

BIBLICAL ISRAEL VERSUS CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL

STUDY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

In his book *“God’s Land on Loan: Israel, Palestine and the World”* Eugene March says; “Modern Israel was so named with the deliberate intention of claiming for itself the legacy of ancient Israel as the rightful reconstitution in Palestine of a long-absent people . . . That it is situated on land once occupied by another nation named Israel is true, but that does not mean that when we read ‘Israel’ in the Bible we should automatically and rightly think of modern Israel as the continuation of that ancient people.” If this statement is true and valid we need to explore the relationship between the Biblical use of Israel and what the claims of modern Israel mean.”

In this study we will look at how Israel is used in the Bible, how it relates not just to an ancient Kingdom but to a people. Then we will move to contemporary Israel and the dialogue between contemporary theology and politics and how this affects our views of modern Israel.

- Before reading any further in this study complete the statement “In the Bible Israel is . . .”

BIBLICAL ISRAEL

Let’s explore Israel as it is used in the Bible. We will look at how in the Bible Israel was used initially as a person’s name and follow it through its transition to be the name of a people and then to be the name of a Kingdom and in New Testament times became the reference for a religion of a people.

- The first time we come across the word Israel is in Genesis in reference to Jacob. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham who had God’s promise to be the father of a great nation, lives a life of a wheeler/dealer that tricks his brother out of his inheritance and has to flee to the home of his uncle Laban. While there he marries Laban’s two daughters, Leah and Rachel. After being in exile for 14 years he returns to his home in Canaan, the land Abraham settled in. When he reaches the border of Canaan he sleeps over night on the shores of the Jabbok River. During the night he has an encounter where he wrestles with God. **For the account of this encounter read Genesis 32:22-32.** At the end of the encounter God changes Jacob’s name to Israel. The meaning of this is “struggles with God” or “let God persist.” This is the first biblical reference to Israel. It is interesting to note that the name given to Jacob is not used after this reference but is taken on as the family name and the offspring become known as the children of Israel.
- The next reference to Israel comes when Moses is called by Yahweh to lead the people of Israel, who are in slavery, out of Egypt. **To read of Moses’ call read Exodus 3:1-22.** The Israelites referred to here are the remnants of the twelve tribes that were founded by the twelve sons of Jacob. The story that unfolds has the Israelites being freed and then their 40 year wandering in the desert ad the

revelation of the law to Moses. We see the people of Israel being led to the land of Canaan, which had been promised to Abraham by Yahweh. Throughout this story the people are referred to as the “children of Israel” and sometimes by an ethnic term referring to them as Hebrews. The term Israel is used to refer to a people. We get from this period the writings of Moses to the people of Israel, the Torah, which includes the law. The Shema, the Israelite Creed, state; “Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This shows the reference to the people being called Israel.

- In the Biblical story we see the people of Israel under the leadership of Joshua take control of the land of Canaan. Eleven of the twelve tribes are given land, the tribe of Levi is not given land but the priesthood of the people, and a loose confederation of tribes exists under the term Israel. These references occur mostly in the books 1 and 2 Kings first referring to the tribes of Israel and then as a place. **For example, read 1 Kings 15:25, 16:8 and 2 Kings 10:36 13:10.** During this time we see the confederation of tribes slowly forming into a kingdom and appear to be taking on the name Israel.
- In about 1020 BCE a search is made for a king to rule the fledgling kingdom, despite negative advisement from Samuel, and Saul was chosen as King. In 1 Samuel 10:1 we read of Saul being declared as prince over “his people Israel.” **For the account of the selection of Saul as king read 1 Samuel 8-12.** As the power of these people increases we first see David, and then his son Solomon, becoming the king of this United Kingdom. The power and the wealth of the people increases as they defeat traditional enemies, such as the Philistines, and particularly under Solomon their trading prowess becomes great and they become a wealthy, powerful nation. It is during this time that the first temple is built and become s the religious center of the worship of Yahweh. Yahweh is said to reside in the temple and so worship is centered on the temple.
- On Solomon’s death in 922 BCE, the kingdom was divided between his two sons (1 Kings 12:1-19). The Davidic Empire continued based in Jerusalem, with Rheoboamas king, as the nation of Judah (the Southern Kingdom). The larger number of people, and the larger territory, became the nation of Israel (the Northern Kingdom) with Jeroboam as its first king. Shechem became its capital and he designated two ancient sanctuaries as his religious centers, Dan in the north and Bethel in the southern part of the kingdom. These were established to compete with the temple in Jerusalem and ensure the people did not keep their allegiance to the temple. Later in the kingdom’s history Samaria would become the capital. We now see Israel being used not just of a people but of a nation-state.

