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GOD'S MESSAGE TO MAN THROUGH THE PROPHETS

II. THE PROPHETIC WORD AND ISRAEL

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Is there a future for the nation Israel? On this pivotal question all systems of prophecy divide. There is probably no more comprehensive theme in all prophecy than this.

Those who interpret the prophetic Scriptures figuratively or symbolically hold that all Old Testament predictions relating to Israel are realized in the Church, and there remain no promises for Israel in the future. On the other hand, Bible students who interpret prophecy literally find many Scriptures predicting a glorious future for God's ancient people. Indeed, so central and significant is the place of Israel in God's future program that all prophecy must be misunderstood and twisted if this phase of prophecy is not given its rightful emphasis.

One of the keenest German philosophers, Hegel, an ardent student of the philosophy of history, said when speaking of the history of Israel, "It is a dark, troublesome enigma to me. I am not able to understand it. It does not fit in with any of our categories. It is a riddle." If it is dark, the Word of God can throw light upon it. If it is an enigma, the Bible can unravel it.

The last references to Israel in Scripture in relation to their past history indicate their spiritual failure in rejecting their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke states it thus: "And he said unto them, O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27; this and following Scriptures are from the A.S.V.).

Paul approaches Israel's failure from the angle of the law. Says he, "What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith; but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works" (Rom. 9:30-32).

The result of this national departure from the Lord has been their setting aside, as far as national testimony is concerned, for the centuries of the Christian era. So thoroughgoing has been this dealing of God with Israel, that many have been ready to conclude that "God is through with the Jews." But what say the prophetic Scriptures?

One of the inexplicable (on human grounds) phenomena of the centuries has been the preservation of the nation Israel. God had an ultimate purpose in view when He protected and preserved this people through the more than four hundred years of Egyptian bondage and the

seventy years of Babylonian exile. Now the Lord has kept His wayward nation through almost two millennia of world-wide dispersion, persecution and wandering.

It was the prophet Jeremiah who was commissioned of God to deliver a message of a most unrelieved judgment to Israel. But it is precisely he who is so insistent that God will not suffer the extinction of the nation. The testimony is as explicit as possible: "For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee: for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee, but I will not make a full end of thee; but I will correct thee in measure, and will in no wise leave thee unpunished" (Jer. 30:11; also 31:35-37 and 46:28).

Unquestionably, Israel has been kept nationally in order that there may be a regathering and restoration to the land. Our generation is witnessing the preliminary stages of this return, which is in unbelief (Zeph. 2:1, 2). The restoration to the land of promise is set forth under a twofold aspect: the first a preliminary and seemingly human movement, and the second a clearly miraculous undertaking from God. The passages are so numerous--extending from Moses to our Lord Jesus--that we shall have to be selective. The first prediction of return from world-wide scattering is found in Deuteronomy 30:1-10:

And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul; that then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the peoples, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine outcasts be in the uttermost parts of heaven, from thence will the Lord thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: and the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers. And the Lord thy God will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live. And the Lord thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, that persecuted thee. And thou shalt return and obey the voice of the Lord, and do all his commandments which I command thee this day. And the Lord thy God will make thee plenteous in all the work of thy hand, in the fruit of thy body, and in the fruit of thy cattle, and in the fruit of thy ground, for good: for the Lord will again rejoice over thee for good, as he rejoiced over thy fathers; if thou shalt obey the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law; if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul.

The comprehensive scope of the passage is clear and unmistakable.

Isaiah builds upon this early testimony and reveals that the return will be patterned after the exodus from Egypt (11:11-16), that the Lord will set Israel in their own land (14:1), that the trumpet of God will supernaturally assemble the outcasts (27:13), and that when all topographical hindrances are removed, the exiles will come from the far points of the compass

(49:12, 13). The great evangelical prophet even points out the role that the Gentiles will play in this return (Isa. 49:22, 23; 60:9, 10).

As already stated, though Jeremiah was called upon to herald a message of doom, he has a glorious word concerning the return. In parallel passages he emphasizes the grand scale of the restoration (Jer. 16:14, 15; 23:3, 7, 8; 24:6-9; 30:3; 33:7-9). Ezekiel, a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, with the results of Israel's disobedience manifest before him in the Babylonian exile, lifts his eyes to a better day (Ezek. 34:28) and sees that God will accomplish a regathering for His name's sake (Ezek. 36:21-32), and reunite the long divided nation (Ezek. 37:21-25).

