

C h a p t e r O n e

ISRAEL: THE LINCHPIN IN GOD'S PROGRAM FOR THE FUTURE



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*All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass,
but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?*

—MARK TWAIN

Perhaps you have heard of Mr. Goldstein who was said to have made a visit to heaven as the representative of the Jewish people. He met the Lord and asked, “Is it true that we are the Chosen People?” The Lord boomed His response: “Yes, it’s true, you are the Chosen People.” To which Mr. Goldstein replied, “Would You mind choosing somebody else for a change!” This joke, which is often told by Jewish people, reflects the terrible history of Jewish suffering that has made some Jewish people view God’s choice as a burden. However, being God’s Chosen People is a great privilege that God in His mercy has bestowed upon His people, placing them squarely in the center of history and prophecy.

How is it that this small group of people has had such an immense impact on society? The Jewish people comprise only one-half of 1 percent of the world's population, yet win 20 percent of the Nobel Prizes that are awarded. The entire world recognizes the achievements of Jewish notables such as Jonas Salk who developed the polio vaccine, Albert Einstein whose theory of relativity catapulted the world into the Atomic Age, and Sigmund Freud who was the father of psychotherapy. People ask why the small State of Israel, which is about the size of the state of New Jersey, seems to have such a large role in world events, with global coverage of its daily activities.

Certainly Jewish people have had—and will continue to have—a profound influence on the world because of God's choice of Israel to be His people. By examining God's Word, it is possible to understand what is happening in the news today and what will take place in the future. The best place to start doing that is by looking at the past—when God first called Israel to be His Chosen People.

ISRAEL'S PAST

The unconditional covenants that God made with Israel in the past are foundational for understanding Israel's importance in the prophetic future. These covenants with Israel govern our understanding of the Jewish people and form the backbone of Bible prophecy.

The Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 12:1–3 records God's call of Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees (Babylon) and the specific promises He made to him. These promises were confirmed and clarified in later pas-

sages of Genesis (13:14–17; 15:1–7; 17:1–21). Additionally, they were reconfirmed to Abraham's son Isaac (26:3–4) and grandson Jacob (28:13–15), specifying which line of Abraham would receive God's promises.

The promises God made to Abraham fall into three categories: personal, national, and universal. The *personal* promises God gave to Abraham included a great name, vast wealth, and abundant spiritual blessing for himself. The life of Abraham as recorded in Scripture confirms that these promises were fulfilled.

God added the *national* promise that Abraham's descendants would multiply and be “as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (22:17). Additionally, God promised Abraham that He would give the nation of Israel the land of Canaan as their “everlasting possession” (17:8) with its boundaries extending from the river of Egypt in the West to the Euphrates River in the East, and to the land of the Hittites in the North (15:18–21). This is interesting in light of all the contemporary questions about ownership of the land of Israel today. Regardless of the political disputes, God has granted the title deed of the land of Israel to the Jewish people. Furthermore, this land promise was never fulfilled in its entirety. Since God always keeps His promises, it is certain that one day, in the Messianic Kingdom, Israel will dwell in all the land that God promised.

The national promises also gave Israel a unique position as God's barometer of blessing—those nations that would bless Israel would be blessed and those that cursed Israel would be cursed (12:3; 27:29). This principle applied in the life of Abraham (12:10–20; 14:12–20; 26:1–11) and throughout the history

of the Jewish people (Deut. 30:7; Isa. 14:1–2). Significantly, this will be the principle that guides God’s judgment of the Gentile nations when Jesus returns. In Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, which represent the judgment of the Gentiles, the nations will be divided on the basis of their treatment of Jesus’ physical brethren, the Jewish people. That is why Jesus will say, “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt. 25:40).

Regarding the *universal* aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant, God promised to bless the whole world through Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and specifically through his “offspring,” that is, his future descendants (22:18). The ultimate fulfillment of this promise was found when Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, provided atonement for the whole world through His death and resurrection (Gal. 3:16).

