses advises the people to “take care that you are not snared into imitating them [the Canaanites]” (Deuteronomy 12:30). He specifies some of the pagan practices to avoid: the worship of foreign gods and idols, child sacrifice and other wanton violence, forbidden sexual relations, and intermarriage with those who do not share Israel’s commitment to the Lord.

These foreign practices are not only abusive of the persons involved and defiant toward the God of Israel; they also constitute an offense against the land. A passage in Numbers treats murder as a form of environmental contamination:

You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and no expiation can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I also dwell; for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites. (35:33-34)

A Leviticus text uses an even more graphic image. “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways,” God tells Moses, for “otherwise the land will vomit you out for defiling it, as it vomited out the nation that was before you” (20: 24, 28).

The command to conquer Canaan is brutal. Moses instructs the Israelites to “utterly destroy” the inhabitants. “Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy,” he says. “Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me [God], to serve other gods.” (Deuteronomy 7:2-4) The book of Joshua recounts the capture of cities such as Jericho, with men, women, and children all put to the sword.

But the conquest was never complete. Pockets of Canaanites remained throughout Israel, and the peoples mixed extensively. When Joshua leads the Israelites in a post-conquest ceremony renewing their covenant with God, the text mentions the presence of “the aliens who resided among them” (Joshua 8:35).

Under Israel’s law, resident aliens could join in all the major religious observances. They were entitled to fair wages, and the Sabbath rest applied to them. If they were poor, the aliens could glean the fields and receive tithes. They had access to Israel’s system of justice.⁴ “When an alien resides with you in your land,” according to Leviticus, “you shall not oppress the alien.

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” (19:33-34)

For several generations after the conquest, Israel is a loose tribal confederation led by charismatic “judges.” This arrangement does not prove to be stable or satisfactory. So the elders of Israel go to the old priest Samuel and ask him to appoint “a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Samuel 8:5). God tells Samuel to give the people what they want, as “they have not rejected you [Samuel], but they have rejected me [God] from being king over them” (8:7).

Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel. But before doing so, he warns the people that they will regret this move toward conformity with the political norms of the region. The kings, he warns, will exalt themselves and subjugate the people. They will conscript young men to serve in their armies and fight their endless wars. They will take young women as palace servants. They will impose heavy taxes and redistribute property to their court favorites (8:11-18).

After Saul’s reign ends in tragedy, David becomes king in his place. And God makes a covenant with the new king:

Moreover the LORD declares to you [David] that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Samuel 7:11b-13)

That “house for my [God’s] name” is the temple, built under David’s son Solomon. Its location is Jerusalem, a formerly minor Canaanite outpost that David had chosen for his capital. The kingdom prospers and expands its influence under David and Solomon. Now Jerusalem, with the temple at its center, comes to acquire a peculiar prominence in Israelite thinking. Several of the psalms rhapsodize the joy of pilgrims coming to the holy city. For example, Psalm 48 begins:

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God.
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
is the joy of all the earth.

The prophet Ezekiel declares, “Thus says the LORD GOD: This is Jerusalem; I have set her in the center of the nations, with countries all around her (5:5).” At the

center of Jerusalem sits the temple, and at the center of the temple is the Holy of Holies, where the high priest enters the presence of God.

The Prophetic Critique

Yet the Hebrew Scriptures, even as they glorify the temple, also contain a critique. In dedicating the temple, Solomon asks: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you [God], much less this house that I have built” (1 Kings 8:27).

The prophet Isaiah rebukes the people for their vain ceremonies in the temple:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the LORD;
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or
of goats. (1:11)

God prefers a different form of worship, according to Isaiah:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my
eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (1:16-17)

The Old Testament speaks often of God’s particular concern for the poor. “I know that the LORD maintains the cause of the needy, and executes justice for the poor,” declares the psalmist (140:12). Hannah, the mother of Samuel, gives thanks: “He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor” (1 Samuel 2:8).

Under God’s covenant the land is supposed to provide sustenance for all. But the prophet Micah condemns those who see it as a resource to be appropriated for their own advantage:

Alas for those who devise wickedness and
evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
They oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance. (2:1-2)

Ezekiel challenges the people’s presumptuous claim upon the land: “Thus says the LORD GOD: You eat flesh with the blood, and lift up your eyes to idols, and shed blood; shall you possess the land? You depend on your swords, you commit abominations, and each of you defiles his neighbor’s wife; shall you then possess the land?” The prophet proclaims, “I [God] will make the land a desolation and a waste, and its proud might shall come to an end; and the mountains of Israel shall be so desolate that no one will pass through” (33:25-26, 29).

Isaiah calls to account “you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!” (5:8) In his “Song of the Vineyard,” the prophet compares Israel to a vineyard that God had carefully tended. “When I expected it to yield grapes,” Isaiah asks, “why did it yield [bitter] wild grapes?” Like the other prophets, he announces God’s judgment:

And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns....
(5:5-6)

A Crisis of Faith

Israel and Judah were small kingdoms caught between the great powers of their day, the aggressive empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt. In the face of military power they could not match, the Hebrew kings tried to side-step the threats. They made shifting alliances and played one power off against the other. They attempted to buy off the aggressors with tribute.