Among the minor prophets Amos foretells a day when exiles will be over (Amos 9:14, 15); Micah predicts the assembling of all the afflicted (Mic. 4:6-8); and Zechariah specifies such a large regathering that room will be at a premium (Zech. 10:10).

In words reminiscent of Isaiah's prophecy our Lord Jesus prophesied that the trumpet of God would sound for the angels to gather God's earthly elect from all the areas of earth (Matt. 24:29-31). Part of the regathering will take place before the time of Israel's trial, and a portion of it will be realized at the end of their age. Suffice it to say, the restoration of Israel to their land is so ingrained and interwoven into the warp and woof of Old and New Testament (Rev. 11) prophecy, that violence must be done large portions of Scripture, if this truth be rejected.

The rapture of the Church (I Cor. 15:50-58 and I Thess. 4:13-18) will find Israel, constituted as a nation, back in the land. There God will resume dealings with them, and from the place where relationships were suspended after the rejection of their Messiah. It will be a time of unprecedented distress and tribulation for the nation.

Numerous passages in the prophets treat of this time of seven years, called Daniel's seventieth week or the time of Jacob's trouble. Jeremiah gives the proper sequence of this period of judgment as after their return to the land (30:3), and continues: "Ask ye now, and see whether a man doth travail with child: wherefore do I see every man with his hands on his loins, as a woman in travail, and all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it" (30:6, 7).

Daniel reveals that in this time of national distress Michael the archangel will espouse the cause of Israel (12:1). The unbelieving mass of the nation will have made a pact with the ruler of the revived Roman Empire (Dan. 9:27), but the godly will be witnessing (Rev. 7:4-17) and be purged and refined (Zech. 13:7-9). Passages like Psalm 2:4, 5; Isaiah 26:20, 21; Zephaniah 2:3; Zechariah 12:1-9; 14:1-5; Matthew 24 and 25; Luke 21; Mark 13; and Revelation 4-19 treat of this important period in Israel's national life. Although the time is pre-eminently related to Israel, unbelieving Gentiles will be included also (Ezek. 30:3: "a time of the nations").

Certain Scriptures underscore the fact that during and after the tribulation period, the nations will suffer the judgment of God upon them for their treatment of God's people, Israel.

This is the intent of Psalm 2:1-6; Isaiah 63:1-6; Zechariah 12:1-9; 14:1-5; and the famous conclusion to the significant Olivet Discourse (Matt. 25:31-46).

In another sense, and equally valid, part of this same prophetic era is viewed as God's special assize for Israel. Apart from the well-known passages in Malachi 3:1-6 and Matthew 24:37-25:30, the testimony of Ezekiel 20:33-38 is especially explicit:

As I live, saith the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand, and with wrath poured out, will I be king over you. And I will bring you out from the peoples, and will gather you out of the countries wherein ye are scattered, with a mighty hand, and with wrath poured out; and I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there will I enter into judgment with you face to face. Like as I entered into judgment with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so will I enter into judgment with you, saith the Lord God. And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant; and I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me; I will bring them forth out of the land where they sojourn, but they shall not enter into the land of Israel: and ye shall know that I am the Lord.

The events of the wilderness journeyings of Israel, when the rebellious were purged out before the entrance into Canaan, are made the pattern of the future judgment of the nation before the earthly reign of Messiah over a cleansed people.

It is not generally realized that the resurrection of the righteous is in several stages (I Cor. 15:22-24). The prophetic Scriptures of the Old Testament record a twofold resurrection of Israel: physical and national. Isaiah 26:19 states the first phase in general terms. But Daniel 12:1, 2 furnishes us with the vital chronological element:

And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince who standeth for the children of thy people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

After the time of Israel's tribulation there will be the resurrection of the godly of the nation of all periods. The unsaved will appear at the Great White Throne (Rev. 20:11-15).

The national resurrection of Israel is another way of stating their reinstatement as a nation into the favor of God. The famous passage by Ezekiel on the valley of dry bones (37: 1-14) graphically depicts this transaction. Isaiah has in mind the same prophetic event in 66:7-9:

Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man-child. Who hath heard such a thing? who hath seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? shall a nation be brought forth at once? for as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the Lord: shall I that cause to bring forth shut the womb? saith thy God.

