"Biblical and Hermeneutical Support for the Modern State of Israel within God's Prophetic Plan"

Abbreviated Paper Overview

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Introduction

Martin Luther struggled with the significance of God's continuing covenant with the Jews. Tying this to the Land promise and seeing the Jews stilll in a desolate condition since God's judgent fell in AD 70, he concluded: "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 scattered and despised." As a result, he decided since they did not, they could not, inherit the Land and so accepted the spiritual interpretation of his Augustinian order that the Church became the sole heir of the promises to Abraham. I wonder what Luther would say if he lived in our day when more than six million Jews have returned to their biblical homeland to regain their independence in a developed Jewish state whose military might and technological achievements are the envy of the world? I wonder, too, what they might say to us, the modern defenders of the prophetic Word, who almost eighty years after this historic return still ponder the question "Is the modern state of Israel prophetically significant?"

At the heart of the issue is whether God will fulfill His promise to His Chosen People. The "Orthodox churches" of the East and West, along with Reformed churches make a theological distinction between the ancient people of God and the modern political state of Israel founded in 1948. They hold that the promises made to biblical Israel find their present and final fulfillment in Christ and His Church (the "new Israel" or the "new people of God"). The question of modern Jewish identity and continuity as Israel has also become an issue within the evangelical churches, provoked by the resurgence of global anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism attendant to Israel's war with Iran and its proxies, especially the Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas. Much of this resulted from war-time propaganda, with the historical and theological question of Jewish identity and continuity becoming a political issue that has reduced traditional Christian support for the Jews as God's Chosen People and for the modern State as a fulfillment of prophecy.

If there is to be a literal future fulfillment it must be with the same people and in the same place mandated in the Land covenant. This issue has been complicated by other questions: Are the Jewish people today the actual descendants of the ancient Israelites, does the unbelief of modern Jews disqualify them from inheriting the promises (since fulfillment is conditioned upon participation in the New Covenant), and can the contextual realization of the Land Covenant in the Millennial Kingdom have prophetic significance within the Church Age without claiming prophetic fulfillment? First, let us address the reasons we can accept the continuation of Jewish ethnic identity from ancient to modern times.

Modern Jews as Descendants of the Ancient Israelites

The evidence of continual Jewish habitation in the Land of Israel for 3,000 years is:

1. *There has been continual Jewish habitation in the Land of Israel from ancient to modern times.*

   a) Archaeological excavation throughout the Land of Israel since the 19th century has revealed a stratigraphic history of Jewish artifactual remains. This includes the subsequent periods of foreign occupation up to the modern era.

   b) The historical record also documents uninterrupted Jewish residence in the Land. Dan Bahat, former district archaeologist of Jerusalem, has noted:

      > Although the Temple was destroyed, the physical and spiritual nexus between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel was not broken. Throughout the succeeding centuries, even if a large part of the nation was driven from exile to another, many stayed on, reinforced from time to time by returning exiles, maintaining their communities and settlements in the face of all manner of persecutions, natural disasters and alien conquests. For nearly two thousand years, they provided the nucleus around which the aspirations of the dispersed nation crystallized, and, through them, the nation clung to the dream of returning to its Land.

2. *There is an unbroken tradition of Jewish worship at holy sites from ancient to modern times.*

   The destruction of the Second Temple in the year A.D. 70 did not spell the end of Jewish activities on the Temple Mount. For many centuries, Jews continued their attachment to the site by maintaining a physical presence on the mountain. When Jews were prevented from the site, they prayed three times a day for the speedy renewal of the sacrificial service in a restored Temple. The aspiration of rebuilding the Temple, enshrined in the required thrice daily Jewish recitation of the *Shemoneh Esreh* ("Eighteen Beneditions"), has characterized the united hope the Jewish community worldwide. One modern rabbi has stated: "In the course of 2,000 years, the Jewish people have never forgotten the Temple. … The dream of rebuilding the Temple spans fifty generations of Jews, five continents and innumerable seas and oceans." In testimony to this hope Jews have been buried on the slopes of the Mount of Olives for more than two millennia. This, in itself, reflects Jewish reverence for and continuation in the Land.