But the prophets warned that these strategies would fail. And in the end they did fail. Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, fell to the Assyrian onslaught in 723 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah survived that episode, but its capital of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The Judean elite was carried off into exile in Babylon.

The Babylonian exile was a crisis of the first order for faithful Jews. If God’s promise to Abraham had been “everlasting,” how could they lose the land that was supposed to be a “perpetual holding”? What had happened to David’s throne that was supposed to be “established forever”?

Once again, God's prophets supply an answer. Even before the exile occurs, they affirm that God's love for Israel has not ceased. His covenant promises—a people, a land, a line of kings, and a blessing to the nations—will surely be fulfilled. Even if for a time, because of its sins, Israel does not enjoy all those benefits, God has not cast his people aside.

“How can I give you up, Ephraim [another name for Israel]?” asks God through the prophet Hosea. “How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender; I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim.” Instead Israel's God will “roar like a lion” and “his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.” (11:8-11)

The prophecy of Amos, full of harsh condemnations and predicted devastations, closes with this promise of mercy:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the LORD your God. (9:14-15)

The prophets stress that God's motivation in restoring Israel is the honor of his own name—by showing the nations that he keeps his covenants with Abraham and his descendants. Jeremiah insists that those covenants are unconditional:

Thus says the LORD: Only if I had not established my covenant with day and night and the ordinances of heaven and earth, would I reject the offspring of Jacob and of my servant David and not choose any of his descendants as rulers over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them. (33:25-26)

Grand and Unrealized Expectations

Groups of Jewish exiles did return from Babylon, starting after a decree from the Persian King Cyrus in 538 B.C. They fortified Jerusalem, built a second temple, and rededicated themselves to the covenant. This restoration, however, was disappointing in many ways. The larger number of exiles remained in Babylon.⁵ The rebuilt Jerusalem was a shadow of its

former self. Its inhabitants were insecure and dependent upon their Persian overlords. The scribe Ezra laments:

Here we are, slaves to this day—slaves in the land that you gave to our ancestors to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts. Its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins; they have power also over our bodies and over our livestock at their pleasure, and we are in great distress. (Nehemiah 9:36-37)

The prophet Haggai asks despondently, “Who is left among you [the returned exiles] that saw this house [the temple] in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?” (2:3) Yet Haggai looks forward to something greater than Israel had ever experienced previously:

For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts. (2:6-9)

Even before the exile, prophets anticipated a future “day of the LORD” when God would finally set everything right on the earth. Wicked nations and individuals would be defeated, and their pride would be brought low. The righteous would be delivered from their afflictions and settled in peace. Most notably, the Gentile (non-Jewish) peoples would enjoy God's presence and blessings alongside Israel. In a prophecy that appears in both Micah (4:1-4) and Isaiah (2:2-4), Jerusalem is to become not only the capital of a restored Israel but also the seat of God's benevolent rule over the entire world:

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong

nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore;
but they shall all sit under their own vines
and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken.

The latter part of Isaiah's prophecy foresees God's creation of "new heavens and a new earth" (65:17). This will involve both the redemption of Israel and the inclusion of the Gentiles: "Thus says the Lord GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered" (56:8). God promises "the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD" that they will receive "a name better than sons and daughters," "an everlasting name that shall not be cut off" (56:5). He will "bring [them] to my holy mountain," where "their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar." In that day, God's temple "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples," Isaiah declares (56:7).

Some passages in the post-exilic prophets, such as Daniel and Zechariah, portray Jerusalem as the scene of dramatic global battles between good and evil. Their specifics have occasioned much apocalyptic speculation among Jews and Christians. It is sufficient to observe that these prophecies were not obviously fulfilled in their time. And certainly the ambiguities, the ups and downs of Jewish life between the Old and New Testaments never came anywhere close to resembling the prophesied new Jerusalem—much less a "new heavens and a new earth."

Jesus Goes to the "Lost Sheep"

As Jesus was born in Bethlehem, there remained a large residue of unrealized expectations for what God would do in Israel and the world. Jesus addresses those expectations in the first public appearance of his ministry. Speaking at the synagogue in Nazareth, he reads a prophecy of Isaiah:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.
(Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2)

Then Jesus dramatically proclaims, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The Galilean preacher's impressive teaching and healings raise messianic expectations. After his death, one of his followers mournfully recalls that "we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). Just before his ascension, Jesus' disciples ask him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)

Jesus focuses his ministry on his own people. "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans," he instructs his disciples, "but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5). He stays for the most part within the historic boundaries of Israel, oscillating between Galilee and Jerusalem. He celebrates the Jewish festivals and affirms the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. His 12 disciples are all fellow Jews.

Yet Jesus ministers not only on the Jewish west side of the Sea of Galilee but also on the Gentile east side. After the synagogue audience in Nazareth disdains him, he reminds them that two of Israel's most famous prophets had found a better reception among the pagans: "But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah ... yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a [Gentile] widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." (Luke 4:25-27)

Likewise, Jesus has significant encounters with Gentiles: a Syrophenician woman near Tyre (Mark 7:24-30), a Samaritan woman in Sychar (John 4:1-42), a Roman centurion in Capernaum (Matthew 8:5-13). In response to the centurion's faith that Jesus could heal his paralyzed servant, Jesus exclaims, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." He points to the soldier as illustrating how Gentiles were being welcomed into God's kingdom while Jewish "heirs" were in danger of being turned away: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:11-12).