The Other Covenants

The Land Covenant. Later biblical covenants expanded three particular aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant, namely the promises of the land, the seed, and the blessing. The land promise was expanded into the Land Covenant found in Deuteronomy 28–30. This promise assured that Israel would experience physical and material blessing from God if they would obey His law. However, God also threatened to discipline the nation for persistent disobedience and idolatry by driving the people out of the land and into exile. Finally, God promised to restore the Jewish people to their land after much suffering. God states that both their suffering and their restoration will occur “in [the] later days” (Deut. 4:30; 31:29).

The Davidic Covenant. God's promise of seed for Abraham was further expanded in the Davidic Covenant. This covenant is foundational for the messianic hope of the Hebrew Bible and the basis of the New Testament expectation of a future kingdom. Though David wanted to build a house (temple) for God, God instead promised to build a house (dynasty) for David (2 Sam. 7:11). God affirmed that He would give David an eternal dynasty and kingdom with an eternal Ruler to sit on David's throne (v. 16). That Ruler was to be one of David's sons (his seed) who was also to have a Father/Son relationship with God (vv. 12–16).

In the course of the historical narrative of 1 Kings, it appears that this promise would be fulfilled through Solomon. In fact, since Solomon even believed that he was the potential fulfillment, he built the temple. But the Lord warned Solomon that the promise would be fulfilled through him only if he would "follow my decrees, carry out my regulations and keep all my commands" (1 Kings 6:12). The author of 1 Kings quickly points out how miserably Solomon failed because of his marriages to foreign women who turned his heart away from God (11:1–4). In fact, no Davidic king succeeded in obeying God completely. All of them, even the good ones, ended with failure. Thus the book of 2 Kings ends with the hope and expectation that God will one day send an eternal Ruler who will build the true temple of God and sit on the throne of David. The prophet Zechariah foretold that this future King will come to unite the offices of Priest and King and build the temple of the Lord (Zech. 6:9–15).

The hope and longing for this Son of David consumed the prophets (Isa. 11:1, 10; 16:5; Jer. 23:5; 30:9; 33:15–17; Ezek.

34:23–24; 37:24–28; Hos. 3:4–5; Amos 9:11–15) and found its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus. The angel Gabriel announced His birth, saying, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32–33). Jesus was the Promised One, the Son of David and the Son of God. He announced the coming of God’s kingdom, and He will return to rule from the literal throne of David in Jerusalem and establish the kingdom of God on earth.

The New Covenant. The blessing component of the Abrahamic Covenant was amplified by the New Covenant. The name “New Covenant” comes from Jeremiah 31:31–34, but it had already been promised in the Pentateuch (Deut. 30:1–14) and would be affirmed in other prophets (Ezek. 36:26–27). The newness of this covenant is derived from its distinction from the Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law. In Jeremiah 31:32 the New Covenant is said to be unlike the Old Covenant God gave Israel when the nation left Egypt. This Old Covenant is an obvious reference to the Mosaic Law, not the Abrahamic Covenant or any other covenant. Hebrews 8:13 confirms this when it states that the Old Covenant (Mosaic Law) has been made obsolete by the establishment of the New Covenant.

The New Covenant was promised to Israel and Judah and was ratified through the death of Jesus on the cross (Matt. 26:27–28; Luke 22:20). Today, the church shares those spiritual blessings through its relationship with the Messiah Jesus. However, only when Messiah returns and begins His kingdom will He establish the New Covenant in its fullest sense. In that day, when everyone knows the Lord, all people will fully experience this universal aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Since God keeps His promises, these covenants from Israel's past remain significant for her present and future. The land aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant reaffirms that the title deed to the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. Israel never fully possessed the land as described in the Abrahamic Covenant. Even at the zenith of David's and Solomon's rule, the land they governed did not match the land grant God gave Abraham. Therefore, the covenant assures that there will be a future kingdom which will include all the land God promised—something which, throughout her long history, Israel has never possessed. The Davidic Covenant assures that Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, will return and establish His kingdom on earth. He will rule from David's throne as the righteous King of Israel and Sovereign of the world. Finally, the New Covenant guarantees that there will be a time when all Israel will turn to her Messiah. Then Israel and all the nations of the world will know the Lord. These covenants certainly give hope for the future . . . but what of Israel today? We now turn to Israel's present.

