

Is the Modern State of Israel a Fulfillment of Prophecy?
Dr. Michael Rydelnik
Professor of Jewish Studies
Moody Bible Institute

Since their world-wide exile from their homeland nearly two millennia ago, Jewish people have daily prayed that they would be restored to the land of Israel. Moreover, the Hebrew prophets foretold a day when God would draw His people back to their promised land. Throughout church history, Christians for the most part could not conceive of a literal fulfillment of this promise so they interpreted these prophecies figuratively or historically. However, some believers in the 19th century did indeed take the promise of a return literally and therefore began to anticipate a Jewish return to the land of Israel.¹

In the 20th century, the situation shifted once again. For example, having observed forty years of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the Balfour Declaration, and the League of Nations Mandate to Great Britain to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine, Moody Bible Institute concluded that the ancient prophecies of Israel's restoration to the land were being fulfilled. Therefore, in 1923, MBI initiated its unique Jewish Studies major. By 1948, with the establishment of Israel as a state, Bible believing followers of Jesus in both the United States and Great Britain were largely convinced that the rebirth of the Jewish state was a fulfillment of prophecy. Later, with Israel's seemingly miraculous victory in the Six Day War (1967) and its reunification of Jerusalem, people were so convinced that this fulfilled Bible prophecy that it became one of the factors that caused the Jesus Movement in the years that followed.

¹ This discussion of the prophecies of the return to the land of Israel is adapted and expanded from my book, *Understanding the Arab Israeli Conflict: What the Headlines Haven't Told You*, Revised (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 132-34.

Circumstances have dramatically changed today. Authors like Gary Burge and Stephen Sizer dismiss any prophetic element to the rebirth of Israel.² The shifting of political sympathies away from support for Israel to demonizing and delegitimizing the Jewish state³ have led many to reject the validity of seeing Israel as a fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

For those who believe the Bible, a crucial question is whether Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. It is imperative to strike a balance between naysayers, who are forced to spiritualize the words of Israel's ancient prophets and the sensationalists, who see every event in the Middle East as predicted in obscure prophetic passages. This requires a careful and fair examination of biblical prophecy and the promised Jewish return to the land. This paper will examine the biblical evidence used to support viewing the modern State of Israel as a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Afterwards, alternative approaches to these texts will be briefly examined. Finally, it will conclude 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.

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Return in Unbelief

First, the Bible predicts that Israel would return to the land in unbelief. To return in unbelief does not mean without any faith in God whatsoever. By "unbelief" I mean without the Jewish people as a whole having yet placed their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Scriptures foretells that a national spiritual regeneration of "all Israel" will indeed take place at the return of the Messiah Jesus (Zech 12:10; 13:1; Rom 11:25-26). However,

² Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land, Whose Promise: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 20014), 133-35; Stephen Sizer *Christian Zionism: Roadmap to Armageddon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 151-60.

³ See Joshua Muravchik's exceptional book *Making David into Goliath: How the World Turned Against Israel* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014) for an explanation of the factors in the last 40 years that have caused a shift in perspective, from Israel being an admired, plucky nation, standing alone in a sea of hostility to an alleged oppressor of the Palestinians.

biblical prophecy indicates that the Jewish people will turn to God only *after* returning to the land of Israel.

Ezekiel 20:33-38

One passage that supports this is Ezekiel 20:33-38. In the context, the prophet recounts Israel's history of rebellion against the Lord (Ezek 20:1-32). Having shown Israel's past iniquity, the prophet moves to Israel's future restoration (Ezek 20:33-38). In the opening verse of this paragraph (20:33), Ezekiel provides a summary of future redemption for Israel. He promises that the Lord will reveal Himself to Israel "with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm" and "with wrath poured out," pointing to the day when God would ultimately be King over Israel (20:33). Notably, the references to the "mighty hand" and "outstretched arm" allude to God's past deliverance of Israel from Egypt (cf. Ex 6:6; 32:11; Deut 4:34-35; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2) indicating that God's future deliverance will be even greater than the redemption from Egypt.

Having promised Israel's redemption, the prophet next foretells the steps in that process, beginning with God's promise of Israel's regathering, "I will bring you out from the peoples and gather you from the lands where you are scattered" (20:34). This does not seem to be a mere promise to restore Israel from Babylon after the exile but points to a far greater restoration from multiple "peoples" and "lands," revealing a return from a world-wide dispersion.