Inverted Values

One of the most difficult, divisive questions facing Jews of Jesus' time was what attitude they should take toward their Roman imperial masters. There were three basic options: cooperate with Rome, resist it, or retreat into a separate existence with minimal contact. All three

options aimed at securing a Jewish society that could live under God's law in the land. Resistance was the choice of Zealots who demanded complete independence for the whole people. Separation would create a space for communities such as the Essenes in the Dead Sea wilderness, but it left the rest of society to its own devices. Cooperation, as practiced by King Herod Antipas and the temple elite, sought to negotiate the greatest degree of Jewish autonomy that the Romans would permit.

On the evidence of the Gospel accounts, Jesus dodges this central question of Jewish life. He pursues none of the three options. He is not a separatist, as he mixes freely with "tax collectors and sinners" (Mark 2:15) and other morally compromised types. Nor is he a militant Zealot, as he tells his disciples to put away their swords. "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36), Jesus declares. Yet he also criticizes the corruption of the Herodians and temple officials who cooperate with Rome.

Jesus appears remarkably uninterested in the question of how to preserve a Jewish society under the pressure of pagan rule. Asked whether it is right to pay Roman taxes, he responds obliquely, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mark 12:17). He seems similarly complacent about Roman exactions of forced labor when, in the Sermon on the Mount, he directs his disciples: "[I]f anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (Matthew 5:41). This phrase is a reference to a Roman soldier's privilege of compelling a bystander to carry his gear for a mile.

Jesus states no plan for how the promise of land to Abraham is to be fulfilled. Instead he announces the arrival of a "kingdom of God" that is unlike any of the kingdoms that others are trying to build. The values of this kingdom seem to be inverted. The command to carry the soldier's baggage an extra mile is part of Jesus' call to "love your enemies" (Matthew 5:44)—not the usual political strategy.

Elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pronounces blessings on "the poor in spirit" and "those who mourn" (5:3-4). In a society where the powerful seize land and appropriate it for themselves, Jesus says it will be "the meek" who "inherit the earth" (5:5). It is not clear when this unlikely development will occur.

Jesus counsels his followers not to "worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear" (5:25). "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," he says, "...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither

moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal" (5:19-20).

The benefits of Jesus' kingdom seem to be mostly in the future. To those who are reviled and persecuted on his account, he says, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (5:12). After death and judgment, Jesus foresees striking reversals of fortune. For example, he tells a parable of "a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day," while ignored and hungry "at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores." The two men die, and Lazarus is "carried away by the angels to be with Abraham," while the rich man suffers torments in Hades (Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus and the Temple

Jesus picks up and extends the prophetic critique of temple worship. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus "enter[s] the temple" as if he owns it and "drive[s] out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple." He accuses the temple officials of having turned what was supposed to be "a house of prayer for all nations" into "a den of robbers" (11:15-17).

Jesus goes on to predict the destruction of the temple: "Not one stone will be left here on another; all will be thrown down" (13:2). He foretells a time of natural disasters, "wars and rumors of wars," false messiahs that "lead many astray," and persecution of his followers by civil and religious authorities (13:5-13). He advises his disciples to stay calm and "flee to the mountains" (13:14) for this period.⁶

In the end, Jesus says, "they will see 'the Son of Man [a messianic term that Jesus used for himself] coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." (13:26-27) Jesus' words imply that these events will take place soon; however, he adds, "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (13:32).

The role of the temple becomes a topic of debate in the Gospel of John. Passing through Samaria, Jesus meets a woman near Mount Gerizim, the Samaritan holy place. She raises the question of whether it is right to worship God there or in Jerusalem. Jesus replies:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we [Jews] worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming,

and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth. (4:21-24)

Earlier, in John's account of Jesus cleansing the temple, the Galilean preacher declares, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The narrator comments that Jesus "was speaking of the temple of his body" (2: 19-21). This is an instance of a larger pattern in John's Gospel, in which Jesus is presented as the fulfillment of images and events from Israel's history.

Just as Jesus' body becomes the new temple, so also he tells the Samaritan woman that he is the source of "living water"—like the water that God supplied to their Hebrew ancestors (4:7-15). Jesus identifies himself as "the bread of life" that "came down from heaven"—like the manna on which Israel fed in the wilderness (6:30-58). "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower," says Jesus (15:1-11). Here he is borrowing an image used several times in the Hebrew Scriptures: Israel as the vine, God as the landowner. Now, though, Jesus is stepping into the role of Israel.

New Tenants in the Vineyard

In a sharp exchange with Jewish religious leaders, Jesus tells a parable based on Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard (p. 5):

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. (Matthew 21:33-39)

So the landowner, as in Isaiah, takes violent action. He kills the tenants and "lease[s] the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time" (21:41).

The referents of this disturbing parable were clear to Jesus' original audience. As in Isaiah, God was the landowner and God's people, Israel, was the vineyard.