ISRAEL'S PRESENT

Since these covenants are all from Israel's past, some have improperly taken them away from Israel and applied them to the church today. It is true that the vast majority of Jewish people have failed to recognize Jesus as their Messiah. This rejection has motivated some sincere followers of Christ to adopt the erroneous opinion that Israel's promises have transferred to the church. Their approach seems to take a rather shortsighted view of the faithfulness of God.

One of the essential principles of the Abrahamic Covenant was that it was unconditional and eternal. Abraham did not

need to do anything to receive or maintain this covenant. Furthermore, when God reaffirmed His covenant with Abraham, He solemnized His divine oath with the offering of sacrifices (Gen. 15:9–17). In ancient times, when two parties wanted to bind themselves to a covenant, they would lay the severed parts of a sacrificial animal on the ground and both parties would walk in their midst. This signified that both were in agreement and bound by the covenant. When God solemnized His oath to Abraham, He deliberately excluded Abraham from the process. Instead, God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep, and God alone passed through the animal parts. This demonstrated that God was solely responsible for this covenant—it did not depend on Abraham or his descendants but on God alone. In light of the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant, there are several truths about the Jewish people today that must be maintained.

God Has Retained Israel as His Chosen People

This is not only an Old Testament concept; the New Testament agrees with it as well. Paul writes that, despite Israel's disbelief in Jesus, God did not reject His people whom He foreknew (Rom. 11:1–2). Moreover, Paul adds that although most Jewish people have rejected the good news of Jesus, the people of Israel remain God's beloved Chosen People "on account of the patriarchs" (v. 28)—a clear reference to the Abrahamic Covenant. Paul categorically states that God's gifts and call to Israel are irrevocable (v. 29).

Remaining God's Chosen People does not mean that Jewish people have forgiveness and a personal relationship with God apart from faith in their Messiah Jesus. Jewish people, as all people,

must trust in Jesus. Regardless, the Lord's words in Deuteronomy 14:2 remain as true as ever. "Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession." God did this not because of any merit found in the Jewish people. Rather, He chose them, as Moses wrote earlier in Deuteronomy, "because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers" (7:8). Since God is faithful to His promises and loyal in His love, the Jewish people are still the Chosen People.

God Is Active Today Preserving and Protecting the Jewish People

The Lord, through the prophet Jeremiah, assures us that it will be impossible ever to destroy the Jewish people. In fact, in order to put an end to the Jewish people, it would be necessary to stop the sun, moon, and stars from shining and also to measure all the heavens and the foundations of the earth. God declares that only if these impossible acts could be accomplished will "the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me" or "will I reject all the descendants of Israel" (Jer. 31:35–37). Plainly, the Lord will preserve His people. That is why the prophet Zechariah says of the people of Israel that whoever touches them "touches the apple of his [God's] eye" (Zech. 2:8).

Throughout history, there have been those who have sought Israel's destruction—from Haman to Hitler to Saddam Hussein—but they have never succeeded. In 1981 I attended the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors in Jerusalem, as a second-generation participant. There I heard Menachem Begin, the late prime minister of Israel, declare before those Holocaust survivors and their children that Hitler's attempt to annihilate the Jewish people ought not to cause them to doubt God's existence

but rather to believe in Him. Begin said that apart from God's providential intervention there was no way Hitler could have failed. The prime minister recognized that God was true to His promise to preserve and ultimately to protect His Chosen People. Frederick the Great was said to have asked his chaplain for one clear and compelling evidence for the existence of God. The chaplain replied, "The amazing Jew, Your Majesty."

The preservation of the Jewish people, despite a history of hatred and persecution, has led historian Paul Johnson to call the Jews "the most tenacious people in history." It is far better to say that the Jewish people are protected by the tenacious God of history, who is faithful to His promises and relentless in preserving His people. For this reason, no weapon formed against Israel will ever prevail (Isa. 54:17).

God Is Presently Saving a Remnant of Israel

Paul asserted, in Romans 11:1–5, that God did not reject the Jewish people; and as proof he offered the doctrine of the remnant. His point was that God has always worked through a faithful remnant both during the Old Testament and in the present age. Even though the vast majority of the Jewish people have rejected Jesus as the Messiah, God in His faithfulness has preserved a remnant within Israel, chosen by grace, who would believe. Paul writes, "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace" (v. 5).

