

## Is the Modern State of Israel the Fulfillment of Biblical Prophecy?

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Since the inception of ancient Israel as a nation, it has always been a fulfillment of prophecy. Historically, the ancient nation of Israel, in all its forms, has been iterations of prophetic expectations and fulfillments. There has never been a time in which Israel, as a nation, has existed without a prophetic expectation. In fact, throughout church history many have understood the presence or absence of Jewish people as a sign of God's plan or interpretive rubric for scripture. However, with an ever shifting social rather than theological modern Jewish identity both Jews and Non-Jews have begun to examine the possibility of a secular non sequitur "chosen people". It is vitally important that we discuss and nuance our understanding and position on Prophecy concerning the Jewish people and the Modern state of Israel.

It is difficult to find any disagreement with Dr. Rydelnik's paper and I respect his contribution to both the Messianic movement and the overall body of Messiah as the foremost expert in this area. Therefore, my questions and critiques are only concerning issues of nuance and clarity. For example, it is vitally important to state, even more firmly, that Zionism is not the child of pre-millennial dispensationalism. Dr. Rydelnik is correct in noting that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century both social and theological conditions were uniquely conducive to the support of a physical and spiritual restoration of the modern state of Israel. Jewish immigration, political and social support, theological emphasis on prophecy, and the rise of Zionism all came together in a profound movement culminating with the creation of the modern state of Israel. He also rightly points out authors like Gary Burge and Stephen Sizer "dismiss any prophetic element to the rebirth of Israel."<sup>1</sup> Burge and Sizer see the prophetic events as past incidents only and no longer applicable to the modern political state of Israel or the Jewish people. To respond to their trajectories, it is important to understand that support for the ideals of the modern state of Israel both inside and outside the followers of Yeshua was something that existed well before premillennial dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup> Many who take a view against the modern state of Israel have erroneously blamed the rise of dispensationalism as the catalyst for the success of Zionism and dismiss it as a theological innovation.<sup>3</sup> While in fact, it can be argued that since Zionism predates premillennial dispensationalism its the historic rise and the formation state of Israel made dispensationalism grow more popular.

It would also be helpful to clarify our position on the historic interpretation of scripture in Church history. While the majority of the historic Church did employ an allegorical understanding of biblical prophecy concerning Israel there has always been a parallel group that expected literal fulfillments, specifically and most often concerning a historic and literal

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<sup>1</sup>Rydelnik, Michael. *Is the modern state of Israel a Fulfillment of Prophecy?* Paper presented at The Borough Park Symposium, New York, NY. Feb 16, 2015 - Feb 18, 2015 Pg. 2

<sup>2</sup>Rosenberg, Jacob. "The Perfect Storm of Jewish Evangelism: How Jewish Immigration, the Russian Pogroms, Dispensationalism, Pre-Millennialism, Zionism, and Hebrew Christianity Coalesced into the Foundation for Modern Jewish Missions in New York City between 1880-1920," 2012; Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984).

<sup>3</sup>Weber, Timothy P., *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004, Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550-1682* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008).

millennial kingdom.<sup>4</sup> As Dr. Rydelnik showed in his example of Luther, for some the literal fulfillment might have been preferred but mistakenly abandoned or discarded because it just seemed impossible. This is the same issue Augustine cites and something that Luther later mimics. With this said, his observations on the state of the theological/political rhetoric in many institutions has shifted from anti-Israel to completely dismissive and it is vital that it is corrected and answered.

The position from which Dr. Rydelnik approaches the issue is important and he argues it very convincingly. However, there are two points that could use some further discussion to solidify the stated arguments and positions. Was there any renewal of Israel after the captivity following the pattern described by Dr. Rydelnik? Is the character of Modern Israel predicted to be distinctively Jewish?

### **The Biblical Evidence**

Dr. Rydelnik makes a strong case that the prophetic pattern expects a return in unbelief and the spiritual renewal that subsequently accompanies the return to the Land. However, he overstates that “those that returned from Babylonian exile did not experience the national purification depicted in prophecy.”<sup>5</sup> While Rydelnik points out correctly that Zech 12-14 have not been fully fulfilled it would be fair to say that the exiles that did come back from exile did experience a spiritual renewal. Ezra 10 reports, “Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us.”<sup>6</sup> The last chapter of Ezra states that “All” the people were able to reconcile with God through the representation of the leadership. Rydelnik makes the argument for a national journey culminating with the return of the Messiah. He makes his case well, that the modern state of Israel “seems to be a dramatic work of God in fulfillment of the Bible’s predictions of a Jewish return to the land of Israel.”<sup>7</sup> He shows convincingly that the expectations in scripture for Israel repeatedly happens in stages and that the anticipation is that

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<sup>4</sup>John M. Court, *Approaching the Apocalypse: A Short History of Christian Millenarianism* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008); Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992). In addition, Many church fathers, including Irenaeus, Barnabas, Victorinus, Papias, and Lactantius, looked forward to a future and historic millennial reign of the Messiah. cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, Chapter XXVIII, found in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. I: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 557-558. Barnabas Epistle of Barnabas found in *ibid.*, 146. Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter LXXX, found in *ibid.*, 239. Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes and The Epitome to the Divine Institutes* found in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VII: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 211-254.