The mistreated servants were the Hebrew prophets who suffered for their unpopular messages. The son was Jesus, and his awful fate was a foreshadowing of the crucifixion. And "the chief priests and Pharisees," Jesus' interlocutors, "realized that he was speaking about them" as the wicked tenants who refused to respect the son (21:45). Jesus concludes the parable with a chilling warning to these Jewish leaders: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43).⁷

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, the community of his first followers was entirely Jewish. According to the Acts of the Apostles, members of the early church in Jerusalem followed Jewish customs, studied the Hebrew Scriptures, and worshiped regularly in the temple. The apostle Peter's first sermon, on the day of Pentecost, cites the Old Testament prophets to explain what had happened with Jesus. Peter closes by appealing to his fellow Jews: "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36).

Yet, without any plan or intention, the apostles begin to see Gentiles accept their message of Christ. Peter is summoned by a vision to preach to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesarea. The apostle acknowledges a momentous widening of God's kingdom: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34). When the Holy Spirit falls upon members of the Gentile household, Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47) The apostle returns to Jerusalem and recounts the incident to church leaders there, who "praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'" (11:18)

Persecution in Jerusalem scattered the first Christians to cities like Antioch and Damascus, where they came into even greater contact with receptive Gentiles. The church in Antioch embraced this development and sent out the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys around the Greek-speaking Mediterranean.

Paul, like the Jerusalem apostles, values his Jewish heritage. He affirms that the Law of Moses "is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (Romans 7:12). When entering a new city, he makes a habit of going first to the synagogue. Paul refuses to impose the law upon Gentile converts, but he is careful to observe

the requirements of temple worship when he visits Jerusalem—as he does several times (Acts 21:17-26).

Christ as Fulfillment of the Covenant

Paul's letters pursue the Gospel theme of Christ as the fulfillment, not the nullification, of God's covenant with Israel. In Galatians 3 he argues that in Jesus the promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" has been realized. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us," Paul writes, "... in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles" (3:13-14). According to the apostle, Jesus is also the "offspring" that the Jewish patriarch was promised. Therefore, Paul infers, "[I]f you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:29).

Similarly, Paul applies the notion of the temple metaphorically to the Church. "[W]e are the temple of the living God," he tells the Corinthian Christians (2 Corinthians 6:16). Admonishing them to avoid sexual immorality, he asks, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Corinthians 6:19). Paul makes these assertions while the literal temple in Jerusalem is still very much functioning.

The letter to the Hebrews carries this "spiritualizing" tendency further. Its characteristic method is to take material aspects of Old Testament history and reinterpret them as prefigurements of Christ's greater work. The anonymous author hails Jesus as a "high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (7:26)—far superior to the priests in the line of Aaron. Those priests serve in the temple, which is only "a sketch and a shadow of the heavenly" sanctuary in which Christ now ministers (8:5). Jesus offers a better sacrifice, as he "entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (9:12).

According to this epistle, Jesus "is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted through better promises" (8:6). God's covenant with Israel promised "rest" in the land of Canaan—a rest that the people never fully enjoyed. But the new covenant in Christ promises a more lasting and spiritual rest in God's grace: "So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his" (4:9-10).

Because of the superiority of this new covenant, the letter to the Hebrews sees no further role for the earlier covenant: "In speaking of 'a new covenant,' he [God] has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear" (8:13).

The author of Hebrews takes note of the fact that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never possessed the land that had been promised to them. "All of these died in faith without having received the promises," he says, "but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland." (11:13-14) But their true homeland is not Canaan or Mesopotamia or Egypt, according to the epistle. The patriarchs, and by extension all people of faith, "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one."

Later, the author tells his Jewish Christian audience that "you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). This image of a spiritualized Jerusalem is developed further in the Revelation to John. That book concludes with a vision, reminiscent of Isaiah's (see p. 6), of God's final victory. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth," writes John, "for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (21:1-2)

Is There Still a Place for Israel?

In New Testament passages like this, the old Jerusalem, the earthly Jerusalem almost fades from view. Did that contested, troubled city over which Jesus grieved (Matthew 23:37-39) still have a place in God's plans? Was there a place for its inhabitants—particularly the Jews who had not become followers of Christ?

The fullest New Testament meditation on this question is found in Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11. The apostle starts by confessing, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" for "my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (9:2-3). His "heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved" (10:1).

Paul sees his fellow Jews as blessed with great advantages: "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah ..." (9:4-5).

But, in Paul's view, a paradox has emerged: "Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law" (9:30-31). Tragically, the Jews' own virtue contributed to the downfall of many. "I can testify that they have a zeal for God," the apostle says, "but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness." (10:2-3) In their attachment to the law of Moses, they have rejected their Messiah, Christ, who "is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (10:4).

To understand what has happened, Paul turns to the Old Testament concept of "the remnant." Promises given to all of Israel are inherited only by those who are chosen and faithful. "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel," the apostle maintains, "and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants." Thus "it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise who are counted as descendants" (9:6-8). In the current situation, the heirs of Israel's covenant are Jewish and Gentile Christians who have put their faith in God's promised Messiah. "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace," Paul says (11:5).

