

Why Israel?

By Martin Mallory

“Always keep your eye on Israel. It’s how you will understand God’s plan and world events.” Those were the words of my father as he spoke from behind the newspaper he was reading to me when I was a very young boy. He often read news articles to anyone in the family who happened to be around to hear. That day, for some reason, I was listening, but had no idea how this prophetic exhortation would come to shape my life.

The disciples had been watching Israel too and had some questions. “So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” (Acts 1:6). If we don’t understand the context of this question, we can wonder about the intelligence of the disciples and what they were thinking. Or, we may see this as the classic “birth of the Church” scripture. But these Jewish men had a different understanding of what was happening. They had a different context. Indeed, they have been “watching Israel” as had their ancestors as a way of understanding their world.

Many of us know what it is to binge watch a series on Netflix or Amazon. We also know that to jump in on episode 3 or 4 would mean that much of the context, character development and plot would be missing. It’s the same when we start reading in Acts without understanding the context the way the disciples would have.

God and Israel had a long history before getting to Acts 1.

We can see the beginning if we look at Genesis 12:1-3. God calls Abram out of his country and away from his people with this promise:

“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

Later, in Genesis 15 we read the account of God making a covenant with Abram. Here we have God actually making it very clear that He will fulfill what He has spoken. As the epic scriptural story continues to unfold, we read in Exodus chapters 19-24 the amazing story of God shaping a people for Himself in the wilderness. In Exodus 19:5, God proclaims,

“Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a **kingdom** of priests and a holy nation.”

Could it be that these Jewish disciples, who knew their history and heritage, were asking about this Kingdom? Of course, things didn’t go as planned. Israel’s history is one of repeated failure, repentance,

and failure again. Still, Jews who knew their history would be looking for yet another restoration of the Kingdom.

Ezekiel Chapter 36 is a stunning proclamation from the Lord about what He will do to restore His people. Interestingly, He specifically says it is for His the “sake of His holy name” that He will do this. In other words, it’s not primarily due to Israel’s faithfulness. In fact, God says he is not doing this for Israel’s sake. They indeed have been unfaithful, but God defends His integrity by proclaiming He is faithful to do what He says he will do.

Perhaps the most graphic depiction of God’s plan regarding Israel is the well-known story of the valley of dry bones depicted in Ezekiel 37:1-14. God concludes this vision describing life from the dead by proclaiming:

“I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”
(Ezekiel 37:12-13)

Some will find it surprising to know that there are more than 60 places in scripture that speak of the restoration of Israel, the people to God, the restoration of the land, the people to the land. In fact, Israel and the Jews mentioned over 3,000 times in scripture. Clearly there is a foundation for the disciples to wonder and ask their “restore the Kingdom” question of the risen Lord. We miss this largely due to the worst Church split in history; that of the Jewish believers from the Gentile believers. The Christian’s Jewish heritage has been systematically removed or replaced and reinterpreted as Gentiles gained influence over the Church.

Christian's Jewish heritage: a great loss to the church and a family torn apart

By the end of the 4th century a theological shift began to take place, one that would eventually separate the Christian faith from its original Jewish source. In its place had arisen a false doctrine, fueled by antisemitism, creating a chasm where the connection between the two became largely lost. Here is a brief summary of this de-evolution of the Church:

- AD 306 – The Council at Elvira forbade Christians from receiving a blessing from the Jews, or Jews blessing their lands, which flies in the face of one of the purposes of the Jewish nation—to bless the nations.
- AD 325 – In the Council of Nicea no Jewish bishops were invited. Constantine called the council together and urged them to disassociate from anything Jewish. The Western calendar for observing the resurrection of Jesus was one of the outcomes of this council.
- AD 331-396 – St. Gregory of Nyssa describes the Jews as “slayers of the Lord, murderers of the prophets, enemies of God, haters of God, adversaries of grace...”
- AD 340-420 – St. Jerome had a personal relationship with rabbis, but still calls the Jews “serpents, haters of all men...”

