

Is modern Israel today the Kingdom of God?

The first message proclaimed by the Lord Jesus Christ was “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand”. Jesus preached these words to the Jews. For thousands of years, the Jewish prophets in the Old Testament predicted a future kingdom in which the Messiah would rule with peace and righteousness. The Jews longed for this day to come. But when Christ eventually came to establish this messianic kingdom, Israel rejected him and put him to the cross. Why did Israel reject the Messianic kingdom inaugurated by Jesus Christ?

To begin with, they wanted a king who could free them from the oppressive hands of the Romans. Christ’s kingdom, however, offered a different type of freedom – a freedom from the bondage and slavery of sins. Second, Christ was too unreligious in His appearance and demeanour. He had no religious garments that distinguished him as a religious leader. His appearance was unimpressive. His social circles included fishermen and tax-collectors. He interacted with the outcasts of society, and spoke even to women who lived in vice. Thirdly, His preaching and teaching were too radical and offensive. He condemned the legalism promoted by the Pharisees. He claimed divinity, and asserted that He was the great “I AM”. He compared the scribes and the Pharisees with “white-washed sepulchers” found with dead men’s bones. How could such a man who has so little social status and political influence usher in the kingdom of God?

Israel openly rejected Christ as the Messiah and His spiritual kingdom. But did God reject Israel?

Dispensationalism says that God did not really reject the nation of Israel. In order to prove this case, Dispensationalism appeals to both biblical prophesy and current political developments to show that God indeed will one day restore the nation of Israel to its prominent position as the nation of God. The nation of Israel, Dispensationalism claims, has survived many wars and threats from its neighbours. It has defeated the aggressors in a miraculous Six-day war in 1967. The scattered Jews have returned to help reconstitute Israel as a sovereign, independent nation. Clearly, God is working to rebuild Israel today to become the kingdom of God. According to this teaching, God did not totally abandon the nation of Israel. He only delays His plan to restore Israel.

This restoration, Dispensationalism claims, will take place in the future. In the mean time, God will establish a new entity, the church, to save the Gentiles. Israel is not the Church, says Dispensationalism. The two are separate entities. In fact, God does not have the same plan for Israel and the Church. God promised the Messianic kingdom to the nation of Israel. This Messianic kingdom is mainly for Israel; and it will be established during the period of the Millennium mentioned in Revelation 20. This millennium will see Christ ruling in Jerusalem. During this period of the one thousand years, the church will no longer be on earth. By then, it would have been raptured and taken up into heaven.

This view is untenable. Let us consider the following arguments.

1. The kingdom that King Jesus came to set up is not strictly for the Jews. Jesus did not even come with the agenda to offer His kingdom first to the Jews. He preached the gospel of the kingdom to the Jews first. But God’s plan is to gather His elect people from both the Jews and the Gentiles and form them to become one people in Christ. One text that shows that God gathers the Gentiles to become fellow heirs of the Abrahamic covenant is Gal 3v14, so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

2. The restoration of Israel promised in the Old Testament took place at Pentecost when Christ poured out His spirit to the Church. This can easily be explained by comparing Acts 15 with Amos 9:7.

3. The Church is identified with Israel. When we turn to 1Peter 2:9, we find the Church designated as a holy nation, a royal priesthood. This description is taken from the Old Testament where Israel was referred to as “the kingdom of priests”. Exodus 19:6: “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.”

4. All those who are converted by Christ are saved to belong to a kingdom. Col 1:13.

5. A true Jew is not one who belongs to the nation of Israel. A true Jew is one who is circumcised in the heart. Similarly, a true Israelite is one who is the child of Abraham by faith. Romans 2, 4

6. God does not have two people – the Jews and the Christians. Christ by his death and resurrection has already demolished the wall of partition. Ephesians 2:16-22 says that Christ in his death has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles believers, and have made them to become one people. In fact, v19 says that the Ephesian believes have become fellow citizens with the Jews in the same spiritual commonwealth. The Church as the new commonwealth of Israel is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Likewise Hebrews 12:22-23 identify Mount Zion with the “church of the living God”.

Understanding this relation between the Church and the kingdom of Israel is important, especially in light of the endless conflicts in Israel. Israel today should not be regarded at the same level as Israel of the Old Testament. Christians who set their hopes that Jerusalem will one day be the sacred capital for Jesus in the Millennium kingdom will be disappointed. Christ’s kingdom is not earthly and Jewish. It is spiritual and extends to every one who confesses Him as Saviour and Lord.

We should dissociate ourselves from Israel today. We should win them for Christ, just like we do with the other nations. But we should never regard the land of Jerusalem as a special place where Christ will return to set up His reign. The promise to rebuild the holy land of Israel in the Old Testament prophecies is fulfilled in the Church. God’s people today do not dwell at one place bound by size and space. God’s people today dwell in the Church which is scattered all over the whole earth. The Church covers many lands over many waters. The Church will in fact cover the whole earth before Christ returns.

What then do we do with Israel today? Israel is in the news almost every day. News of the Middle East conflict continues to make the headlines in the major press all over the world. If we do not explain ourselves clearly, the unchurched masses may think that we are a pro-Zionist movement, and that the church is in alliance with Israel to bring about a messianic kingdom.

Israel of the Old Testament was a theocratic nation established by God to be a type of the Church. By setting Israel apart in the Old Testament, God shows the world how He loves and cares for His covenant people. In addition, by choosing one nation above the others, God shows what He expects His chosen people to be like. They are to obey Him, follow His standards and precepts, and be completely consecrated to Him in worship and service. But when God poured out His Spirit on all flesh at Pentecost, His covenant kingdom is extended to include all the nations, tribes, and tongues of this world. Following Pentecost, the kingdom of Christ is catholic

and universal. It is no longer confined to a nation in Palestine. The fact also is that the Jewish nation rejected the Messiah and crucified him on the cross. We should never associate Israel today with the Messianic kingdom. We should just leave Israel today alone, and let it decide its own national policies. But having said this, we should continue to win the Jews for the Lord Jesus Christ. They, like others, need the saving gospel.

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