The apostle cuts to the heart of the matter: "I ask then, has God rejected his people?" His answer is emphatic: "By no means!" (11:1) A "hardening has come upon part of Israel," Paul explains, "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" to God's kingdom (11:25). Then his fellow Jews, now experiencing "rejection," will receive "acceptance" and "full inclusion" (11:12, 15).

Paul explains the situation by means of an analogy. He compares the people of God to an olive tree. The "natural branches" are Israel. Some of these have been broken off and Gentile Christians, "a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place" (11:17). Yet the natural branches have not been thrown away. "And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again" (11:23).

Paul states his confidence that "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29). There is a future for the biological descendants of Abraham, as the apostle sees it. God's promises to them will be fulfilled in some sense. But the nature of that fulfillment is not entirely clear. The apostle's focus is on his fellow Jews' eventual acceptance of Christ as their Messiah. He says nothing about their political arrangements—whether

Israel will someday again enjoy independence, and what form of government it might then have. He does not discuss the disposition of the land of Canaan/Palestine/Israel.

So there remains considerable uncertainty about how to interpret the Hebrew prophecies of a restored and glorious Jerusalem. These were not obviously fulfilled in their time, as Israel never returned to the power and prominence that it enjoyed under David and Solomon. The New Testament applies some of those prophecies to Christ; however, it does not appear that he fulfilled them all in his first coming. Although New Testament writers "spiritualized" many of these benefits of Israel's covenant, applying them metaphorically to Christ and the Church, many Christians wonder whether the material aspects of the covenant—the line of descendants, the land—can be completely discounted.

Even today, there remains a residue of unfulfilled biblical prophecy. The great hope of the Church is that all will be set right with the return of Christ. "Come, Lord Jesus!" we pray with John (Revelation 22:20). But we do not know exactly how Israel will fit into that scenario. As Jesus said, "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

¹ This and all subsequent biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

² See also Leviticus 25: 23: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine [God's]; with me you are but aliens and tenants." In the Jubilee (fiftieth) year, all land was to be returned to the original families to whom God had assigned it.

³ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

⁴ Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 89-90.

⁵ Large numbers of Jews also emigrated to Egypt and other locations all around the Mediterranean and the Near East. The first-century-B.C. Greek geographer Strabo remarked, "This people has already made its way into every city and it is not easy to find any place in the inhabited world which has not received this nation and in which it has not made its power felt." It is estimated that, by the time of Christ, Jews in the Diaspora outnumbered Jews in Palestine. The Diaspora Jews kept contact with the land through prayers for Jerusalem said in their synagogues, taxes forwarded to the Jerusalem temple, pilgrimages for religious festivals in Jerusalem, and the tradition of seeking burial there. But they also adopted languages and customs of the places where they resided. The prophet Jeremiah advised the exiles in Babylon to build houses, plant gardens, and establish their families there. "[S]eek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile," Jeremiah wrote, "and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29:7). See Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2010), 11-21.

⁶ Scholars agree that this passage refers to the destruction of the Jewish temple by the Romans in 70 A.D. At that time the Christians in Jerusalem did in fact flee—to the city of Pella on the east side of the Jordan River. They did not take a last stand with the Zealots resisting the Roman attack. See Burge, *Jesus and the Land*, 57.

⁷ It must be borne in mind that all these rancorous disputes in the Gospels occurred within the Jewish community. Jesus and his earliest disciples were all Jews, as were the religious leaders that they criticized. All parties loved Israel; however, they disagreed vehemently about what God was doing in Israel in their day. Later Christian anti-Semites were not justified in using the harsh language from these disputes to sow hatred against the Jewish people.

Stretching Scripture Too Far: Apocalyptic Prophecy As Mideast Policy Guide

Christians look to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as God's authoritative revelation of his purposes for humankind. But these sacred texts, written originally for Jewish and Christian audiences thousands of years ago, do not give detailed instructions for church or U.S. policy in the 21st century. They do not identify which governments should be supported and which should be opposed. They do not tell us which peace proposals should be advanced and which should be rejected. These are questions that today's Christians must decide prudently, as the Holy Spirit enables them to assess current situations and apply biblical principles to them.

Christians get themselves in trouble when they try to wring out of the Scriptures policy prescriptions for matters that the Scriptures do not address. Unfortunately, the temptation to stretch Scripture is powerful—especially among traditional Christians who take a high view of the Bible's divine inspiration. Such Christians, like those of previous generations, hope and pray for Christ's return to consummate his kingdom. They naturally look for signs that history is moving toward that end.

The latter half of the 20th century saw an explosion of end-times prophecies centered on the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948. That event was undoubtedly significant, and it generated conflicts that have shaken the entire Middle East and even the world. We may be sure that the God of history has a providential purpose in Israel's fight for its existence. But what is that purpose?

Prophetic Certitude

A series of commentators from the "dispensational" school of theology have been quick to assert God's purposes for the modern Middle East. The most famous of these is Hal Lindsey, author of the 1970 bestseller *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and sequels thereto over the following decades. Today's most prominent exponent of apocalyptic Mideast prophecies is San Antonio megachurch pastor John Hagee. He serves as an example of this line of thinking.