<sup>5</sup>Rydelnik, Michael. *Is the modern state of Israel a Fulfillment of Prophecy?* Paper presented at The Borough Park Symposium, New York, NY. Feb 16, 2015 - Feb 18, 2015, Pg. 4

<sup>6</sup>*New American Standard Bible: 1995 update.* (1995). (Ezr 10:14). LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

<sup>7</sup>Rydelnik, Michael. *Is the modern state of Israel a Fulfillment of Prophecy?* Paper presented at The Borough Park Symposium, New York, NY. Feb 16, 2015 - Feb 18, 2015 Pg. 2

God would restore his people physically in unbelief then restore them spiritually. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this was partially fulfilled in that this did happen during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah culminating later in the first appearance of the Messiah. The people did return in unbelief during exile and did experience a renewal, however this renewal was short lived and easily corrupted by the time of Yeshua's ministry. More convincing is the unfulfilled role of the Messiah as pierced (Zech 12:10) and the splitting of the Mountains in Chapter 14. This is a larger issue of how prophecy works and the repetitive nature of promise and fulfillment that cannot be fully treated in this response. However, one can state that the nature of prophecy is that of repetition and deeper fulfillment, therefore while the prophecies themselves stand as partially or even fulfilled for the time in which they were given, they also apply in a more profound way today as well. These past events were types and the future fulfillment anti-types or echoes of the prophetic expectation.<sup>8</sup> Just as we find messianic figures throughout the Bible that fulfill part of the messianic expectations in scripture, Yeshua fulfills them even more profoundly and completely. Israel then, can be restored both physically and spiritually in the past and even more so in the future.

The second question, is the Israel of the bible always equal to the Jewish people? There are two potential problems from making Judaism equal with Israel. One may anachronistically use the terms Jewish people for the ancient people of Israel and inadvertently remove the non-Jewish parts from the whole. Once again, this brings up a much larger issue that is largely debated among theologians and scholars concerning the meaning of "all" Israel in Romans 11 and the nature and national inclusion or exclusion of others into the larger nation. It is important to point out that there is often a large presupposition that "Israel" is used interchangeably to mean the Jewish people and therefore the restoration of Israel as described by the prophets is a Jewish restoration rather than an ingathering of the whole people of God (believing Jews and believing gentiles). The scriptural examples used by Dr. Rydelnik may provide another alternative. If those who are scattered and gathered from exile come from multiple 'peoples' and 'lands' (Ezekiel 20:33-38), is it not likely that these people will appear or have been married into the nations. Like those who were coming back from exile and those who stayed in Babylon the Jewishness of their identity was less in question than their belief in God and restoration to his purposes. From the inception of the people of Israel, there has been an engrafted gentile portion that is part of national Israel. Is it possible that this is what Paul was trying to explain in Romans 9-11? The prophetic pattern described by Dr. Rydelnik is even noticeable in the story of the Exodus and the conquest of the land. The people who leave Egypt transition, first rejecting God then returning to him, and only a remnant enter the land, later to experience renewal in respect to entering the promise. This is precisely why Jeremiah 16 uses it as an illustration and why Hebrews 4 mentions the pattern as "something that still stands." This seems to be the same repetition found in all the prophets. The people of God reject him, they are scattered and through persecution and trouble, they return to God and he restores them to the Land along the way adding new people from new places. This is chronology as indicated by Dr. Rydelnik's paper and his use of Ezekiel 36:24-26. It is not a problem with the pattern or that the pattern is not fully fulfilled until the culmination in the New Jerusalem, rather it is a nuance describing the nature of God's people as including but not exclusive to Jewish people and something that *is* being fulfilled, rather than *was* or *will be* fulfilled. All the times the term Jewish, or Jew, is used

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<sup>8</sup>Goppelt, Leonhard. *Typos, the Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1982; R. M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical τυποῶ Structures*. Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1981; Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989; Kaiser, Walter C. *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*. Chicago: Moody, 1985.

in the Hebrew bible it always is used as a subset of the larger group not the term to represent all Israel.<sup>9</sup> This is less clear after the captivity as evident in the use of the words in the New Testament showing historically that by the time of Yeshua the nationalized movement that reduced Israel to the Jewish people had become the majority rejecting the place of gentiles, something the new testament rejects.<sup>10</sup> When Ezekiel describes the life that enters God's people, it is life to "the whole house of Israel" he does not separate them into tribes or nations but whole. While it does not change the literal nature of the fulfillment, it does offer a wider explanation that can include both a historicized interpretation of the prophetic books while still maintaining an enlarged future prophetic expectation. However, this does not mean that the church has replaced Israel or that all believers are now Jews. On the contrary, Jewish people are still a part of the Abrahamic covenant that unconditionally promises Land to the physical decedents of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob but prophetically and ecclesiological it still includes all the nations into the body of believers as full heirs to the promise (Galatians 3:27-29). Dr. Rydelnik rightly points out that the prophetic promise for Israel includes restoration and reconciliation with God, however he avoids the larger issue of, "who is Israel?" and in his paper simply reduces it to the Jewish people. This opens the argument up to an attack on the presupposition of the equality of Israel and the Jewish people. Those like Burge argue that through an understanding of progressive theology God no longer even cares about land since his kingdom is not of this earth. Burge and others see Old Testament prophecy as no longer relevant, but Dr. Rydelnik shows convincingly that prophecy points to Israel of the future, however the question remains then, "who is Israel?" Extending the line of thinking that would further clarify Dr. Rydelnik's points making a more robust argument and explanation.

If we are to give a full answer to the prophetic nature of the modern state of Israel then we need to define who belongs to the nation, then reaffirm the pattern of return that Dr. Rydelnik rightly points out. It is preferable to not use an anachronistic term for Israel even though in modern language the two are often used interchangeably. Finally, if we understand prophecy as "in process" then we can give a better answer to those who dismiss the past and future for both Israel and the Jewish people.

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Kings 25:25, Neh. 1:2, 2:16, 4:1-12, 5:1-17, 6:6, 13:23; Ester 3:4-23, 4:3-16, 5:13, 6:10-13, 8:1-10:3; Jer. 34:9, Zec. 8:23

<sup>10</sup>See Luke