3. *DNA tests affirm an ethnic and national link to ancient Jewish ancestry going back to Abraham.*

   Although some genetic mixing with local populations in the Diaspora was expected, the genetic tie to the Land is indisputable. Whether Sephardic, Askenazi or Mizrachi, broad genomic studies reveal a clear genetic continuity with ancient Levantine ancestry consistent with Near Eastern origin. Also, genetic studies of the "Cohen gene" isolated a unique abberation of the "Y" chromosome in Jewish males who by tradition bore the claim they were Kohanim of the tribe of Levi. The genetic research confirmed their unique status

– in both Sephardic and Askenazi populations – evidence that they were once connected before geographic separation affected their communities. The Cohen Modal Haplotpe, the genetic signature of Aaron, may be traced to Abraham as the progenitor. The biblical text speaks of Abraham's *seed*, indicating that the determining factor is transferred through the mechanism of biological inheritance. Since there are only seven generations between Aaron and Abraham, a few hundred years, and geneic signatures change slightly over many generations, it is possible to assme that the CHM is also the genetic signature of Abraham.

The unbelief of modern Jews does not disqualify them from living in their Promised Land.

Prophecy does not require national spiritual regeneration as a condition for Jewish People re-establishing a national presence in the Land. In fact, it predicts the opposite, that not only will there be Jews in the Land (as there has been for the past 2,000 years) but Jews will have a government in the Land sufficient to enter into a foreign agreement (Dan. 9:27), rebuild the Temple (Matt. 24:15), and impose Sabbath observance on a national scale (Matt. 24:20). The nation's unbelief, while the reason for exile from the Land, was never a deterrent to its physical return to the Land (2 Chr. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-6). A nation returned to the Land in unbelief is a prerequisite to the nation experiencing the prophetic fulfillment of spiritual regeneration in the Land under the New Covenant at the coming of the Messiah (e.g., Ezek. 36:22-27; 37:1-14; Zech. 12:10-13:1).

The modern Jewish State may have significance within the Church Age without claiming prophetic fulfillment.

Before presenting the reasons for this conclusion let us consider the contemporary views of evangelicals on the issue of prophetic significance.

1) *Possible prophetic significance, but cannot know for sure.*

Mark Bailey, former President of Dallas Theological Seminary: "Is that what is happening today? I can't say for sure. It is the first time in 2,500 years, though, that you have this kind of constitution of people in that land, but I don't *know* what that means. This may be the prelude to end-time events, but I think we're presumptuous if we try to give it meaning beyond that. It *may be*, that's all we can say." Too, Charles Dyer, former Dean of Moody Bible Institute, said: "Judged on biblical grounds, the nation today does not pass divine muster as a nation living in covenant obedience to God. The promise to possess the land is directly tied to the nation's response to Messiah. Though its international right to the land can be well defended, Israel's divine right by covenant to possess it today has only sentiment in its favor.

However, Israel's "divine right" to the Land is not based on their own conditional possession but on God's unconditional promise. The territorial grant in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-21; 26:3-4; 28:13-15), which is expanded in the Land Covenant (Deut. 28-30), is grounded on God's unconditional promise (Gen. 15:8-17) to a graciously chosen people (Deut. 14:2). From its inception as a nation, Israel's possession of the Land was not because of its merited performance as a people but because of its unmerited position as God's people (Ps. 111:6). At the climax of Mosaic violation and the enactment of the covenantal curses, the prophet Jeremiah nevertheless affirmed that no matter what Israel might do, God's covenantal promise would not be affected (Jer. 31:25-27). Daniel also recognized that the basis for

