

Thoughts on Israel

On October 7, 2023, Hamas (an acronym that means “Islamic Resistance Movement”) attacked the State of Israel. Hamas is an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood from the 1980’s, and presently controls and governs Gaza. Over 1,400 Israelis were killed, and many others were taken hostage. The immediate need for pastors and leaders in the Western Church is not necessarily to engage in political commentary, nor try to specifically place this action within the realm of fulfilled prophecy. Though God is working all things in the world toward the ultimate outcome of the consummation of history and the return of King Jesus, we need not place every event in the realm of prophecy related to the times of the end. Prophecy is better understood *after* it is fulfilled, not *while* events are unfolding. Restraint related to the prophetic implications is the wiser course for pastors and leaders. Instead, the first response should be to turn to the Lord in prayer. Within 48 hours of the beginning of the conflict (which has formally been declared a “war” by Israel), I offered some thoughts [here](#) on how we could pray in this situation that were posted on The Chapel social media channels. Turning to the Lord is our first and best response, and I encourage you to continue praying along these lines. As John the Revelator prayed, “*Come, Lord Jesus.*”

The history of this conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis dates back many centuries, and the most recent conflicts are rooted in post-WW II land designations and the accompanying outcomes. My goal in this brief article is not to take on the political issues surrounding this conflict. Political commentary is for others to do, and is not my area of expertise. Instead, I would like to offer some perspective to followers of Jesus about how we view Israel through a Biblical lens, offer some clarifications from Scripture that may be helpful in how we process this event, and finally note some ways in which Christians can and should respond.

To begin, a quick note about moral clarity. Though the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has a long history, and though each side might offer their own justifiable rationale as to the current state of the relationship, there need not be a moral fog around the definitively evil act that was perpetrated on October 7th. Hamas did not initiate violence on government officials or soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force. Instead, they brutally targeted innocent civilians at a music festival in a surprise attack. This is premeditated evil, unjust, and no set of reasons or rationales can excuse or justify it. Thus, the duly constituted and internationally recognized State of Israel not only has a right to defend itself as a sovereign nation, but also has a duty of protection for its citizens. As Christians, we understand this from New Testament teaching, specifically the Apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans 13 about the God-ordained nature of governments and their right to “bear the sword” against those who act wrongly toward them. So, there should be no lack of moral clarity in condemning such an atrocity.

With that established, there are other lingering questions that emerge about how Christians view the State of Israel. Does Scripture compel Christians to uncritically stand with the State of Israel in any and every instance? What about the promise to Abraham, and by extension to

Israel, that “*those who bless you will be blessed and those who curse you will be cursed*” (Genesis 12:3)? Does the promise of land, over which this conflict has long been fought, still apply to the State of Israel? What is the Church’s relationship to Israel as the people of God?

These are all pertinent questions to how we process events regarding Israel. Though I will not exhaustively answer all of them, I will endeavor to address them in the paragraphs that follow. But, one primary thought should engage our minds as we work through these questions:

Jesus changes everything.

The whole narrative of Scripture finds its centerpiece in Jesus. The story of the world is a story about God’s relationship with humanity and how Jesus restores it. Questions about covenants should remember this: *Jesus changes everything*. Questions about God’s chosen people should remember this: *Jesus changes everything*. Questions about God’s promise of land should remember this: *Jesus changes everything*.

Before Abraham

It would seem that the natural starting place to discuss the nature of Israel as the people of God who have the promises and covenants of God is to begin with Abraham. Abraham is indeed an important starting point, but I think it relevant to back up a bit from Abraham to understand the relationship of God with the first human beings. Why this is important is because it helps us to see that ***God’s purposes are no less than the restoration of the entire world, not just one ethnic group of people or one geography***. In Genesis 1-3, we learn of the Creator God who makes all things, including humans who were image-bearers of God. The story tells us about **land** (Eden) and **blessing** (*walking with God in the cool of the day*). However, when sin enters the story, we then read of **curse** and **exile** from the land they were given. This is an important backstory before we observe the unfolding story of Israel. The pattern from the outset was *land/blessing/curse/exile* with our first human ancestors, and we will see that repeated in microcosm with Israel as a covenant community.

Abraham

As the sinfulness of humanity and the brokenness of the world progressed, God acted in time and history. God called Abraham, an unlikely candidate who was the son of a pagan idol maker, to be the recipient of an unconditional covenant; namely, that God was going to bless the world through Abraham’s seed. This covenant was not dependent on Abraham (he was childless at that point); instead, this covenant was dependent on God’s faithfulness. Within this covenant, God made a promise about land:

*“The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an **everlasting** possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”* Genesis 17:8

This seems to settle the issue of whose land this was: God promised it to Abraham and his descendants (which would be Israel). Nevertheless, while the question of to which nation did