Over time the people of Israel fell away from their following of Yahweh and followed Baal and other gods. According to the Biblical account this upset Yahweh and bought about the capture of Israel by the Assyrians with the eventual collapse of Israel in 722 BCE. This led to many of the Israelites being taken into captivity in Upper Mesopotamia and Media. Judah would remain as a nation-state centered on the temple. Much of the writing of the prophets was about the falling away of the people from their covenant with Yahweh and the consequences this would bring. Eventually the Southern Kingdom of Judah would fall to the Babylonians and many people were taken into exile in Babylon. Much of the prophetic writing of Isaiah and Jeremiah and the Minor Prophets was addressed to the people living in exile and so the term Israel reverted to men “the people of God.” The major calamity to happen was that the temple was destroyed. This meant that the home of God was destroyed and so the people had to find another way to worship Yahweh.

- We now move to the exilic period. The temple no longer existed so that people moved to re-establish their faith. The oral traditions were written down to create much of what we now have as the beginnings of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and the people became known as the People of the Book as the writings became central to their worship rather than the temple. During this period the people also had to find other ways to gather and worship without having a place for sacrifice and other rituals. The beginnings of local meetings occurred that eventually led to the Synagogue becoming a place of worship where there were readings from the Torah with explanations from the leader or Rabbi and the singing of Psalms. The term Israel continued to be that of the children of God. It was also during this time that the people left behind in the land of Judah and Israel had to struggle for existence and ended up marrying with surrounding tribes. The center of this struggling civilization was centered on Samaria. The mixed race people became known as Samaritans.
- After Cyrus, the Persian ruler, conquered Babylon, he let the Israelites return to their land of Judah and rebuild the temple. The completion of the rebuilding of the temple occurred in 516 BCE. The term Israel refers to the people as the land they inhabited was Judah in the south and in the north Galilee with Samaria remaining in between these two areas. Since the people inhabited the land of Judah, one of the original 12 tribes, the people became known as Judeans and from this we get the Latin word to refer to them, Jews. The people of this area went through control by different empires, the most notable being the Greek's under Alexander the Great. This brought about the Maccabean revolt and reclaiming of the temple. During all this time the term Israel is used to refer to the people.
- We now move to New Testament times where we find Judah and the surrounding area under Roman rule. We see the Temple being expanded to its former glory by Herod who was trying to impress the people and the Roman rulers. Throughout the New Testament the term Israel is used to refer to the people. **See Matthew 8:10, 15:31; John 1:31, 3:10; Acts 2:22, 36, 3:12.**
- No history of Biblical Israelites is complete without referring to what happened to the people during the first century CE. The people were greatly oppressed under Roman rule and there were a number of revolts. The major revolt occurred in 70 CE when the people barricaded themselves in Jerusalem. Under starving conditions many people died as the Romans surrounded the city. Eventually with the city weakened the Romans broke through the barricades and sacked the city killing all those that remained and completely destroying the Temple. The Romans also dispersed the people through the empire and this was the great Diaspora and the term Israelite changed in favor of the Latin term Jew. The Jewish faith developed and changed, adapting to there not being the central place for worship of the temple. There was to canonization of the major writings into the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Major writings of interpretation of the writings occurred from which came the Talmud and Mishnah writings. The religion of the people and religious practices changed and developed to the new environment and conditions. This continued through several centuries to give us Judaism as we see it today.

From this brief history it can be seen that the term Israel is used in the Bible mainly to refer to the people who were the descendants of Jacob or Israel. The term Israel means the "children of God" and the people were Israelites. Only for a short period in time, 922 to 721 BCE was Israel the name of a political entity that was a kingdom. If you read Hosea you will see God's condemnation of Israel for her sinful ways and turning against God. There is the promise to destroy land and the people if they did not turn away from their ways.