Israel's return to possess the Land after the exile was God's loyal love toward His chosen people, and not their own ability to obey (Dan. 9:18-19). In like manner, Paul affirmed that the covenantal promise remained intact for the Jewish people as the Jewish people and also for the Jewish people as unbelieving and Christ-rejecting Jewish people (Rom. 11:28). Again, the basis for this unprecedented promise was the unchanging character of God who made an unconditional covenant (Rom. 11:29). while the privilege of possession of the Land is conditional, the promise of possession is not. Rather, it is as eternal as the God who gave it since it is based on His unconditional character. In Jeremiah 25:5, in a similar conditional context, the prophet makes the imperative statement: "dwell on the Land which the LORD has given to you and your forefathers forever and ever." In this context it is the fact that Israel has received an unconditional and eternal promise of the Land that should motivate them to obedience so that they may possess it as God intended (Deut. 8:6-18). These positive promises weigh in favor of a more confident assessment of the significance of the modern State of Israel.

2) *Prophetic significance in fulfillment of prophecy.*

This perspective is advocated by evangelicals within the Christian or Biblical Zionist camp (e.g., the International Christian Embassy and Christians United for Israel) who may or may not be be charismatic but are decidedly non-dispensationalist. They hold that the modern return of the Jewish people to form the Jewish State is a direct fulfillment of prophecy. Some even ascribe special prophetic significance to the dates of 1948 (Isa. 66:8) and 1967 (Zech. 8:1-8), but in any case believe that the messianic era has arrived and will be soon climaxed by the return of the Messiah to set up His messianic kingdom in Israel. For many in this group, the concept of dual covenant (salvation for the Jews under the Abrahamic Covenant and for Gentiles under the New Covenant) allows them to accept a secular Jewish state as a fulfillment of the end time prophecies of national restoration. Therefore, Jews do not need a national repentance or conversion nor do they need to experience a future judgment. They have suffered enough in past tribulations, especially the Holocaust, which is often consider as having fulfilled the "time of Jacob's (Israel's) trouble" (Jer. 30:7) and Jesus' prediction of a "great tribulation" (Matt. 24:21.

3) *Prophetic significance in preparation for fulfillment.*

Five events that are a necessary preparation for the final fulfillment of the God's covenants with Israel in history. These have and are occuring within the Church Age as God continues to work with the Jewish People to confirm His promises to the fathers (Rom. 15:8).

a) *Israel will be regathered to the Land before the Tribulation in unbelief.*

Ezekiel clearly differentiates two related phases of regathering: first to the Land and then to the Lord. Ezekiel 36:24-28 reveals the temporal and logical order of Israel's return in the process of restoration:

Phase 1*: Regathering to the Land (physical) – before* the Tribulation (in unbelief)

[24]For I will take you from the nations, and I will gather you from the lands,

and I will bring you back into your Land.

***Phase 2**: Regathering to the Lord (spiritual) – before* the Millennial Kingdom (in belief)

> [25]***Then*** I will sprinkle on you clean water, and you will be clean; I will purify you from all your defilement and from all your idols. [26]I will give you a new heart and put within you a new spirit, and I will remove the stony heart from your flesh and give you a fleshy heart; [27]and I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my decrees, and you will faithfully obey my laws. [28]And you will dwell in the Land which I gave to your forefathers; and you will be My people, and I will be your God (author's translation).

Present Preparation (Stage 1)	Permanent Possession (Stage 2)
Return to part of the Land	Return to all of the Land
Israel struggles for its borders	Israel is secure in its borders
The work of man (secular)	The work of God (spiritual)
Partial Regathering	Permanent Regathering
Worldwide in scope	Worldwide in extent
Restoration to the Land	Restoration to the Lord
Messiah Rejected	Messiah Reigning
Nation is Unregenerate	Nation is Regenerate
Nations war with Israel	Nations worship with Israel
Plans to rebuild the Temple	Priests serving in the Temple

A final passage that indicates that Israel will be regathered *before* the Tribulation in unbelief is Zephaniah 2:1-2:

> Gather yourselves together, yes, gather, O nation without shame,
> ***before*** the decree takes effect – the day passes like chaff – ***before*** the burning anger of the LORD comes upon you, ***before*** the day of the LORD's anger comes upon you.