God promise the land is clearly answered, the question about how long this promise stands is not as clear. As noted in the verse above, Genesis records the land promise as an “everlasting” possession. This word “everlasting” is the debated word among scholars. As Dr. John Walton notes in his NIV Application Commentary on Genesis, the Hebrew word *’olam* is a word that has to be understood based on its context. For instance, when this word describes God’s kingdom, it is meant to be understood as “forever, eternal, everlasting.” But, when this word is used of some other contexts, it is meant to be understood as “substantial, or open-ended perpetuity” rather than eternal. Even within this promise that God made to Abraham about land, the term *’olam* is also used to describe circumcision. We know that circumcision fulfilled its purpose and became obsolete in the New Testament people of God; thus, *’olam* in that context meant “substantial, or open-ended perpetuity.” As well, in Numbers 25:13, the Aaronic priesthood is also described as *’olam*. It, too, became obsolete in the fulfillment of Jesus as our Great High Priest. So, the question of the “everlasting” possession of land by Israel is one that needs to be understood based on context of the word usage *’olam*, and there is debate as to the length of time envisioned in this covenant.

Israel

This promise to Abraham and his “seed” or descendants continued to be realized in the formation of the nation of Israel. From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob (renamed Israel), this covenant was repeated, and God’s desire through Israel is that they would be a witness to the glory of the One True God, YHWH. When Israel was constituted as a nation under the leadership of Moses and after the departure from Egyptian captivity, God spoke to Moses about the laws that would govern Israel. Israel did indeed move into Canaan, the land of promise, under the leadership of Joshua. God made it clear to Israel that if they broke the covenant and were unfaithful to YHWH, they would be exiled from the land of promise they inherited. In Deuteronomy 28, God outlines the blessings of Israel’s obedience, and also the consequences/curses of their disobedience. Among the curses would be exile from the land of promise. This is also clear in Leviticus 25-26, and is restated by the prophet Jeremiah when exile actually happens. Thus, the pattern we see from the beginning – land/blessing/curse/exile – is repeated in the nation of Israel. If Israel obeys the LORD and embraces obedience to the covenant, they will be blessed and secure in the land. If they are not faithful to the covenant, they will be cursed and exiled from the land. Clearly, the exile of Israel happened two major times – the Assyrian captivity and the Babylonian exile – and pictured God’s desire for His chosen people to be an obedient people that demonstrates to the world the glory of YHWH.

Jesus

As I reminded you above, Jesus changes everything. Upon His arrival, the nation of Israel inhabited the land of promise, yet not as they envisioned. The Jews had a Temple, they had a Priesthood, and they were able to pursue a Jewish way of life. They were, however, under the heavy-handed rule of the Roman Empire. But in the coming of Jesus, the fulfillment of all of those promises and covenants comes into focus. Jesus, the promised Messiah of the Old

Testament, is now the new and better Temple where God's Spirit and presence resides. Jesus is the new and better High Priest who lives forever to intercede for His people. Jesus is the new and better offering where His blood cleanses people from sin and satisfies the justice of God in a way that the blood of bulls and goats could only foreshadow. Jesus would be the centerpiece of a new people of God, the Church, made up of all who put faith in Him whether Jew or Gentile. And Jesus, as Dr. Gary Burge points out, would be the new "vine" and thus would reorient the spiritual geography of those who believe. As Isaiah and other prophets frequently referred to Israel as the vine/vineyard planted in the land of promise, Dr. Burge points out that the question changes with Jesus. Whereas the question used to be whether or not Israel was planted in the holy land, Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, speaks of Himself in John 15 as the "true vine" to demonstrate that what matters is whether people are planted in Him, thus reorienting the spiritual geography for the new people of God. And, as Jesus pointed out to the woman at the well, He would set in motion a time where worshippers would worship in spirit and truth and not be limited by their geography ("*Woman*", Jesus replied, "*believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem*", John 4:21).

The New Testament

The Apostle Paul speaks of this program for world restoration that was begun in Abraham/Israel and fulfilled and extended in Jesus. In Galatians 3:16, Paul makes it clear that the promises spoken to Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus: "*The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.*" As well, a few verses earlier in Galatians 3:7-9, Paul says "*Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*" Here we see that all who have faith in Jesus are children of Abraham and thus are blessed recipients of the promise.

In addition, the Apostle Paul notes that this promise was not just for one specific geographical place, but was for the entire world. As he writes in Romans 4:13: "*It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring **received the promise that he would be heir of the world**, but through the righteousness that comes by faith*" (emphasis added). God's heart from the beginning of humanity's plunge into sin has always been the restoration of the world. Thus, Paul says that all who have put their faith in Jesus, the "seed" of Abraham, are now children of Abraham and inheritors of the promise of the world. Jesus does, indeed, change everything.

But there is also a final note that would be proper to highlight from Paul's teaching – the idea of Christians having a sense of "debt" or "obligation" to Israel. Toward the conclusion of his letter to the Roman Church, Paul writes "*For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed **they owe it to them**. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, **they***

owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (Romans 15:26-27, emphasis added). A few chapters prior, Paul warns Gentile Christians of being arrogant in relation to Israel, and instead urges humility because God is not done with ethnic Israel: *“I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved”* (Romans 11:25-26a).