Throughout the entire church age, there has always been a remnant of Jewish people who have sincerely believed in Jesus as their Messiah and Lord. Since 1967 a significant number of Jewish people have come to believe in Jesus and still maintain their unique role as the Jewish remnant. There are approximately

250,000 Messianic Jews worldwide participating in hundreds of Messianic congregations and in many evangelical churches. This movement is also evident in Europe, South America, the former Soviet Union, and Israel.

Paul anticipated a day when the remnant would become the whole. He writes in Romans 11:25–26 that at Jesus' return, when the full number of Gentiles have come in, Israel as a whole will turn to Jesus in faith as their Messiah and so "all Israel will be saved." Perhaps the Spirit of God's unique move among the Jewish people today is but a precursor to the far greater movement that will take place yet in the future.

God Is Restoring the Jewish People to the Land of Israel

Since their exile around the world nearly two millennia ago, Jewish people have daily prayed that they would be restored to the land of Israel. The Hebrew prophets foretold a day when God would draw His people back to their promised land. Throughout church history Christians, for the most part, could not conceive of a literal fulfillment of this promise, so they interpreted it figuratively. However, some believers in the nineteenth century did indeed take the promise of a return literally and therefore began to anticipate a Jewish return to the land of Israel.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, Jewish groups arose in eastern Europe, known as the "Lovers of Zion." They believed that a return to the land of Israel was the only hope for Jewish people to survive in a world filled with anti-Jewish hatred. In 1881 the very first Jewish people began to return to build a homeland. This first immigration wave, known in Hebrew as an *aliyah* (literally "ascent"), was difficult and did not see much success.

By 1894, Theodor Herzl, a Viennese journalist and an assimilated Jew, was covering the treason trial of the French Jewish Captain Alfred Dreyfus. It was apparent that Dreyfus was innocent but falsely accused solely because he was Jewish. Crowds roamed the streets of Paris, crying, “Death to the Jews.” That this could occur in liberal France, the seat of Jewish emancipation and freedom, devastated and transformed Herzl. He wrote *The Jewish State* which called for the return of the Jewish people to their historic homeland as the only solution to anti-Semitism. Herzl formed the World Zionist Organization and convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897. There he wrote in his journal, “In Basel, I founded the Jewish state!” He anticipated that within fifty years there would be a revived Jewish state in what was then known as Palestine. This sparked a second wave of Jewish immigration from eastern Europe, which included David Ben-Gurion (Israel’s first prime minister) and Yitzchak Ben-Zvi (Israel’s second president), to *Eretz Yisrael* (the land of Israel).

The next major development occurred during World War I. For a variety of reasons, the British Empire through its foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, issued “The Balfour Declaration.” This private letter to the Jewish Lord Rothschild declared that “His Majesty’s Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object. . . .” After the war, this declaration was accepted by the League of Nations, which granted the British the mandate for Palestine in order for them to carry out Balfour’s declaration.

Many in Great Britain and around the world saw the regathering as the beginnings of prophecy being fulfilled, including

Balfour himself. As Jewish people returned to their ancient homeland, they found support among Bible-believing Christians. By 1923, in support of the return of Jewish people to their land and seeing the need for end-time missionaries to the Jewish people, the Moody Bible Institute established a Jewish Studies program.

Despite shifts in British policy, particularly during World War II, vast numbers of Jewish people returned to the land. In 1947 the United Nations partitioned Palestine between the Arab and the Jewish populations. The Jewish state was declared on May 14, 1948, with the end of the British mandate. The fledgling state was immediately attacked by all the surrounding Arab nations. Against all odds Israel survived; and in 1967 the nation fought, and won, the dramatic Six-Day War which saw the reunification of Jerusalem.

Bible believers frequently ask how the unprecedented, re-born State of Israel fits with Bible prophecy. For several reasons, it appears that the best explanation is that the modern State of Israel seems to be a dramatic work of God in fulfillment of the Bible's predictions of a Jewish return to the land of Israel.