It is clear from verses 2 and 3 that time of the regathering is *before* the Tribulation or יום אף־יהוה ("the day of the LORD's anger"). It is also evident that the nation is in unbelief since they are described as a "nation without shame" (vs. 1), meaning they have not yet repented. For this reason they are threatened with judgment when the Day of the LORD arrives (vss. 2-3).

b) Israel will be regathered to the Land through persecution and for judgment.

Jeremiah 16:15-16 predicts a worldwide regathering of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel through the means of persecution:

> [15]"As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them. For I will

> restore them to their own Land which I gave to their fathers. [16]Behold, I am going to send for many fishermen," declares the LORD, "and they will fish for them; and afterwards I shall send for many hunters, and they will hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and from the clefts of the rocks."

In verse 16 this means is metaphorically described as "fishermen" and "hunters" who will pursue the Jewish people back to their Land. These pursuers, said to be sent by God, have been used to force the Jewish people back to their Land in preparation for the events that will result in their final restoration. It is clear from the following verses (vss. 17-21) that these people are unrepentant at the time of their forced return to the Land and that only afterward does this result in them coming to experience God's mighty deliverance and their recognition that He is the LORD (YHWH).

The modern history of Israel reveals that persecution has been the leading cause of the Jewish return to the Land. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries czarist pogroms and Polish economic discrimination in Eastern Europe motivated the creation of the Zionist Movement. During the Second World War, the attempted genocide of Jews during the Nazi holocaust encouraged international sympathy for the Jewish plight and led to the creation of the State of Israel. The Arab-Israel war of 1948-49 then forced Jews from Arab lands and later Soviet repression forced over a million Jews to immigrate to Israel. For almost 80 years Israel has fought six major wars with its Arab neighbors for its survival. This has resulted in increased hostility from the international community and global anti-Semitism. These "fishermen" and "hunters" continue to drive otherwise complacent Jews from the Diaspora to find safe haven in the Jewish State. In fact, the council of rabbis in Israel has issued an urgent call to the Jewish communities outside the Land to return. As these history of events occurs in conformity with the prophetic texts, can we not say that the modern State of Israel is prophetically significant?

c) Israel will be regathered to the Land in stages.

The bones come to life in stages: first sinews on the bones, then flesh, then skin, and finally, breath of life (37:6-10). Then God told Ezekiel that "these bones are the whole house of Israel" (verse 11) and their restoration is a picture of the way God will bring them "back to the Land of Israel" (verse 12).

Despite the previous arguments, the common hesitation of futurists in ascribing prophetic significance to the modern Jewish State is the uncertainty that the modern State of Israel is the *same* Israel of prophets predictions. In other words, "How do we know that the modern Jewish State might not be wiped out by its many enemies and the Jewish people again driven out of the Land and scattered among the nations to be brought back sometime in the future to fulfill these prophecies? One response to this might be that if this were to happen, there would be no way anyone could ever know that a future return to the Land was the return that would fulfill prophecy. If the Jews could be dispersed again after returning to the Land, there is nothing to prevent this

from reoccurring many times more. Therefore, it would be impossible to know when a return was of prophetic significance. A response to this might be that this is precisely the point, no one can know if a return to the Land is prophetically significant until after prophecy has begun to be fulfilled. On this basis, no one in the age of the Church is able to know if a modern Israel is prophetically significant because prophecy will not begin to be fulfilled until after the Church has been Raptured and the seventieth week of Daniel commences. However, one prophetic text offers a solution explaining that

d) Israel's two regatherings will be sequential and without interruption.