Hagee, like others, claims that the Bible provides a roadmap to what is happening and will happen in the

Middle East. Relying on "my confidential sources in Israel, information from military experts around the world, and electrifying revelations from Bible prophecy," the Texas pastor proclaims:

The rise of terrorism in our world and the emerging crisis in the Middle East between Israel and Iran are part of a much bigger picture—that of God's plan for the future of Israel and the entire world. We are going to discover we are facing a countdown in the Middle East—the Jerusalem Countdown, a battle such as the world has never seen or will ever see again. It is a countdown that will usher in the end of the world.¹

According to Hagee, the countdown began in 1948: "The rebirth of Israel as a nation was an unmistakable milestone on the prophetic timetable leading to the return of Christ."² Hagee assumes that modern Israel is a direct continuation of the ancient Kingdom of David and inherits all the promises given to that kingdom.

Hagee asserts, "The boundaries of the State of Israel are recorded in Scripture." Based on Genesis 15:18, he presents a map of the "Royal Grant to Abraham" stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River.³ To control all this territory, modern Israel would have to conquer land now belonging to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Neither modern nor ancient Israel has ever ruled over more than a fraction of this vast area. The eastern portions were not included in the tribal allotments set down in Joshua 13-19.

Hagee and his fellow seers are equally confident in identifying other nations. The evil Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38 is Russia, according to Hagee. And "when Ezekiel speaks of Persia, Ethiopia, and Libya, he is speaking of the Arab states."⁴ Hagee interprets "young lions" in Ezekiel 38:13 as England. "In Revelation 13, we have a description of the Antichrist, who will be the head of the European Union." Reading "kings from the east" in Revelation 16:12, Hagee points to the People's Republic of China.⁵ A reference to "a great eagle" in Revelation 12:14 portends the United States, according to Hal Lindsey. Ancient Babylon equals modern Iraq. The pagan Canaanites and Philistines whom the Israelites fought are the modern Palestinians.⁶

These self-styled prophets, understanding the Bible's apocalyptic passages as "history prewritten," believe they foreknow the course of events. "The coming nuclear showdown with Iran is a certainty," Hagee wrote in 2005. "The war of Ezekiel 38-39 could begin before this book gets published." He explains that "Ezekiel's war ... will consist of an Arab coalition of nations led by Russia for the purpose of exterminating the Jews of Israel and controlling the city of Jerusalem." Israel is caught by surprise "because its leaders are trusting in their peace accord with the European Union to guarantee their safety from Russia and the Arab coalition of nations." Instead, Hagee says, Israel will stand alone and victorious in the Jezreel Valley, which "will one day soon be covered with blood drained from the veins of the armies of the world."⁷

Inflexible Policies

All this prophetic certitude—about the identities of the actors, their righteousness or unrighteousness in God's eyes, and the actions that they must or will take—yields an inflexible set of policies. Apocalypticists such as Hagee tend to give unconditional support to the most extreme elements in Israel. They underwrite and defend Jewish settlements intended to stake a claim of Israeli sovereignty over the Palestinian-populated West Bank, which they call by the ancient names of Judea and Samaria. A major dispensationalist conference in 1985 drew a line in the sand, declaring that "Judea and Samaria (inaccurately termed 'the West Bank') are, and by biblical right as well as international law and practice ought to be, a part of Israel."⁸

The group that sponsored the conference, the International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem (ICEJ), has also promoted a very provocative movement: a small group of Orthodox Jews who aim to destroy the Muslim shrine of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Their purpose is to build a new Jewish temple on the site, which the ICEJ would welcome as a realization of end-times prophecy. Apocalypticists like the ICEJ often deny that the Palestinians are a people, or that they have rights as a people, and are slow to criticize Israel when it violates Palestinian rights.⁹

The dispensational seers have consistently opposed peace proposals that might have a chance of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They disdain any territorial concessions to the Palestinians as a betrayal of the Jews' divine right to the entire land. Hagee categorically rejects the current international framework for negotiations: "The Roadmap for Peace is an ill-conceived document, one that has Israel giving up Gaza, then the West Bank, and then Jerusalem. It clearly violates the Word of God."¹⁰

The San Antonio pastor's proof for this assertion is Joel 3:2, in which the Hebrew prophet condemned conquerors of ancient Israel for having "divided up my land." Hagee reads this passage as forbidding any treaty by which modern Israel might freely agree to allow space for Palestinians to rule themselves. He finds another rigid policy directive in Nehemiah 2:20, where the fifth-century B.C. restorer of Jerusalem tells his mixed-race neighbors that they "have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem." Hagee leaps forward two millennia to conclude that today "the nations of the world have no inheritance in Jerusalem." He thunders the impossibility of any compromise: "Let it be known to all men far and near, the city of Jerusalem is not up for negotiation with anyone at any time for any reason in the future. It has been and shall always be the eternal and undivided capital of the State of Israel."¹¹ He leaves no room for any accommodation of the Palestinian population living in East Jerusalem.