First, the Bible predicts that Israel will return to her land in unbelief. Biblical prophecy indicates that the Jewish people will turn to God only *after* returning to the land of Israel. Ezekiel 36:24 states, "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land." The next two verses continue, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Note that the

national restoration of the Jewish people will precede the *spiritual* regeneration of Israel. Israel has been reborn as a secular state by secular Jews. This is the precursor of the day when the entire nation turns in faith to the Messiah Jesus.

Second, the Bible predicts that Israel will return to her land in stages. Ezekiel 37 contains the vision of a valley of dry bones. The bones come to life in stages, first, sinews on the bones, then flesh, then skin, and finally, the breath of life (vv. 6–10). Then God tells Ezekiel that “these bones are the whole house of Israel” (v. 11) and that their restoration is a picture of the way God will bring them “back to the land of Israel” (v. 12). So the regathering of Israel is not an event that will occur in one fell swoop. Rather, it is a process that culminates in the nation’s receiving the breath of life by turning to their Messiah. This is precisely how the Jewish people have returned to the land. Through the different waves of immigration, from the first in 1881 to the most recent wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, the Jewish people have returned in stages. The final step will be when the entire nation turns in faith to Jesus their Messiah, and God breathes the breath of life on them.

Third, the Bible predicts that Israel will return to her land through persecution. God says of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah, “I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers” (16:15). In the next verse, God says that He will use “fishermen” and “hunters” to pursue His people back to their land (v. 16). This metaphor for persecution has been literally fulfilled. Since the birth of modern Zionism, the primary motivation for return to the land of Israel has been anti-Jewish persecution. In the last 100 years, God has used czarist pogroms, Polish economic discrimination, Nazi genocide, Arab hatred,

and Soviet repression to drive Jewish people back to their homeland. Economic success and religious freedom in the Diaspora keep Jewish people complacent about returning; so God uses “fishermen” and “hunters” to drive them back to the Promised Land.

Fourth, the Bible predicts that Israel will return to her land to set the stage for end-time events. Daniel 9:27 speaks of a firm covenant between the future world dictator and the Jewish people which will unleash the final events before Messiah Jesus' return. This prophecy assumes a reborn State of Israel. The Jewish state had to be restored so this prediction (and many others) can take place. There needs to be a reborn State of Israel for this treaty to be signed, for the temple to be rebuilt, for Jerusalem to be surrounded by the nations during the campaign of Armageddon, and for Jesus to return to deliver the Jewish people from their enemies. Since Israel has returned in unbelief, in stages, and through persecution, it is likely that the modern State of Israel fulfills the predictions of the ancient Hebrew prophets . . . and sets the stage for events yet to come.

God established His plan for Israel in the ancient past by establishing His covenants with the Jewish people. On the basis of these covenants, God continues to work among the Jewish people in the present age. But God has much more in store for Israel in the future. In fact, He has given the Jewish people a featured role to play in the outworking of end-time events.

ISRAEL'S FUTURE

Throughout history, God has caused the Jewish people to have an influence that far outweighs their size. This will be even more true in the future. In examining the end times, there are

several ways in which Israel will be the focal point in God's future program.

Israel Will Play a Vital Role in Starting the Future Tribulation

Although the Bible teaches that Jesus can return for His church at any moment (Matt. 25:1–13; 1 Thess. 5:2–6), it gives a specific requirement for the beginning of the future Tribulation period. The Tribulation will begin only when Israel signs a covenant (a treaty of some sort) with the future false Messiah. According to Daniel 9:27, the seventieth “seven” of Daniel’s vision begins when “he will confirm a covenant with many for one ‘seven.’” The identity of the “he” in this verse is a future world ruler who will set up an abomination in a yet-to-be-built temple. This ruler is frequently called “the Antichrist” or the “man of sin,” but I prefer to call him the future “false messiah.”

This false messiah makes a covenant or treaty with *many*. From the context, it appears that the *many* refers either to many in Israel or to Israel and her neighbors. This treaty, either between Israel and the false messiah or Israel and her neighbors but brokered by the false messiah, will most likely establish peace in the Middle East for the first half of the Tribulation (three and a half years). But the false messiah will then break the covenant and unleash hell on earth, culminating in the campaign of Armageddon.