This did happen and Israel as a nation never returned in Biblical times. As we have seen the area became Samaria and the people of the area were despised by the Israelites who returned from Babylon.

CONTEMPORARY ISRAEL

We now turn our attention to contemporary Israel as we know it today.

- Following World War 1 and the persecution of the Jewish people in Europe, particularly the beginnings of the Holocaust in Germany, Jewish people started migrating to Palestine. The area of Palestine was the area we saw in our look at Biblical times that included Galilee, Samaria and Judah. There was a Jewish population present in this area, the ancestors of people that never left during the Diaspora. As the numbers of immigrants grew they started putting pressure on the British government, who had a mandate to rule this area, for the formation of a Jewish state. In 1948 the United Nations declared the area to be the State of Israel, giving an area on the West Bank of the Jordan and the Gaza strip on the Mediterranean, to the Palestinian people. The Palestinians objected to this taking of their land and did not, along with other Arab nations, recognize the State of Israel. The ensuing struggles led to Israel taking over the land to their south that was part of Egypt and taking control of the West Bank to try to control the terrorism that plagued them from militant Palestinians. Israel as we see it as a nation today covers the area that was the United Kingdom under David.

BIBLICAL ISRAEL AND JUDAISM

Clearly, modern Israel was created to provide safe haven for Jews and for the practice of Judaism. But modern Judaism is not simply a continuation of the ancient religion of Israel. Judaism and Christianity developed as *religions* after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 of the Common Era (CE). The Roman conquerors expelled from the land most of those who had lived in and around Jerusalem, including the followers of Jesus. A small number of Pharisees were allowed to begin a religious school at a site called Jabne (or Jamnia) located near the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. There the earliest official canon of Scripture (called the Tanakh by Jews and the Old Testament by Christians) was formed sometime in the first third of the second century CE. They also began the process of gathering the materials we now know as the Palestinian Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud, which later became primary in Judaism, was collected and transmitted in Babylon by some of the exiles who had remained there even after Cyrus the Persian, who defeated the Babylonians in 539 BCE, had authorized a return of exiles to Jerusalem. Many Christians do not realize that modern Judaism is based much more on the Talmud than on biblical traditions. Certainly the Talmud makes use of the Tanakh, but it provides instruction on much, much more. Modern Judaism is not a continuation of the religion of ancient Israel and should not be confused as such.

BIBLICAL PROMISES AND MODERN ISRAEL

There are words in the Bible, particularly the eschatological writings, about the renewal and restoration of God's people. The issue is whether the modern political nation-state named Israel is the subject of those words. Many assume that such is the case. But there are several reasons to deny that identification.

- First, most of the passages are found in the writings of the prophets. The most logical understanding is to see the return of some of the exiles from Babylon in 538 BCE, and the immediate decades following, as meeting the expectation fostered by the promises in question. The biblical prophets

Haggai and Zechariah, who were instrumental in getting the people in Jerusalem to begin the reconstruction of the Temple (520–515 BCE), certainly understood themselves and their work in this way. They saw the “fulfillment” (if one must use this language) of the promises in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in the return of some of the exiles from Babylon and the renewal of Jerusalem.

- Second, what constitutes “fulfillment” anyway? Ezekiel 47 is one passage, among others, expressing promises found in the prophetic writings. It celebrates the building of a new temple to replace the one destroyed by the Babylonians. It describes how a stream of fresh water will flow from the temple that will renew the Dead Sea and supply the whole land with abundant water. The borders of the land will be extended to those of David’s kingdom, with the tribal lands restored according to the ancient boundaries. Now this is a beautiful vision, but it is not a picture of modern Israel. Yes, much of the barren land in modern Israel has been reclaimed and irrigated and is now flowering but not literally in the manner pictured in Ezekiel. Did this passage in Ezekiel offer comfort and challenge to generations of people removed from their land? Certainly, but not as a prediction. The aim of the prophet and of this passage was to provide assurance of God’s continuing care and compassion. In that, Ezekiel did, and continues to, succeed.
- Third, to maintain, as some Christians and some Jews do, that modern Israel is the result of direct divine intervention, as the fulfillment of explicit predictions concerning the restoration of “Israel,” poses some terrible choices. On the one hand, if God did directly create modern Israel, is it also the case, then, that
 1. God ordained the Holocaust just to make Jews return to Palestine? Or that
 2. (2) God willed the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Christians and Muslims in order to make room for modern Israel? On the other hand, to insist that God had nothing to do with the establishment of modern Israel is perhaps to suggest that
 - a) God has no interest or involvement in the affairs of the world, or
 - b) God is indifferent to human struggles for justice and the alleviation of pain. Such choices are unacceptable to most thoughtful Christians (and Jews and Muslims as well).