These modern dispensational prophets are not just opposed to specific peace proposals; they tend to look askance at any effort toward peace. Because they interpret the Bible as predicting a cataclysmic end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they dismiss any possible peace accords as empty promises offering only a delusory hope. At this point, the Christian apocalypticists are more hardline than even the most hawkish Israeli governments. Hagee advises the ruling conservatives in Israel not to trust any commitments by the Arabs, the Europeans, or even the United States. "Israel, desperate for peace, is negotiating itself into the greatest war Israel has ever seen," he warns.¹²

The apocalypticists extend their inflexible approach far beyond the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. They would turn this one issue into a global litmus test: Nations that back Israel are righteous and blessed and should be supported by all Christians, they contend; nations that side against Israel are fit only for condemnation. Here is how Hagee states God's foreign policy:

He has determined to make Jerusalem the decisive issue by which He will deal with the nations of the earth. Those nations who aligned themselves with God's purposes for Jerusalem will receive His blessing. But those who follow a policy of opposition to God's purposes will receive the swift and severe judgment of God without limitation.¹³

The Texas pastor fears that the United States risks its future if it pursues Mideast peace possibilities: "This is not the time to provoke God and defy Him to pour out His judgment on our nation for being a principal force in the division of the land of Israel."¹⁴

An Irresponsible Approach

This attempted use of apocalyptic prophecies to guide Mideast policy is irresponsible—both theologically and politically. It treats speculations as certainties. And on the basis of those pretended certainties, it lays down rigid policy mandates where Christians should be open to all prudent proposals.

The apocalyptic approach turns Scripture passages into a secret code that would have been meaningless to the original audiences, and meaningless to all subsequent generations of Jews and Christians—until suddenly, in the late 20th century, everything supposedly became clear to a few dispensational seers. It haphazardly equates ancient kingdoms and modern nations, skipping over more than two millennia of history as if nothing significant had changed. It never considers the possibility that Bible prophecies might be fulfilled at some time other than the present: either during the period when they were delivered, or in the first coming of Christ, or in a second coming that may be far into an unimaginable future.

Most seriously, this approach neglects the warning of Jesus: “And if anyone says to you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look! There he is!’—do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.” (Mark 13:21-22)

Jesus advises his followers to focus on doing God’s will and being prepared for any eventuality. He regards speculation about prophetic timetables as a useless diversion: “But about that day or hour [the end] no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.” (Mark 13:32-33) Yet where Christ counsels humility, today’s Mideast apocalypticists rush in with reckless speculation.

Double Standards Disqualify Peacemakers

That reckless speculation has a price. It makes those who indulge in it less able to do God’s will as peacemakers. It hardens the lines of conflict, reducing the parties to caricatures of good (Israel) and evil (its neighbors). It fails to take account of the complex issues between Israelis and Palestinians. It reduces the other 440 million Middle Easterners to a mere backdrop—of interest only insofar as their actions affect the 11.5 million Israelis and Palestinians.

The apocalypticists practice a double standard of morality under which Israeli claims to sovereignty and self-determination are championed while parallel Palestinian claims are cast aside. Likewise, Israel is

exempted from criticism while Palestinian failings are roundly condemned. This is a mirror reflection of the double standard among pro-Palestinian liberal Christians, who patronize the Palestinians while incessantly denouncing Israel. Both groups, by their bias, disqualify themselves from any role as honest brokers for peace.

The false certainties of the apocalypticists also undermine peace prospects by narrowing the grounds on which agreement might be reached. They predetermine disputed questions—the borders of Israel, the status of Jerusalem, the fate of Palestinian refugees—that ought to be negotiated. These inflexible positions leave little room for the kind of pragmatic compromises that might address the needs of all parties concerned.

Furthermore, the apocalypticists diminish peace prospects through their constant assertions that war is Israel’s destiny. These assertions run the risk of becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Discounting the limited measure of peace that might be achievable, they leave war as the only option. Yet even if war is unavoidable in the end, even a temporary peace that saves lives today may have value. Christians are commanded: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Romans 12:18).

Indeed, it is broader scriptural commands like these that ought to guide Christians engaging the Middle East. We are to pursue peace where it is possible. We are to show compassion to all who suffer. We are to seek just solutions that respect the rights of all.

¹ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine Press, 2006), vii, 1.

² John Hagee, *In Defense of Israel* (Lake Mary, FL: FrontLine Press, 2007), 11.

³ Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*, 195-196.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102, 106. Note that of these three modern nations, only Libya is ethnically Arab. None of the three was Arab in ancient times.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 108, 117.

⁶ Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming* (New York: Vision House, 1973), 185. David Brickner, *Future Hope: A Jewish Christian Look at the End of the World* (San Francisco: Purple Pomegranate, 1999), 73. quoted in Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), 128, 132-133, 244-246.

⁷ Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*, 17, 107, 119. Note that as of the date this paper’s writing in 2012, the nuclear showdown between Israel, the United States, and Iran that Hagee had predicted for 2006 had not yet occurred.

⁸ *Declaration of the First International Christian Zionist Congress* (Jerusalem: International Christian Embassy-Jerusalem, 1985). Quoted in Donald E. Wagner, *Anxious for Armageddon* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 101.

⁹ Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 234-236, 244-246.

¹⁰ Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25, 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

Arguing From Evidence: Why Support Israel?

There is a widespread assumption that evangelical Protestant support for Israel is purely theological. But this assumption overlooks the many other reasons why evangelicals and other Americans feel an affinity with the Jewish state.