Isaiah 11:11-12 records an uninterrupted temporal sequence of regatherings. If this understanding is correct, the text requires that the present Israel be the Israel that will remain in the Land to experience prophetic fulfillment in the end time. This passage reads:

> [11]Then it will happen on that day that the LORD will ***again the second time*** regather with His hand the remnant of His people [the Jewish People] who remain from Assyria (Greater Syria), Egypt, Pathros (Upper Egypt), Cush (Ethiopia), Elam (Iran), Shinar (Iraq), Hamath (Middle Syria), and from the islands of the sea (Mediterranean coastlands). [12]And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

Because the interpretation of this text is critical to the argument of the modern regathering being significant to prophetic fulfillment, it is necessary to examine the text in more depth.

The context of this passage is clearly eschatological (cf. verses 1-10), as the prophetic formula ביום ההוא ("on that day"), a temporal prophetic marker (cf. Isaiah 7:18-25; 10:20-23) indicates. It should be noted that although the Masoretic text clearly reads שנית ("the second time"), most critical commentaries along with BHS have argued it is a scribal error (because it is superfluous with [יוסף "happen once again"). They have emended שנית ("the second time") on the basis of the Arabic *sanija* ("be high"), even though there is no evidence for this meaning in Hebrew.With this emendation the text reads שא ("lift up") + יד("hand") = שא ידו ("lift up His hand"). There is some support for this from the LXX which reads "the Lord will stretch forth His hand again" in comparison with Isaiah 49:22 which reads "raise high his hand." However, the Aramaic Targum clearly supports שנית ("a second time") with its paraphrase: "the Lord shall display His might *a second time*." While one anticipates that there should be a verb before ידו ("His hand"), it may be implied from the context. Yet, even if one were to accept the emendation, the term יוסף "once again" (lit. "add") implies the idea that this is a *second* deliverance. However, it is my opinion that the redundancy ("again … second time") is intentional to make the point of two regatherings

and for this reason in my translation I have supplied as the implied verb "regather." The first "regathering" failed to achieve the promised restoration because the hearts of the nation were unchanged. The second and final regathering is a rescue that concentrates on the שׁאר עמו, "Remnant" of His nation – those whose hearts are changed (Ezek. 36:26-27) and therefore succeed in fulfilling the promise.

Most commentators relate the "second regathering" in terms of a prior historical deliverance which they identify with the exodus from Egypt. However, this "second time" regathering is a global regathering ("from the four corners of the earth") and the term "once again" implies the first, with which it compares, must be as well. Previous regatherings after exile or deportation from the Land were from one place: Egypt (1446 B.C.) and Babylon (538 B.C.). History's only "regathering" after the Roman dispersion from the Land in A.D. 70 was experienced in the 20th century and was, for the first time, a global regathering. If the "second time" regathering is the final regathering (as vs. 12 reveals from its description of a divine deliverance from the nations, cf. Matt. 24:31). Since nothing can come between the first implied and second stated regathering, the first regathering must be the present modern one that occurred with the establishment of the nation in 1948. Because both the first and second regatherings are in a prophetic context there is no reason to require Isaiah's original audience to understand the first regathering as a past event. Abraham had no idea what exile or regathering God had in view when he received the prophecy of the exodus in Genesis 15:13-14) but when fulfillment historically occurred the nation understood it conformed to prophetic details that had been revealed.

e) Modern Israel parallels the Israel predicted to exist in the End time.