The next step in the process of restoration indicates a time of outpoured wrath on Israel (20:34b -36). This is a reference to the eschatological period frequently called the Tribulation or in Jeremiah's words, "the time of Jacob's distress" (Jer 30:7). Thus, having regathered the Jewish people back to Israel before the Tribulation while they are yet in

unbelief, the Lord promises to drive some who have returned out to the wilderness to experience His judgment. This is the time when the Lord brings Israel “under the rod” (20:37) of discipline. In similar fashion, the book of Revelation depicts Israel as a woman, fleeing to the wilderness during the Tribulation. God will purge the nation in the wilderness, even as He purified Israel during their wilderness wanderings after the exodus from Egypt.

Notably, only after the regathering and discipline of Israel, God will bring about Israel’s ultimate spiritual restoration. Having purged the rebels, the Lord promises to bring the nation “under the bond of the covenant,” referring to the New Covenant. Jeremiah also predicted this covenant and described it as the day when all Israel would know the Lord, from the least to the greatest of them (Jer 31:31-34). Similarly, God says through the prophet Ezekiel that having restored Israel from their time of purging in the wilderness, the remaining members of the nation “will know that I am the Lord” (Ezek 20:38). This follows the pattern laid down in the wilderness wanderings, when the nation was purged of those who did not believe (Num 14:32-33) and the rest of the nation entered the land.

Two observations can be derived from this exposition. First, at the outset of the prophecy, the Jewish people are predicted to return to the land and only at the end of it do they come to experience God’s forgiveness and spiritual restoration. This indicates that Israel will return to the land in unbelief.

The second observation is that this refers to an eschatological restoration. As mentioned above, Ezekiel predicted a restoration from a world-wide dispersion unlike the return from Babylon. Moreover, those that returned from Babylonian exile did not experience the national purification depicted in this prophecy. Thus, Ezekiel predicted an

eschatological regathering of Jewish people from dispersion around the word while they were still in a state of unbelief.

Ezekiel 36:24-26

A second passage that supports the return of the Jewish people prior to faith in Messiah Jesus is Ezekiel 36:24-26. It begins with the promise of return, “For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land” (v. 24; NASU). Some have argued that the return to the land of Israel spoken of here is merely a reference to the return from Babylonian exile in the 5th century B.C. However, in verse 24, the emphasis is not on return from Babylon but “from the nations” and “from all the lands” referring to a regathering from a world-wide dispersion. This is not a reference to a return that was fulfilled under Ezra and Nehemiah but to a return that will be fulfilled eschatologically.

The following two verses (36:25-26) indicate chronology, “*Then* I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (NASU). Note that the spiritual regeneration of Israel follows the restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel.

The basis of the NASU use of the word “then” is that the verb “sprinkle” is a *vav* consecutive, indicating temporal sequence or consequence. Some have maintained that this feature of the *vav* consecutive is only true in historical narrative literature and not in prophetic oracles. Hence, many translations leave the conjunction “then” untranslated (see HCSB, ESV, NIV, NET) and show no logical order. However, this ignores the grammatical

force normally associated with the *vav* consecutive. Moreover, in the Balaam oracle, regarding the star arising from Jacob who would then crush the forehead of Moab (Num 24:17), the verb “crush” is a *vav* consecutive with a clear sequential force, demonstrating that oracles can indeed have temporal or logical sequence. Thus, the valid inclusion of the conjunction “then” reflects the sequential nature of this oracle. So the prophecy begins by stating that God will restore the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Having done so, then, when the people of Israel are already in the land of Israel, God will work through a variety of means to bring the nation to repentance for their rejection of Messiah Jesus and thereby, to faith in Him. Only at that time will God metaphorically, “sprinkle clean water” on the Jewish people and cleanse Israel “from filthiness.” Hence, a careful reading of this passage reveals that the prophet foresaw an eschatological return of the Jewish people from a vast Diaspora, after which, the nation would turn in faith to the Lord and experience God’s cleansing from sin.

These two passages⁴ from Ezekiel indicate that God would bring about an eschatological return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland. They also indicate that this return would occur prior to the national repentance and spiritual restoration of Israel which will come about when the nation turns in faith to Jesus the Messiah. There are critics of Biblical prophecy that complain that the state of Israel has been reborn as a secular state composed of secular or unbelieving Jewish people. However, rather than criticize, they should recognize that the prophets foretold a Jewish return to the land in unbelief. As such, this return is merely the precursor to the prophesied day when the entire nation turns in faith to the Messiah Jesus.

⁴ Ezekiel 37 is a yet another passage that indicates Israel’s return in unbelief. However, it adds yet another characteristic to describe that return so it will be taken up in the next section.

