

The New State of Israel

by John F. Walvoord

The restoration of Israel to its ancient land and its establishment as a political government is a significant event in the history of the world.

Scripture: Genesis 17:8

Topics: "Israel History", "Biblical Prophecy"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the rich history of Israel in the Old Testament, tracing their journey from the divine call to Abraham, through the conquest of Palestine, periods of oppression and revival, to the restoration after the captivities. He highlights the significant events leading to the establishment of the new state of Israel in 1948, the political and military growth, development of agriculture and industry, educational system, revival of Biblical Hebrew, and the religious life of Israel. Walvoord also discusses the political and prophetic significance of the new state of Israel in relation to Biblical prophecies and the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham.

Transcript

When Theodor Herzl announced in 1897 the purpose of the Zionist movement--"to create for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law"--few realized how dramatic would be the fulfillment. The Jews had dreamed for centuries of re-establishing themselves in their ancient land. Now this longing was translated into action. Few nations could point to a richer heritage as a basis for the hope of the restoration of the nation.

The History Of Israel In The Old Testament

The history of Israel began more than thirty-five hundred years ago, when, according to the early chapters of Genesis, the divine call was extended to Abraham to leave his ancient land of Ur and proceed to a land that God would show him. After some delay, Abraham finally entered the land, and there the promised son Isaac was born.

Though God miraculously fulfilled the promise of a son in Isaac, Abraham himself never possessed the Promised Land but lived as a pilgrim and stranger. Rich in earthly goods, Abraham never fulfilled his hope of a homeland in his lifetime. His son Isaac shared a similar fate. Under Jacob, Isaac's son, the people of Israel forsook the Promised Land entirely and at the invitation of Joseph set up their homes in Egypt where they lived for hundreds of years. It was not until their very existence was threatened in Egypt by a

hostile king that the day finally came for Israel's possession of the land. With Moses as their appointed leader, they began their momentous migration, one of the largest ever undertaken by any nation. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, they finally completed their pilgrimage from Egypt to the land promised Abraham.

The book of Joshua records the conquest of Palestine and its partial occupation. The nation Israel, however, was doomed to generations of oppression and moral declension. They periodically were oppressed by Gentile nations about them with occasional cycles of spiritual and political revival, led by judges whom God raised up. The political anarchy which characterized the period of the judges was succeeded by the reign of the kings, beginning with Saul, and was followed by the glory and political power of the kingdoms under David and Solomon. Under Solomon, Israel reached its highest point of prestige, wealth, and splendor, and much of the land which God promised Abraham temporarily came under the sway of Solomon.

Again, however, moral deterioration attacked from within. Because of Solomon's disregard of the law against marriage to the heathen, many of his wives were pagans who did not share his faith in God. His children, therefore, were raised by their pagan mothers and they were trained to worship idols instead of the God of Israel. The resulting judgment of God upon Israel was manifested in the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel. The ten tribes, united to form the Kingdom of Israel, persisted in complete apostasy from God, and idol worship became the national religion. In 721 B.C. the ten tribes were carried off into captivity by the Assyrians. The Kingdom of Judah, including the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, continued for a little more than another century until they too were taken captive by Babylonia. For a generation, the land of Israel was denuded of the descendants of Abraham.

The book of Ezra records the restoration of Israel which followed the captivities. In keeping with the promise given to Jeremiah that the captivity would continue for only seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10), the first expedition of the children of Israel, led by Zerubbabel, began their trek to their homeland. The book of Ezra records their early steps in restoring the land and building the temple. Nehemiah completes the picture with the building of the walls and the restoration of the city of Jerusalem itself. Once again Israel was in their ancient land, re-established as a nation.

The history of Israel from that point on was not without its serious problems. First, the warriors of Macedon under Alexander the Great swept over Palestine. Then they were subject to the rule of the Seleucian monarchs and later were controlled by Syrians. One of the sad chapters in Israel's history was the Maccabean revolt which occurred in 167 B.C. and which resulted in severe persecution of the people of Israel. In 63 B.C. Pompey established Roman control and from then on the land of Palestine, the homeland of Israel, was under Roman control for centuries. It was in this period that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem. During Christ's lifetime on earth, Israel was under the heel of Rome and Christ Himself was sent to the cross on the basis of Roman authority.

The History Of Israel Since Christ

The subsequent history of Israel was most unhappy. In A.D. 70, Titus, the Roman general, ordered Jerusalem and its beautiful temple destroyed, and a quarter of a million Jews perished. The remaining Jews continued to revolt and finally in A.D. 135 the desolation of Judea was ordered. Almost a thousand towns and villages were left in ashes and fifty fortresses razed to the ground. The people of Israel, except for a few scattered families who remained, were dispersed to the four winds.

