

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

An Introduction to Israel

Irvin Himmel

There is much misunderstanding of what the Scriptures teach about Israel. This is due largely to two factors: (1) failure to read and study the Bible carefully; and (2) listening to preachers who speculate endlessly about prophecy and the role of Israel in the fulfillment of prophecy. This essay centers on some plain points that are set forth in the Bible.

The Man Israel

Jacob, a son of Isaac and a grandson of Abraham, was given the name Israel, and its first appearance in the Bible is in this connection. It was divinely revealed to Jacob, ***“Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed”*** (Gen. 32:28). Later, God again said to Jacob, ***“...Thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel”*** (Gen. 35:10).

The name appears to signify ***“prince who prevails with God”*** or ***“he who strives with God.”*** Strong gives its meaning as ***“he will rule as God”***; Gesenius as ***“warrior of God.”*** Jacob continued to be identified by his old name as well as by the name Israel. Some passages use both names. For example, ***“And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt seventeen years: so the whole age of Jacob was an hundred forty and seven years. And the time drew nigh that Israel must die...”*** (Gen. 47:28-29). ***“And one told Jacob, and said, Behold, thy son Joseph cometh unto thee: and Israel strengthened himself, and sat upon the bed”*** (Gen. 48:2).

The Family of Israel

Jacob had twelve sons, sometimes referred to as ***“the twelve patriarchs”*** (Acts 7:8). These men and their children collectively were called Israel or the children of Israel. ***“And Israel dwelt in the land of Egypt ...and they had possessions therein, and grew, and multiplied exceedingly”*** (Gen. 47:27). ***“And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them”*** (Exod. 1:7). The twelve branches of Jacob’s family were known as ***“the twelve tribes of Israel”*** (Gen. 49:28; Exod. 24:4). The names of the members of Jacob’s family who came into Egypt from Canaan are listed in Genesis 46. They are said to be the names of the ***“children of Israel.”***

Many years later, when Moses was sent to deliver the much-enlarged family of Jacob from Egyptian bondage, God told him to say to Pharaoh, ***“Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn...Let my son go”*** (Ex. 4:22-23).

The Nation of Israel

Jehovah brought the descendants of Jacob out of the land of Egypt and formed them into a nation. They were promised and given the land of Canaan as their inheritance. God took ***“a nation from the midst of another nation”*** (Deut. 4:34) and used it to ***“eat up the nations”*** that were his enemies (Num. 24:8). The name Israel became a synonym for God’s nation. This is the nation that was foreseen when God promised Abraham, ***“I will make of thee a great nation”*** (Gen. 12:2). David said to the Lord on one occasion, ***“And what one nation in the earth is like thy people, even like Israel?”*** (2 Sam. 7:23).

The nation of Israel is sometimes spoken of as the kingdom of Israel. When the people demanded a king to be like all the nations around them (1 Sam. 8), God instructed Samuel to anoint Saul to rule over them. After Saul became stubborn and rebellious, God rejected him. Samuel said to Saul, ***“The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day...”*** (1 Sam. 15:28). David was the next king. Following the death of David, ***“Solomon was king over***

all Israel” (1 Kgs. 4:1). At the time of the dedication of the temple, Solomon remarked, ***“I am risen up in the room of my father, and sit on the throne of Israel”*** (1 Kgs. 8:20). Solomon was chosen of God ***“to sit upon the throne of the kingdom of the Lord over Israel”*** (1 Chron. 28:5). ***“Solomon reigned in Jerusalem over all Israel forty years”*** (2 Chron. 9:30).

Northern Kingdom of Israel

The nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms following the death of Solomon. Ten tribes were included in the northern kingdom, and two tribes made up the southern kingdom. The name Israel took on a narrower meaning, being the common designation for the northern kingdom as distinguished from the southern kingdom (Judah). To illustrate, 1 Kings 15:9 says, ***“And in the twentieth year of Jeroboam king of Israel reigned Asa over Judah.”*** Ahab was one of the worst kings to rule in the northern kingdom. Jezebel asked him, ***“Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel?”*** (1 Kgs. 21:7).

The prophet Amos wrote about the ***“transgressions of Judah”*** and the ***“transgressions of Israel”*** (Amos 2:4, 6). Jeremiah charged that ***“backsliding Israel”*** played the harlot, and her ***“treacherous sister Judah”*** did likewise (Jer. 3:6-11). During the period when the name Israel was applied in a more restricted sense, it sometimes referred to people of either the northern kingdom or the southern kingdom (Ezek. 13:4; Lam. 2:1-3).

Restored Israel

When a remnant of the Jews returned from exile to their homeland in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, they had no king. Although commonly known as Jews, the name Israel was still used to designate the people collectively. The people who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and kept the Passover are described as ***“the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity”*** (Ezra 6:21). When Ezra prayed and made confession on behalf of the people, there assembled unto him ***“out of Israel”*** a very great congregation (Ezra 10:1). Nehemiah 12:47 tells of some things done by ***“all Israel”*** in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah.

In the restoration period of their history, their land was popularly called Judah or Judea, and the people were known as Jews; nevertheless, they were still children or descendants of Israel. At the time of the birth of Jesus, Palestine still was called ***“the land of Israel”*** (Matt. 2:20-21).

Spiritual Israel

The New Testament applies the name Israel to the heirs of the spiritual promise made to Abraham and fulfilled in Christ. Paul reasoned, ***“For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children....They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed”*** (Rom. 9:6-8). The children of the flesh are the physical descendants of Abraham; the children of the promise are the people who believe and obey Christ. Fleshly Israel, for the most part, rejected the promised Messiah. The true children of God are Abraham’s spiritual offspring.

Blood descent means nothing today, ***“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart”*** (Rom. 2:28-29). The promise to Abraham reaches to Christ and spiritual heirs. ***“And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise”*** (Gal. 3:29). The faithful in Christ are the true Israel of God (Gal. 6:16).

Some of the restoration prophecies of the Old Testament look beyond the return of a remnant to their homeland. They point to a more complete spiritual restoration through Christ and the gospel. Examples of such are found in Amos 9:11-15; Zechariah 9:9-17; and Jeremiah 31:27-34. To skip over the historical fulfillment of the prophecies relating to the restoration of physical Israel in the days of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, and to ignore the ultimate and more complete fulfillment of prophecies pertaining to the restoration of a spiritual remnant through the gospel of Christ, projecting all such prophecies to an imagined future grand, glamorous, and glorious kingdom of Israel on earth, ruled by Christ from David’s throne in Jerusalem, is a gross error. It is wrong to treat fulfilled prophecies as if unfulfilled. Care must be exercised to distinguish between physical Israel and spiritual Israel. – ***Truth Magazine***, April 19, 2001. ■

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