Return in Stages

Second, the Bible predicts that Israel would return to the land of Israel in stages.

Ezekiel 37 contains the vision of a valley of dry bones. At the outset of the passage, God asked Ezekiel if these bones can live? Wisely, the prophet responds, “O LORD God, You know,” leaving the answer with God alone (Ezek 37:3). God’s response to the prophet once again presents His ultimate and total plan, to “cause breath to enter” them so that they “may come to life (37: 5). This is not the first stage of the dry bones coming to life but the end goal. In the rest of the passage the Lord, through Ezekiel, describes the specific process by which the dry bones would live.

In the vision of the dry bones, Ezekiel saw the bones come to life in stages: first sinews on the bones; then flesh; then skin; and finally, the breath of life (37:6-10). Then God tells Ezekiel that “these bones are the whole house of Israel (37:11)” and that their restoration is a picture of the way God will bring them “into the land of Israel (37:12).” The gradual return to life of the bones reveals that the regathering of Israel is not to be construed as an episode that will occur instantaneously, in one single event. Rather, it is a process that culminates in the nation receiving the breath of life by turning to Messiah Jesus.

This regathering looks beyond the return from Babylonian exile to events at the end of days. The breath is to come from the four winds (37:9) indicating a return from world-wide dispersion. Moreover, at the return from Babylonian exile, Israel as a collective nation did not come to know the Lord as this passage describes (37:14). That spiritual birth awaits the eschatological Messianic Kingdom. Hence, Ezekiel’s vision does not describe events

fulfilled in the post-exilic period but rather looks forward to the end of days, encompassing events just prior to the return of the Messiah.

In this passage, the dry bones represent Israel in exile, without any hope. The process of the bones coming together with sinew, flesh, and skin likely refers to the waves of immigration before Israel's rebirth. This is precisely how the Jewish people have returned to the land of Israel. There were the five separate *aliyot* (immigration waves), from 1881 to 1939, when Jewish people from Europe returned to the Promised Land. Moreover, after the birth of Israel in 1948, some one million European Jewish survivors of the Holocaust came to Israel. Not long after that, some 800,000 Jewish people were driven from the Arab world and came home to the land of Israel. More recently, in the 1990s, some 1 ½ million Jewish people fled the former Soviet Union and immigrated to Israel. These immigration waves demonstrate that the Jewish people have indeed returned in stages. The body without breath represents unbelieving Israel today, restored to the land but not yet spiritually regenerated (even as the previous section noted, a return in unbelief). Finally, according to this passage, the final step will occur when God breathes the breath of life on these bodies (37:14), representing the day when the entire nation of Israel turns in faith to Messiah Jesus. Only then will the collective people of Israel experience God's Spirit within them and know the Lord.

Return through Persecution

Third, the Bible predicts that Israel would return to her land through persecution. God says of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah, "However, take note! The days are coming"—the LORD's declaration—"when it will no longer be said: As the LORD lives who brought the Israelites from the land of Egypt, but rather: As the LORD lives who brought the Israelites from

the land of the north and from all the other lands where He had banished them. I will return them to their land that I gave to their ancestors” (Jer 16:14-15). This speaks of the certain and momentous nature of the end of days return of the Jewish people to their land. No longer will the Exodus from Egypt be the most glorious and central event to the Jewish experience. Instead, the Exodus from all the lands of the Diaspora will constitute God’s greatest act of physical redemption for the Jewish people.

Clearly Jeremiah is not here referring to the return from Babylon because this speaks of a restoration from many nations (“the land of the north and from all the other lands”). Moreover, the phrase “the days are coming” is an eschatological formula used to describe events in the distant future (cf. Jer 23:5; 7; 30:3; 31:27, 31, 38; 33:14; 51:47, 52; Amos 9:13). Furthermore, the return from Babylon did not displace the Exodus as God’s central act of redemption of the Jewish people.

In the next verse, God speaks through Jeremiah, detailing the means He will use—persecution—to bring His people back to their land. When God returned the Jewish people from Babylon, He used the decree of Cyrus (Ezek 1:1-8; Jer 25:12; 29:10). The Persian king aided those who returned and the return was free and peaceful. In contrast, Jer 16:16 uses metaphors of persecution to describe the return to the land. First, God will use “fishermen . . . [who] will fish for them,” catching them against their will. Second, God will bring the Jewish people back with “many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and out of the clefts of the rocks,” a terrifying image of pursuit and persecution.