From A.D. 135 to modern times, the nation Israel made their homes all over the world. In the eighth century the Abbasid Arabs took possession of Israel's ancient land. For a brief period the Frankish crusaders were established in Palestine only to be defeated by Saladin in 1187. The Ottoman Turks assumed power in 1517 and the land of Palestine continued as part of the Ottoman Empire until Turkey was defeated in World War I. The conquering of Palestine by General Allenby in 1917 and the British occupation of Palestine proved to be a dramatic turning point in the history of Israel.

The Return Of Israel To The Land

Before control of Palestine was wrested from the Turks, the Zionist movement had already begun. As early as 1871 some efforts were made by the Jews to re-establish themselves in a small way, but in the entire area there was not one Jewish village and only the more learned were familiar with the Hebrew tongue. In 1881 modern Zionist resettlement began in earnest. At that time only 25,000 Jews lived in the entire area. The Zionist idea as stated in "The Basle Programme" was adopted by the first Zionist congress called by Theodor Herzl in 1897. Its published aim was to reclaim the land of Palestine as the home for Jewish people. By the outbreak of World War I, the number of Jews had swelled to 80,000.

The Zionist movement was, given impetus during World War I when British Foreign Secretary Arthur J. Balfour instituted the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, in which he stated: "His Majesty's Government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people..." This declaration, though welcomed by the Jews, was opposed by the Arabs and little came of it. Meanwhile a British mandate given over the land of Palestine by the League of Nations became effective, but through a desire of the British to maintain friendship with the Arab nations, no progress was allowed in establishing a homeland for Israel.

In 1939, during the early portion of World War II, the British government issued a white paper which set forth the conditions for establishing an independent Arab state in Palestine. By that time, 400,000 Jews were in the country. The restrictions on Jewish immigration, however, were severe, and future immigration was subject to Arab consent. Only a small part of the land could be sold to the Jews.

During World War II, however, due to the world-wide sympathy aroused for the people of Israel because of the slaughter of six million Jews under Nazi domination, the feeling became widespread that Israel should have a homeland to which its refugees could come and establish themselves. An Arab league was formed in 1945 to oppose further Jewish expansion. After World War II the British government turned Palestine over to the United Nations and under the direction of this body a partition of Palestine was recommended with the division into a Jewish state and an Arab state. By 1948 Jewish population had risen to 650,000.

The Establishment Of The New State Of Israel

On May 14, 1948, as the British withdrew control, Israel proclaimed itself an independent state within the boundaries set up by the United Nations. Before the day passed, however, Israel was attacked by Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia, and open warfare broke out. Though both sides suffered heavily, a series of truces began. The first was on June 11 and was followed by a renewal of hostilities which ended in a final truce on July 17. On January 7, 1949, a general armistice was arranged in which Israel was allowed to retain the additional land secured during the hostilities. Israel itself was admitted to the United Nations. In the years that followed no adequate solution was found for the many difficulties attending a permanent peace. The Arab nations refused to recognize Israel and denied it the right of existence. Israel on her part adopted an unrealistic approach to the refugee problem which continued to

be an open sore.

Since 1949, the nation Israel has made rapid strides until today it is well established. Though surrounded by enemies, Israel rests in its security of superior arms and effective military organization. Of significance is the unassailable fact, that for the first time since A.D. 70, the nation Israel is independent and self-sustaining, and is recognized as a political state.

The restoration of Israel to its ancient land and its establishment as a political government is almost without parallel in the history of the world. Never before has an ancient people, scattered for so many centuries, been able to return to their ancient land and re-establish themselves with such success and such swift progress as is witnessed in the new state of Israel.

Political And Military Growth Of Israel

Of special significance is the fact that Israel is a recognized political state. In its original declaration on May 14, 1948, provision was made for the establishment of an ordered government in the form of a democratic parliamentary republic. The principal legislative body in Israel is the kneset, from a Hebrew word which means "assembly." The kneset meets in Jerusalem, which is the capitol of Israel, and temporarily occupies quarters adapted for this purpose. A government center is planned on an elevation which will face Mount Herzl where the founder of the Zionist movement is buried. The kneset has power to make and amend laws, and its approval is necessary before a government can take office. A new government must be formed at such times as the kneset votes no confidence in the existing government. Of its 120 members, the great majority are of Jewish background, but a few Arabs are included.