It is true that the Bible weighs heavily in evangelical thinking. Most evangelicals, like most Christians of other traditions, believe that God's covenant with Abraham and his posterity remains valid. Part of that covenant is God's promise that "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). For many evangelicals, that verse is sufficient mandate for them to favor Israel over its antagonists. Some also resort to speculative interpretations of end-times prophecies to justify siding with Israel (pp.12-14).

But one does not have to decode obscure visions of Ezekiel and Daniel in order to arrive at a pro-Israel position. There is no need for special revelation. One can look at evidence that is plain for all to see.

Israel is a unique entity in the Middle East. Small in area and population, it preserves a minority people that has a continuous history reaching back almost 4,000 years. The Jews have survived repeated waves of imperial conquest, campaigns of forced assimilation, and bouts of genocidal persecution—in the Middle East and elsewhere—and the state of Israel has become their haven. To the Jewish population long resident in Palestine have been added refugees from Jewish communities around the region, in Europe, the former Soviet Union, and even Africa.

Israel stands as an example of multiculturalism. In a region where so many regimes attempt to enforce uniformity—only one ethnicity acknowledged, one language spoken, one form of religion practiced—Israel hosts a vibrant variety. Walking through the Old City of Jerusalem, one witnesses religious observances representing different schools of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Jews hold the upper hand politically and economically; however, Arabs and Muslims are freer to express themselves inside Israel than in all the surrounding nations.

Israeli society leads the region in educational attainment, cultural creativity, technological innovation,

and balanced economic development. The Middle East would be poorer without the diversity and dynamism of Israel. But it would benefit far more if Israel's neighbors would all accept its existence and open normal relations.

Israel's strategic objective is precisely that: to live securely, at peace with its neighbors. It does not seek to destroy any of the surrounding states. Israeli governments of both the left and the right have affirmed Palestinian self-determination.

By contrast, the strategic objectives of Israel's neighbors are more ambiguous or even sinister. The objective that was pursued through four wars, from 1948 through 1973, was the destruction of the Jewish state. Two nations, Egypt and Jordan, subsequently signed peace treaties with Israel. But several other important actors—Syria, Iran, the Hezbollah movement that dominates Lebanon, the Hamas movement that rules Gaza—remain sworn to annihilate the Jewish state. They continue to sponsor terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians.

In the face of such hostility, Israel has earned the sympathy of most U.S. Christians. They also identify with the Jewish state because it shares common ideals. Israel is a liberal democracy like the United States, with majority rule alongside recognized rights for minorities. It is the only country in the Middle East that the human rights group Freedom House rates as "free."

Israeli elections have resulted in repeated peaceful transfers of power between different political coalitions. The country's independent judiciary has acted to rein in government excesses and abuses on numerous occasions. The government is also responsive to public opinion, which is expressed vigorously in a free press. Advocates for Palestinian rights criticize the government directly and frequently. None of these liberties is so readily available to residents of the West Bank, Gaza, and neighboring countries. Potential dissidents there need to watch their words carefully.

Israel and the United States share common enemies. The nations and groups vowing to crush the Jewish state—Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas—are also virulently anti-American. For militant Islamists, Israel is the "near enemy" and America the "far enemy." The

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terrorist tactics targeted against Israel have likewise been employed against the United States. It makes sense that the two democracies should cooperate in facing these common threats.

Nevertheless, support for Israel does not have to mean lack of sympathy for the Palestinians. They have suffered from the Israeli military presence on the West Bank and in Gaza. That presence constricts the Palestinian economy and curtails the civil liberties of individual Palestinians. Most seriously, it deprives Palestinians of the right to live under a sovereign government of their own choosing.

The military occupation of the West Bank, against the will of the inhabitants, is a standing contradiction to Israel's democratic values. Israeli governments of various hues have recognized that contradiction. They have promised to pursue a "two-state solution" allowing a Palestinian state to exist alongside Israel. U.S. Christian friends of Israel can hold Israeli officials to that promise, and encourage them and their Palestinian counterparts to make the compromises necessary to fulfill the promise.

One of the main sticking points, however, lies on the Palestinian side. Israeli and American negotiators have found it hard to pin down Palestinian leaders to a commitment to live at peace with the Jewish state. Palestinians have been ill served by their own leaders, and other Arab leaders, who have backed away from peace agreements that might have eased the people's plight. Instead such leaders have chosen to whip up hostility against the Jews—often as a diversion from the failures of their own regimes—and perpetuate the confrontation.

A major factor in this deadlocked situation is the lack of democracy among the Palestinians and in the other Arab states. Without democracy, it is much more difficult to

have leaders with the credibility and the accountability to make peace. U.S. Christians can support Israel because it is a democracy that has produced leaders like Yitzhak Rabin with a vision for peace. At the same time, they can encourage democratic development in the Arab world in hopes that it too can bring forth leaders able to make peace.

This pro-democracy and pro-Israel stance is consonant with biblical teachings calling Christians to be peacemakers and champions of justice. But that stance does not have to rest on disputed interpretations of Old Testament prophecies. It stands on its own merits and on the evidence.

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