These metaphors for persecution have been literally fulfilled in the rebirth of Israel. Since the birth of modern Zionism (with the first *aliyah* and the Russian pogroms of 1882), the primary motivation for return to the land of Israel has been anti-Jewish persecution. In

the last 135 years, God has used Czarist pogroms, Polish economic discrimination, Nazi genocide, Arab hatred, Soviet repression, and the current rebirth of Western European Antisemitism, to drive Jewish people back to their homeland. Economic success and religious freedom in the Diaspora can keep Jewish people complacent about returning; so God uses “fishermen” and “hunters” to drive them back to the Promised Land.

Return before the Day of the Lord

Fourth, the Bible predicts that Israel would return to the land to set the stage for end-time events. The Scriptures speak of eschatological events as occurring in the Day of the Lord. In the Hebrew Bible, the phrase may mean a particular coming historical judgment: e.g., the Assyrian invasion of the Northern Kingdom (e.g., Amos 5:18,20) or the Babylonian invasion of Judah (e.g., Ezek 13:5). However, it frequently refers to a future end time period of eschatological judgment (e.g., Isa 13:6-13); The eschatological Day of the Lord follows the evening and morning of the Jewish reckoning of a day, with two aspects: (1) the darkness of the Great Tribulation of Lord's judgment (c.g. Isa 2:12-19; 4:1; Mal 4:5) followed by (2) the light of blessing with the return of Messiah and His reign in the Millennium (e.g., Joel 3:30-32; Isa 4:2; 19:23-25). When describing the events of the eschatological Day of the Lord, the Jewish people are consistently viewed as already present in the land of Israel. Although there are many prophecies that could be discussed, the following discussion will be limited to two passages.⁵

Daniel 9:27

One passage that places the Jewish people in the land of Israel prior to the outbreak of end-time events is Daniel 9:27. Although this is a complicated prophecy, a simple aspect

⁵ Additionally, Zechariah 12 and 14 both seem to demonstrate that Israel would be in the land in unbelief prior to the return of Messiah Jesus to deliver them (See my comments on these passages in “Zechariah” *The Moody Bible Commentary* eds. Michael Rydelnik and Michael G. Vanlaningham [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014], 1432-36). In fact, the prophets generally depict the end of days with Israel already in the land and only afterwards experiencing a spiritual regeneration.

of it speaks of a firm covenant between the future world dictator and the Jewish people in their land. This covenant will unleash the final events before Messiah Jesus' return.

Therefore, Daniel's prophecy assumes a reborn State of Israel. The Jewish State has to be restored so this predicted covenant can be made. There needs to be a reborn state of Israel for this treaty to be signed, for the temple to be rebuilt, for Jerusalem to be surrounded by the nations during the battle of Armageddon, even for Jesus to return to deliver the Jewish people from their enemies (Zech 14:3). Thus, Daniel's complicated prophecy has a simple premise: Israel must be returned to the land for the final events Daniel foresaw to take place.

Zephaniah 2:1-3

A second passage that may speak specifically of a return to the land before the Day of the Lord is Zephaniah 2:1-3. In Zephaniah 2:1-15, God declares His judgment on the eschatological enemies of Judah. But just prior to describing that judgment on the nations, the Lord calls Israel to return to Him. He declares, "Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O nation without shame . . ." (Zeph 2:1). Although this declaration could be a call for Israel's collective repentance, it potentially could be a call for the Jewish people to return to the land of Israel before the Day of the Lord. The possible evidence for this lies in the usage of the word "gather." The Hebrew word for "gather" (*qashash*) is only used here in Zephaniah. However, Zephaniah does use two synonyms for gathering (*'asaph*, 3:8, 18 and *qabats*, 3:19-20). Both of these words refer to a literal regathering. Therefore, it is likely that the word "gather" in 2:1 should be taken literally as well.

If "gather" is to be taken literally, then this passage would be a call for the Jewish people to regather themselves to the land prior to the Day of the Lord, the same period

known as the Tribulation. It calls for the nation to return to the land of Israel “before the Day of the Lord’s anger” (2:2). Having regathered to the land, Israel will “seek the Lord . . . seek righteousness, seek humility” in order to be “hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger” (2:3). It appears that Zephaniah was describing a literal return to the land of Israel as a prelude to the judgments that will take place in the Day of the Lord.

Since Israel has returned in unbelief, in stages, through persecution, and before the advent of the Day of the Lord, it is likely that the modern the State of Israel fulfills the predictions of the ancient Hebrew prophets . . . and sets the stage for events yet to come.