The point is this: The Messiah Jesus can return for the church at any time—even as you read this paragraph. But the Tribulation will only begin when Israel and the future false messiah make a treaty together—showing Israel’s vital role as a catalyst for the Tribulation period. Besides starting the Tribulation, Israel is crucial for other aspects of future events.

Israel Will Be the Focus of the Tribulation

The prophet Jeremiah clarifies this when he calls the Tribulation period “a time of trouble *for Jacob*” (Jer. 30:7, italics added). The name “Jacob” refers in this context not to the patriarch but the people that descended from him. Israel is God’s primary concern during the Tribulation since the church will have already been removed at the Rapture. Israel’s central place in the Tribulation is evident in several ways.

First, the Tribulation will be a time of Israel’s *persecution*. In Revelation 12, God describes Satan’s activity at both the Messiah’s first coming and at His second coming. He uses the figure of “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head” (v. 1). In light of Joseph’s dream (Gen. 37:9), it is best to understand the woman as a reference to Israel. The woman (Israel) gave birth to a Son (Jesus, the Messianic King), who was persecuted by the dragon (Satan) at the time of His birth (Rev. 12:1–6). This happened at Jesus’ first coming through the attempt by Herod the Great to destroy the rightful King of the Jewish people (Matt. 2:13–18).

Prior to the second coming of the Messiah, the Dragon will be cast to the earth and will begin to persecute “the woman who had given birth to the male child” (Rev. 12:13), namely, Israel. Not only will the Dragon be “enraged at the woman” (Israel) but he will make war “against the rest of her offspring” (v. 17). This refers to the future satanic attacks on both the nation and the remnant of Israel who will come to faith during the Tribulation. It will be a time of unprecedented hatred and persecution of Jewish people.

Second, the Tribulation will be a time of Israel’s *cleansing*. God will permit the suffering of His Chosen People in order to

discipline them so that they will turn in faith to Jesus and accept Him as their Messiah. The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the Tribulation as the time when Israel passes under God's rod of discipline (Ezek. 20:37). This discipline will result in Israel's being purged of rebels (those who have not yet trusted in Jesus as their Messiah) while the rest of the nation will be brought into the bond of the covenant (vv. 37–38). The prophet Jeremiah records God's purpose for the Tribulation when God says to Israel, "I will discipline you but only with justice" (Jer. 30:11). According to Zechariah 13:9, God will discipline Israel in order to "refine them like silver and test them like gold." As a result, Israel will call on God's name and He will answer them. God will say, "'They are my people,' and they will say, 'The LORD is our God.'" God will use the suffering of the Jewish people to discipline them so that they will come to know the Lord through Jesus their Messiah.

Third, the Tribulation will be a time of Israel's *service*. During the Tribulation there will be 144,000 Jewish people, from the twelve tribes, who will be called "the servants of our God" (Rev. 7:3). They are Jewish people who come to faith in Jesus after the removal of the church at the Rapture. No doubt there will be Bibles and other materials that will enable the 144,000 to understand and receive the gospel. This remnant of Israel will be sealed by God and set apart for His service. What they will do in service to God is unclear. Perhaps they will be the evangelists of the Tribulation period, helping people all over the world put their trust in Jesus the Messiah, even during the Tribulation.

Fourth, the Tribulation will be a time of Israel's *war*. At the culmination of the Tribulation, world leaders will gather their armies in northern Israel, next to the hill of Megiddo, to begin

the campaign of Armageddon (Rev. 16:16). These nations will march on Jerusalem and besiege the Jewish people there (Zech. 12:3). The attacking armies of the world will fight against Jerusalem, capture and ransack the city, and commit horrible atrocities (Zech. 14:2). God will allow this so that Israel will turn to Him and then be saved. The Tribulation will be a time of war for the Jewish people.

God's wrath will fall on the earth during the Tribulation period. It will be a time of suffering for all peoples. But more than any other nation, God will focus His attention on the Jewish people, with the goal of bringing them to faith in Jesus and restoring them to Himself. Besides Israel's importance in starting and being the focus of the Tribulation, the nation will play an even more significant role in the second coming of Jesus the Messiah.