The establishment of modern Israel is a very human story of both political and military action involving thousands of Jews, Muslims, and Christians. The dire circumstances faced by the Jews of Europe particularly in the 1930s and ’40s made the creation of a safe haven important and religiously significant. No one should deny that. At the same time, however, to claim as many do that modern Israel is of special concern to God is to go too far. All peoples are important to God. The one difference with regard to modern Israel is that insofar as it calls itself a “Jewish state,” it implicitly accepts a higher standard by which to be measured. The actual significance, religiously speaking, of modern Israel rests in how well it embodies the rich ethical teaching of Judaism as the only nation calling itself a Jewish nation.

THE “CHOSENNESS” OF ISRAEL

Eugene March in his coverage of this subject for “The Thoughtful Christian” provides the following view on this subject.

In the Old Testament and in the New Testament there are numerous passages that refer to ancient Israel as a “chosen people.” The church eventually claimed the same status. God has indeed chosen to work in the world through very particular individuals and communities. In the Bible, however, *chosenness* never implies privilege, only responsibility. Individuals and communities were chosen by God for defined tasks. The people of ancient Israel were called to make visible in their lives the commandments of God. Modern Judaism rightly understands this to mean embodying the Torah as individuals and as a community. At the same time, the church has been called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, to embody love for God and love for neighbor.

Some Jews and some Christians have assumed that land promises made to some of the ancient forebears of Israel mean that modern Israel has a divine right to all the land once occupied by David’s kingdom. Some claim that God will be compromised as believable if the promises of land are not protected. Such claims are wrong for at least two reasons. First, if one looks for literal keeping of pledges about land, those have already been met twice: once when the land of Canaan became the land of Israel and Judah, and again when those who had been deported by the Babylonians were allowed by the Persians to return. The modern state of Israel does now have rightful claim to much of the land it occupies, both because some of it was purchased by the early settlers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and because the United Nations officially established the nation and assigned it territory in 1948. The land is not modern Israel’s by divine right, however, but by very human efforts.

The point properly at issue is how much of the land should modern Israel legally occupy? The claim of biblical authority for all the land west of the Jordan River is qualified because the promises first given to Abraham and Sarah can be, it would seem, equally claimed by Christians and Muslims. Modern Israel is of great real and symbolic significance to contemporary Jews, and that should be understood. Nonetheless, the modern political state of Israel is not essential for the continuation of Judaism. To have a place in the land where all the commandments can be observed (some can be kept only in the vicinity of Jerusalem) requires that Jews have free access, but it does not necessarily require that Jews have dominion. Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) also have claims that should be acknowledged. The matter is one of determining the best way justice can be achieved for the most. Nonetheless, modern Israel is not ancient Israel and should not be confused as such when one reads the Bible.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Many Christians believe that the land of Israel is the land promised to Abraham and so is rightfully belongs to the Jewish people. What are your thoughts on this?

Many Christians believe that the rebuilding of the temple and restoration of Jerusalem must happen before the second coming of Jesus. They accordingly promote the war of Israel to overthrow others living in the area. What is your opinion of this?

Do you agree with the opinions expressed about Israel’s claim to the land on biblical grounds?

By claiming to be a “chosen people” the Jewish people as people of God must be held to a higher standard and follow the teachings of their religion. We say “God Bless America.” Does this imply we are a chosen people of God and must also have this higher standard in our dealings with the world?