ALTERNATE EXPLANATIONS

The prophets foresaw the literal restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel as an eschatological work. However, for the most part, throughout Church history, Christian interpreters have either historicized or allegorized the predictions of the prophets. For example, 19th century commentator Adam Clarke, in explaining Ezekiel 37, interpreted it historically, seeing its fulfillment at “the restoration of that people from the Babylonish captivity, and their resettlement in the land of their forefathers.” He also noted the process described in the passage but saw the stages fulfilled at the edict of Cyrus (Ezra 1:2-3), the edict of Darius (Ezra 4:23-24), and the orders of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah (Neh 2:7).⁶ Many past and present interpreters historicize, just as Clarke did.

⁶ Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary: The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with a Commentary and Critical Notes*. 6 Vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1856), IV:525-26. The difficulty with holding that Ezekiel’s prophecy pertains to the historical return from Babylon is the expectation that (a) the entire nation of Israel will experience spiritual regeneration (Ezek 37:13-14), something that decidedly did not happen at the post-exilic return; (b) when Israel comes to know the Lord they will be led by “one Shepherd,” the messianic son of David (37:24); (c) when Israel returns to the land of Israel, they will never be driven from the land again (37:25). (d) all the nations would know that the Lord set Israel apart (37:28). None of these were fulfilled in the 5th and 6th Centuries B.C. but await an eschatological fulfillment.

An alternative approach has been to interpret the prophecies of the return allegorically. An example of this is Martin Luther's lectures on the book of Genesis. Luther was fascinated by the promises made to Abraham's descendants in Genesis 12. When Luther asked who those descendants might be, He looked at the Jewish people of his day and concluded that they could not possibly be the descendants to which the Scriptures referred. Thus, he wrote, "If the Jews are Abraham's descendants, then we would expect to see them back in their own land. We would expect them to have a state of their own. But what do we see? We see them living among us scattered and despised."⁷ To Luther, the idea that God would actually fulfill His promises literally and return the Jewish people to the land was unthinkable. As a result, Luther's immediate view was that the Abrahamic promises, including the promise of return, had been transferred to the church. According to him, Abraham's seed was figurative for the Church. Therefore, the restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel was, according to Luther, to be understood allegorically. Today, contemporary scholars frequently spiritualize the land promise, looking for its fulfillment when the church inherits the earth.⁸

Although the historicist and allegorical approaches to the Prophets are once again gaining favor in the contemporary world, they fail because of their arbitrary nature. They either ignore that the predictions did not accurately come to pass in history or they seek to impose a meaning on texts that the prophetic authors did not intend. Therefore, it seems best to retain a literal understanding of the prophets and their anticipation of an end-time return of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland.

⁷ As cited in Halvor Ronning, "The Land of Israel: A Christian Zionist View," *Immanuel* 22/23 (1989): 132.

⁸ See Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), especially 33-35. This allegorical approach merits an extensive evaluation, far beyond the scope of this paper. See Barry E. Horner, "Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to 'Holy Land' Theology, Review" *Mishkan* 65:2010, 20-27.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that, in fulfillment of the Scriptures, God brought the Jewish people back to the land of Israel. First, Jewish pioneers returned and rebuilt the land. Then, in 1947, the United Nations partitioned Palestine into a Jewish state and an Arab state. And finally, the Jewish people declared statehood on May 15, 1948.⁹ It is remarkable that God would restore a dispersed people, despised throughout history as “wandering Jews”, and then, in literal fulfillment of biblical prophecy, bring them home to their land after 2,000 years of exile.

In 1607, even prior to the publication of the King James Bible, English Puritan Thomas Brightman wrote, “Shall they [the Jews] return to Jerusalem again? There is nothing more certain: the prophets do everywhere confirm it and beat upon it.”¹⁰ In a time when the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world without any hope of return to the land of Israel, Brightman became forerunner of the many English restorationists who saw the prophecies of Israel’s return to the land of Israel, and took them literally. As a result, they became the first modern advocates of a Jewish return to the land of Israel, with the full expectation that this would fulfill Bible prophecy.¹¹ If contemporary interpreters would maintain the same literal approach to the Prophets, then it will become evident that the modern state of Israel is indeed a fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

⁹ For a summary of this history, see Rydelnik, *Understanding the Arab Israeli Conflict*, 75-106.

¹⁰ Cited in Nahum Sokolow. *History of Zionism: 1600-1918*, Volumes I and II (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1919), I:43.

¹¹ See Donald M. Lewis, *The Origins of Christian Zionism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).