- 4th century – St. John Chrysostom said, “They worship the devil; assemblies of criminals. God hates the Jews. They are absolutely abandoned, no expiation, no indulgence, no pardon.”
- St. Augustine called Jews “witness people,” which meant that their destiny was to be a witness of what happens to a race of people who deny Christ,
- AD 589 – The Council of Toledo forbade Jews from holding public office.
- AD 612-621 – Visigoth King Sisebut demanded either baptism or exile.
- AD 570-636 – St. Isidore of Seville forbade forced baptisms, but if children were baptized to save their lives, they had to be taken from their parents & reared Catholic. (In some situations Jewish people were given a choice of baptism or death, which essentially “forced” baptism upon them.)
- AD 1096 – First Crusade against the Jews, killing those who refused baptism.
- AD 1146 – Second Crusade was the same.
- 12th century – The accusation arose that Jews were killing Christians, especially children, and using their blood to drink for Passover
- AD 1179 & 1215 – Lateran Councils ordered separate quarters and distinctive clothes for Jews, a precursor for the distinctive clothing ordered by the Nazis in 20th century Germany.
- AD 1357 to 1350 – During the Black Death Jews were accused of poisoning the wells, thus causing the plague. Some of this may have come from the fact that many Jewish people were observing the biblical health laws and were thus not getting sick.
- 16th century – Martin Luther was at first positive, thinking Jews would “convert,” but he later became virulent in his attacks “God hates them...”
- 19th century – During the pogroms there were 100,000 Jewish immigrants annually. Most came to the United States.

Hitler defended his position on the Jews by saying, “I believe that I am today acting in accordance with the will of Almighty Creator; by defending myself against the Jew I am fighting for the work of the Lord.”

It can be argued that centuries of antisemitism created the perfect theology to allow Hitler to engage in his war against the Jews. Consider the formation of German theological thought stemming from the writings of Martin Luther.

In 1543 Luther published *On the Jews and Their Lies* in which he says that the Jews are a “base, whoring people that is, no people of God, and their boast of lineage, circumcision, and law must be accounted as filth.” They are full of the “devil’s feces ... which they wallow in like swine.” The synagogue was a “defiled bride, yes, an incorrigible whore and an evil slut ...” He argues that their synagogues and schools be set on fire, their prayer books destroyed, rabbis forbidden to preach, homes razed, and property and money confiscated. They should be shown no mercy or kindness, afforded no legal protection, and these “poisonous envenomed worms” should be drafted into forced labor or expelled for all time. He also seems to advocate their murder, writing “[w]e are at fault in not slaying them”. Luther claims that Jewish history was “assailed by much heresy”, and that Christ swept away the Jewish heresy and goes on

to do so, "as it still does daily before our eyes." He stigmatizes Jewish Prayer as being "blasphemous" and a lie, and vilifies Jews in general as being spiritually "blind" and "surely possessed by all devils." Luther has a special spiritual problem with Jewish circumcision. The full context in which Martin Luther advocated that Jews be slain in *On the Jews and Their Lies* is as follows in Luther's own words:

"There is no other explanation for this than the one cited earlier from Moses - namely, that God has struck [the Jews] with 'madness and blindness and confusion of mind' [Deuteronomy 28:28]. So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which they shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since then (which still shines forth from their eyes and their skin). We are at fault in not slaying them."

Paul's writing is in direct contrast to church history

Commentators have difficulty with Paul's writings in Romans chapters 9, 10 and 11. Up to that point, Paul is pouring out solid theological thought that makes sense to the Believer. At Chapter 9 he makes a dramatic shift and begins writing about the Jews. Biblical scholars have often simply jumped to chapter 12 where, for them, Paul begins to make sense again. This has been called "blink theology" since it is as if those three chapters do not exist. This ignoring can be understood prior to the nation of Israel being formed in 1948. Up until then, it would be hard to imagine the Jews ever being restored to the Land or that God would so dramatically demonstrate His faithfulness to the Jewish people. Paul writes,

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! (Rom. 11:1).

Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their full inclusion bring! (Rom. 11:11-12).

For if their rejection brought reconciliation to the world, what will their acceptance be but **life from the dead?** (Rom. 11:15)

Life from the dead. That phrase harkens back to the valley of dry bones. Paul is literally referencing this event that the prophets saw and he is still looking for. Think of it this way. When the Jews got it wrong and rejecting their Messiah, the Gentiles gained salvation, we saw the Gospel spread across Europe. We experienced the Great Awakenings. The global south and Asia is on fire with the Kingdom's expansion. And today, the Islamic world is being impacted like never before as the Gospel of the Kingdom clashes with and dismantles Islam.