As the New Testament comes to a conclusion in the book of Revelation, we see in ch.21-22 the dawn of the eternal state and new creation. Eden is restored to its new and better place as God now dwells with His people and they with Him, and the echoes of Old Testament covenant language are used to describe it. The pattern of land/blessing/curse/exile is broken. The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, and the blessing of His presence will be our eternal inheritance. No more curse, and no more exile for the people of Jesus. All things are made new.

Practical Considerations

With this Biblical backdrop, we can make some important clarifications in answer to some of the previously proposed questions.

Question 1: *Do Christians have an obligation to support the State of Israel uncritically and unconditionally?*

Answer: No, because there is a difference between the Israel of the Old Testament and the current State of Israel. The Israel of the Old Testament was a theocratic monarchy in covenant with YHWH. The current State of Israel is a liberal democracy led mostly by secular Jews who are not obligated by faithfulness to the Torah. Thus, these two entities are not exactly the same (though having Jewish people a part of both does create some symmetry). Just as the United States should not be uncritically approved or supported by Christians (though Christians should support their country when it is acting good or righteously), so too the modern State of Israel. But, as we established earlier, the particular current conflict that Israel is facing with Hamas allows us as Christians to support the State of Israel’s right to respond and protect their citizens from evil. In addition, from an ethical standpoint, the State of Israel in general does value the dignity and sanctity of human life – in times of war and of peace - and that is also something worthy of a Christian’s support.

Question 2: *Does the application of God’s word to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 (“I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse”) still apply to the State of Israel?*

Answer: Not exactly, though some nuance must be applied here. It can be confusing for many because there are, in essence, three “Israels” in the world today (and some of them are interrelated). There is Biblical Israel – Jews who are ethnically related to Abraham. There is the State of Israel – a political entity occupying much of the land of promise. And finally, there is the “Israel of God” that is made up of all believers in Jesus whether Jew or Gentile (note this

designation in Galatians 6:16). This promise in Genesis 12 was made to Abraham, and by extension to Israel that would emerge from Abraham. The New Testament teaches us that all who have faith in Jesus are Abraham's children because Jesus is the "seed" of Abraham; thus, this promise had application to the Jewish people initially and now is inclusive of the Church of Jesus made up of Jews and Gentiles who have put faith in Christ.

Question 3: *Does the promise of land still apply to the State of Israel?*

Answer: That is debated. There is no real debate over who God promised the land to – it was clearly Abraham and, by extension, Israel. There is, however, debate over the word *'olam* (as mentioned previously), and there is also debate about the State of Israel being in covenant with God. Since God clearly established in the Old Testament law that if Israel did not honor Him and obey the covenant they would be exiled from the land, some scholars have argued that *even if* the State of Israel is under the covenant with God, God has no obligation to the State of Israel occupying the land because they are not operating in covenant with God. Fundamentally, this becomes a geo-political debate in our current state of affairs rather than a Biblical debate if the above argument is received.

Question 4: *What is the Church's relationship to Israel?*

Answer: I think this relationship is best characterized by humility, gratitude, and witness. Paul makes it clear that the Church is the "Israel of God" made up of both Jews and Gentiles who have put faith in Jesus. He is also clear that Gentile believers owe a debt of gratitude, love, and help to our Jewish friends. And he is further clear that our witness to Jesus should be used as a way to make our Jewish friends jealous of God's work on our behalf in Christ ("*I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I take pride in my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them*" Romans 11:13-14).

In addition, Christians should be reminded that though the Church has taken center stage for the outworking of God's mission in the world, the Church has not formally replaced Israel. God has not rejected ethnic Israel and still plans to accomplish His own work in her at the appropriate time (note Romans 11 in particular, and for an exegesis of Romans 9-11, please see our teaching series called "God's Choice" [God's Choice Series](#)).

Concluding Thoughts

Christians can and should have moral clarity about the evil perpetrated upon the State of Israel on October 7, 2023. Christians can and should defend the right of a sovereign nation to defend itself against such an evil attack and to further protect its citizens. Christians should not confuse Biblical Israel and the Jewish people with the political entity known as the State of Israel. Christians should not uncritically support any nation/state, but should pray it acts justly and righteously. Christians should do good to all people as Jesus and the apostles taught, but should also give particular attention and love to the people of God, the Church (which would

include our Palestinian brothers and sisters in Christ along with Jewish believers in Jesus). Christians should also humbly show gratitude, love, and witness to Jewish people as we recognize that they are the olive tree into which Gentile Christians have been grafted. Thus, in crises like we are witnessing in Gaza between Israel/Hamas, it is right for the Christian to pray and seek the Lord's help for peace and safety, and to offer tangible or material assistance as we have ability to aid in the relief of suffering and the living out of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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