The event will be so startling and unprecedented that the prophet introduces it by a repetition of attention-arresting questions.

When the student of prophecy comes to the subject of the repentance and salvation of Israel, he is confronted at once with what the French call an embarrassment of riches. It is like going into the forest to find trees; it is all trees. As was stated above, Moses predicted this important event (Deut. 30:1-10, especially verses 2, 6, 8, and 9). No prophet excels Isaiah when he dilates repeatedly on this theme (2:1-4; 44:22, 23; 59:20, 21; 61:1-3).

The reader of Scripture who finds Jeremiah dwelling only on judgment will be surprised to find the large place he gives to the conversion of his people to the Lord at the end of their tribulation (the famous passage on the new covenant in 31:31-34; 32:37-41; and 33:14-17). Micah does not close his message before he describes the removal of the transgression of Israel (7:18-20), and Zephaniah, who is so full of the message of the day of God's wrath, will not conclude his testimony until he gives us a golden passage that sets the heart to singing (3:14-20). James the Wise at the Council of Jerusalem points to the day when "the residue of men may seek after the Lord" and goes on to speak of the conversion of the Gentiles as well (Acts 15:17). The words of Hosea (5:15) beautifully dovetail with those of our Lord Jesus (Matt. 23:37-39).

Zechariah, the greatest of the minor prophets, declares: "And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplication; and they shall look unto me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (12:10).

At that time they will enter into the fountain opened for the world at Calvary (Zech. 18:1). The Spirit of God has allowed us to know beforehand the heartfelt confession of Israel as they come to the Lord. It is none other than Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

Paul, having made a comprehensive comparison in Romans 11:15, states Israel's conversion thus: "And so all Israel shall be saved: even as it is written, There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer; he shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: and this is my covenant unto them, When I shall take away their sins" (Rom. 11:26, 27). The chronological setting is found in Romans 11:25. No event of the future is more certain and assured than the repentance, conversion, and salvation of Israel.

The feasts of the Lord in Leviticus 23 serve as an indicator of the sequence of events in Israel's national life. It is the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of the Day of Atonement, and then the Feast of Tabernacles. Such is the order: regathering, repentance, and rest. Rest will be theirs in both millennial and eternal glory. This people, so long without a country of their own and now with a political economy which rests so uneasily, has been promised a kingdom of matchless glory. Daniel foretold it (7:22), our Lord predicted it (Matt. 19:28), and John foresaw it (Rev. 20:4-6).

This vast theme is best studied under several features which characterize the millennial and eternal state. The glories of the millennial era will be heightened and merge into those

of the eternal ages. During the reign of the Messiah over Israel drastic geographical innovations will take place. Waters will be dried up to allow them passage (Isa. 11:14-16); barren places will become gloriously productive (Isa. 35:1-7 and 65:8-10); and the entire land of promise will undergo radical topographical transformation (Zech. 14:9-11).

Politically, they will no longer be under the domination of their enemies (Isa. 11:14); they will be the head and not the tail of the nations (Isa. 60:1-22); King Messiah will arbitrate the disputes of nations (Isa. 2:1-4) with the absence of war; faithful leaders will be granted them (Jer. 23:4); and the Davidic dynasty will be restored in unparalleled splendor (Hos. 3:4, 5; Amos 9:11; and Ezek. 37:22-25).

Above all, Israel will be transformed and transfigured spiritually as the spiritual leader of the nations. As has been stated, they will be redeemed (Isa. 60:21; 62:1-12); they will be witnesses to the nations (Zech. 8:8, 20-23); God's sanctuary will be in Jerusalem (Ezek. 37:26 and Mal. 3:3, 4); the Spirit will be poured out upon them (Joel 2:28, 29); and Jerusalem will be God's throne (Jer. 3:17). What a glorious prospect indeed!

From Genesis 12:1 through Malachi and large segments of the New Testament, Scripture relates to Israel directly or indirectly. Prophecy has largely to do with earth, so Israel as a people of earth has a large place in it. Let us remember Psalm 102:13; pray the prayer of Isaiah 62:6, 7; and realize the soul prosperity of Psalm 122:6. Blessed forever more be the Lord God of Israel!