If all this happens "because of their transgression", what will "life from the dead" look like as they begin to accept their Jewish Messiah? Paul goes on,

“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 the Gentiles has come in, and in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written:

“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.” (Rom. 11:25-27).

John Wesley understood this. In his notes on the New Testament, published in 1755 he writes regarding this prophetically expected event,

“So many prophecies refer to this grand event that it is surprising any Christian can doubt of it. And these are greatly confirmed by the wonderful preservation of the Jews as a distinct people to this day. When it is accomplished, it will be so strong a demonstration, both in the Old and New Testament revelation, as will doubtless convince many thousand Deists in countries nominally Christian... and this will be a means of swiftly propagating the gospel among Mohametans and Pagans...”

This event in our day

If we see this event as a “dimmer switch” rather than just an on or off switch, we can easily trace God’s hand at work bringing to fulfillment what He has promised. In other words, as we see God moving among Jews, we should also expect a great move of God globally. As their acceptance increases, we find more “life from the dead” happening. Consider:

- Reformation – 500 years ago. Once people were able to read scripture in their own language they discovered that God was still up to something with the Jews.
- 1841 – Anglican and Lutheran Churches appointed the first protestant Bishop to Israel. His name was Michael Solomon Alexander. He had been a rabbi in England before accepting Jesus as Messiah. This begins the re-established Messianic movement in the Land.
- Operation Grace. 1947 – British and Anglican Church offer asylum in England to Messianic Jews. This left about 23 Messianic believers (3 or 4 families) in the Land.
- 1974 - 4 small messianic congregations.
- 1989 – About 30 congregations across the Land, pastored by missionaries mostly in English.
- 1999 – About 81 (almost tripled). Hebrew becomes the most spoken language.
- Today most cities have a Messianic expression of the Body as Believers meet together.

- 1939 – About 16.5 million Jews living in the entire world. Less than half a million lived in Israel.
- 1948 – About 10 -10.5 million Jews in the world. Less than 10% in Israel (850,000)
- Today – about 13 million Jews living in the entire world; 6.5 of these are in Israel.
- This is the first time since the time of Jesus that there are more Jews living in Israel than the rest of the world combined. Moreover, today there are more Messianic congregations in Israel than Reformed and Conservative synagogues combined.

- May 1948 – Nation of Israel formed out of the ashes of the Holocaust.
- Fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:22-24, For God’s name sake...
- Today 6.5 million Jews living in the Land and this number is growing quickly.

- The fall Soviet Union –Jews from all over the former Soviet Union return to the Land of Israel.
- Rise in global anti-Semitism leading to massive waves of immigration to Israel.
- Restoring the Family (Ephesians 2). The Messianic movement around the world and in Israel is the restoration and repair of the great rift in the Body of Messiah. This is perhaps the most astonishing thing to witness. God is restoring His family and creating One New Man.

What can we conclude?

Paul, continuing to write about the Jews proclaims, “...God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable.” (Rom. 11:29) What does this mean for the Jews? God’s Gifts to the Jews are the Land, the Law, the Covenants, and the Privilege to know Him. God’s call to the Jews is to be a Kingdom of Priests, His special possession, to be a light in the world and to be a people that display His Name and character.

Augustine was right. The Jews are a “Witness People”, but not in the way he meant it. The Jews witness to us the security and hope we have in a God who loves and pursues us even when we are failing.

So we return to our original question, Why Israel? Here, at least in part are some reasons:

- Because God is not finished with the Jews.
- Because we owe much and need to humble ourselves in our embrace of the Jewish roots of our faith.
- Because we are grafted in, not replacements.
- Because Jesus made a way for us to be One New Man.
- Because we live in a day the Prophets longed to see.
- Because Jesus is returning and we can understand the times if we watch God’s action towards Israel.

So, Dad was right... Keeping our eye on Israel is the way we discern God’s work in the world, His grace, mercy, love and faithfulness to us. It’s a way to watch the signs and seasons as we eagerly look forward to that day that the sky splits and we see King Jesus coming in glory. Maranatha!