In order for the prophetic texts concerning Israel to have a literal fulfillment, futurists in the past expected that at some point in history (1) the Jewish People would have to return to their ancient homeland, "the Land of Israel," (2) they would have to regain their national status as "the people of Israel," and (3) they would again be in an adversarial position with the Gentile nations. The introduction to the prophecy of Gog and Magog invasion of Israel in Ezekiel 38 describes a situation and condition that fulfills this predicted pattern:

a) Land of Israel is restored from foreign domination (vs. 8a).
b) Jewish People (re)gathered from many nations (vss. 8b, 12b).
c) Israel reinhabits Judea and Samaria formerly in a state of ruin (vs. 8c, 12a).
d) Israel is living in security (בטח), vss. 8d, 11b.
e) Israel is living in unwalled cities (vs. 11a).
f) Israel is prosperous (reputation for wealth), vss. 12a, 13b-c.
g) Israel controls the City of Jerusalem (vs. 12d).

While the time of the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy is the "endtime, last days" (vss.), these verses describe the state of the Land of Israel and its people at the time of the

invasion. Looking at this from an historical perspective we see a physical restoration from the successive and oppressive foreign rules of the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders and Ottoman Empires. The latter, in particular, denuded the Land and put it in a state of agricultural ruin. Jewish aliyah occurred on a global scale during the 20th century. With the establishment of an independent state in 1948 Israel made its citizen's security a top priority, eventually creating a military and survelliance system that would guarantee national survival from attacks by its hostile neighbors. As a result of this secure environment Israel returned to Judea and Samaria ("the mountains of Israel") after 1967 and continued to develop its industry and technology, including oil and natural gas resources, to make it a wealthy nation envied by other nations in the region. Also from 1967 it reunified the city of Jerusalem and placed it under Israeli sovereignty. If this state of the Land and its people exist today (in whole or in part), can we not see that the modrn state of israel is prophetically significant?

In Conclusion

It may still be asked, how do we *know* that the establishment of the modern Jewish State in 1948 was prophetically significant? In response it may be asked, how do we know that the dispersion of the Jews and the destruction of the Jewish State in A.D. 70 was prophetically significant? The event of dispersion and destruction was certainly prophesied, but no date was given when this would occur. After A.D. 70 Jews continued to live in the Land and even marshaled sufficient forces to wage a second Jewish revolt against Rome. Yet, both Jewish and Christian historians have accepted the Roman dispersion and destruction in A.D. 70 as the prophetic fulfillment of divine judgment against the Jewish nation? One reason for this was that this judgment was the *first* experience of Jewish exile from the Land since the Babylonian Captivity, and being *like* that judgment (with the destruction of the city and the Temple), it was evident that A.D. 70 marked a pivotal point in Jewish history, especially since the 9th of Av had been the date of the First Temple's destruction, indicating these destructions were the fulfillment of divinely ordered prophetic judgments (cf. Jer. 20:4; 38:3; Lk. 19:43-44; 21:20-24).

The parallels between the end of Jewish independence in the Land of Israel marked historically by the date of A.D. 70 and the reestablishment of Jewish independence in the Land of Israel marked by the date of 1948 should be observed. Just as with the event of Jewish dispersion, the event of Jewish regathering to the Land was certainly prophesied but no date was given. The Zionist movement and waves of Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel in the 19th and early 20th centuries, after nearly 2,000 years of dispersion from the Land, called attention to a new direction in God's movement of history, but 1948 was the time when the existence of the Jewish State began and ended the *necessary condition* of Diaspora. Jews may have continued to live in the Diaspora after 1948, just as Jews continued after to live in Israel after A.D. 70, but in either

case this does not change the fact that an event of prophetic significance took place. Therefore, just as the dispersion of the Jewish people among the nation from the Land of Israel (the Diaspora) was deemed prophetically significant (of God's judgment), so the return of Jewish People from the Diaspora to the Land of Israel must also be considered prophetically significant (of God's restoration). For this reason, the creation of the modern Jewish State in1948 has the prophetic significance of beginning the process of regathering from the nations (in unbelief) that will be followed by a further regathering (in belief) in preparation for the time of Israel's restoration in the Millennial Kingdom. While such prophetic developments take place within the Church Age, these are necessary preparations for the fulfillment of prophecy that will take place once the 70th Week of Daniel has commenced.