Israel Will Initiate the Second Coming of the Messiah

Although no one knows the day or hour of Jesus' return for His church, we do know that He will return to earth at the conclusion of the seven-year Tribulation period. What will bring about the end of that period and the return of Messiah to the earth? The Scriptures teach that it will be Israel who will call for Jesus to return . . . and He will do so in His mercy.

Matthew 23:37–39 contains Jesus' response to Israel's national rejection of Him. There He says that He would have longed to gather Israel as a mother hen gathers her chicks. However, when the leadership of Israel rejected Jesus, they made such a gathering impossible. As a result, Jesus announced that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed. But He does offer Israel hope in the midst of this judgment. "For I tell you,

you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (v. 39). Jesus requires Israel to say the traditional Hebrew words of welcome and reception. In effect, Jesus is saying that He will not return to Israel until they welcome Him as their Messiah. What will cause Israel to do this?

The prophet Zechariah predicted that at the end of the Tribulation the nations will gather in Israel and attack Jerusalem (Zech. 12:1–9). The suffering will have been so severe and the situation so grave that Israel’s leaders will turn to their God for deliverance. God will then graciously open their eyes so that “They will look [in faith] on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (v. 10). Israel will mourn for all the years that they had rejected Jesus. Nevertheless, they will now welcome Him as their Messiah, saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The Messiah will return, and “a fountain will be opened . . . to cleanse them from sin and impurity” (13:1). Then, as Paul had foretold, all the Jewish people alive in that day will put their faith in Jesus as their Messiah. “And so all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26).

Not only will the Lord deliver the Jewish people from their sin, He will also deliver them from their attackers. According to Zechariah, “Then the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle. On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives. . . . Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (Zech. 14:3–5). It is only when Israel calls for Jesus to return, and looks to Him in faith, that the Messiah will return. Israel is the key to the second com-

ing of Christ. Even after Jesus returns, Israel will still have a crucial position in God's program.

Israel Will Be the Head of the Nations in the Messianic Kingdom

The Messianic Kingdom that Jesus will establish will have many marvelous components. From the renovation of the earth to universal peace, it will be a glorious time. But for Israel it will be especially remarkable. All the Jewish people will have turned to Jesus whom they will now know as Lord. Those who are still scattered around the world will be returned to the land of Israel and will fully inhabit the land according to the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant.

The Messiah will begin His reign from the throne of David in Jerusalem and will rule over Israel and all the nations. Significantly, Israel will be the head of the nations then, even as the book of Deuteronomy had foretold. "The LORD will make you the head, not the tail" (28:13). Isaiah promised that God would again choose Israel and settle them in their land. Then "the house of Israel will possess the nations" (14:1–2).

Although many biblical passages speak of Israel's leadership of the Gentile nations in the Messianic kingdom (Isa. 49:22–23; 60:1–3; 61:4–9; Mic. 7:14–17; Zeph. 3:20), one is especially notable in that it speaks of the spiritual influence Israel will have over the nations. The Lord Almighty Himself describes the scene when many peoples and powerful nations will come to worship Him in Jerusalem. "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:23). When the Jewish people know the Lord, He will make them great and they will lead the

Gentile nations in worship of Him. This small nation of Israel will continue to have a large influence, even in the Messianic Kingdom. The ancient rabbis were right when they said, “Israel is like a vine: trodden underfoot; but some time later its wine is placed on the table of a king. So, Israel, at first oppressed, will eventually come to greatness” (Talmud: *Nedarim* 49b).

CONCLUSION

This chapter began with a quote from Mark Twain. “All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?” Twain has asked the right question. What is the secret of this special people? At the outset of this chapter, we asked the same question. The answer, as we have seen, lies in the Abrahamic Covenant. Long ago, God in His grace chose Israel to be His special people. Even in the present age, Israel remains God’s Chosen People, the special object of His love and concern. Since this is true, God will be faithful to all the promises that He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore Israel remains the linchpin to biblical history and prophecy. God will continue to work among the Jewish people in order to bring them to faith in their Messiah and, ultimately, to place them at the head of the nations under the leadership of their Jewish King, Jesus, the Messianic Son of David.

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