The constitution of Israel provides that any citizen over twenty-one may be elected, and each citizen over eighteen, without respect to sex, race, or religion, is entitled to vote for members of the kneset. Though most matters of law are handled by civil courts divided into three main categories--namely, magistrate courts, district courts, and the supreme court--a series of special courts corresponding to the religion of respective citizens have been established in regard to marriage, divorce, and similar matters. A Jew therefore is referred to the rabbinical courts, Moslems to the Moslem court, and Christians to the Christian court. All of the religious courts are under the control of the Ministry of Religion. The internal government of Israel allows considerable freedom to minority groups, and provides a proper legal basis for this enterprising nation to grow.

One of the important factors of Israel's progress has been its highly efficient army. Formed under great difficulty during the early days of the state of Israel when they were being attacked by enemies on all sides, through heroic efforts, it was able to give a good account of itself and actually enlarge the area of Israel by some fifty per cent in the resulting hostilities. The army is called in Hebrew Tsahal, representing the initials of the defense army in Israel known in Hebrew as the Tseva Hagana Leisrael. Included in its organization are forces equipped to fight on land, sea, and air. The army has been trained by experienced officers from Europe and America and several military academies and a staff college have been created.

The corps of the army consists of volunteers who are supplemented by reserves. Men on reaching the age of eighteen serve for two and one half years. They are eligible for service until they are forty-five. Single women are also given two years of training. A system has been devised by which reservists are settled in border areas and Israel is reputed to have the fastest mobilization system of any nation in the world. Along with the development of the army itself has been the creation of an arms industry which has enabled Israel not only to supply its own forces, but to export in large quantities arms of various kinds, including one of

the best automatic weapons available today.

Humanly speaking, it is because of the efficiency of their army that Israel has enjoyed peace since the armistice of 1949 and was able to overrun the Gaza Strip in the hostilities which broke out in October, 1956. Though the nations which surround Israel number some thirty million and conceivably could overwhelm the small nation, the army of Israel is more than a match for all of its enemies combined. Because of this, the nation Israel today is in a high state of confidence coupled with alertness.

Development Of Agriculture And Industry

Probably the most astounding aspect of the restoration of Israel is the rapid reclamation of the eroded land and wasted resources which for centuries have characterized the area which Israel now occupies. Travelers who visit Syria and Jordan first before coming to Israel are immediately impressed with the dramatic difference. Everywhere there is evidence of astounding progress in Israel.

One of the first problems which beset Israel was to reclaim the land strewn with rocks and seemingly hopeless as far as vegetation was concerned. By prodigious toil, often on the part of immigrants who had little knowledge of agriculture before, the land was cleared, terraced, and cultivated. In Israel, as in surrounding countries, the scarcity of water is a principal problem. Huge projects provided water for irrigation, not only for the northern portion of the nation, but also for the reclamation of the Negiv, the southern desert which forms a major portion of Israel's territory.

Travelers through Israel are introduced to field after field of cultivated crops on land that was hopelessly eroded just a few years before. By 1961, eighty million trees had been planted, and the continuing program eventually will make a major contribution in conserving water and providing timber. Orange trees have been planted in abundance, as well as other citrus fruits, and oranges have become a major export of the new nation. Crops such as cotton, sugar cane, grapes, peanuts, and sisal have become major productions, just a few years ago eggs were closely rationed. By 1961 Israel was exporting almost a million eggs a day.

Though hampered somewhat by failure to conclude peace agreements with Arab nations which share the water available, by making the most of its own opportunities, Israel is building a gigantic irrigation system, drawing water from the Yarkon as well as from the Jordan and sending it south to the Negiv. Thousands of acres are being restored to fertility, and it is estimated that the reclaimed land, will permit another one million immigrants during the next decade. Not only have desert lands been reclaimed, but one of the spectacular achievements was the draining of the swampland of the Valley of Esdraelon, the elimination of the mosquito menace, and the restoration of this broad area to cultivation, which has proved to be one of the most fertile areas in all Israel.

Progress in agriculture and reclamation of the land has been matched to some extent by establishment of industries. Textiles have now become an important part of Israel's production. The cutting of diamonds imported for this purpose, the manufacture of military weapons and arms, and the exploitation of the measureless chemical wealth of the Dead Sea are major factors of Israel's economy. Some oil has already been discovered as well as gas. One by one problems that beset Israel at the beginning are being solved.

The expanding economy has also furnished a basis for construction of fabulous new cities. The new city of Jerusalem, the capitol of Israel, has been beautifully constructed of stone with lovely streets and parks and

by 1961 had attained a population of 160,000. Tel Aviv, the largest of the cities in Israel, has a population nearing 400,000, and offers every convenience of a modern city. Next to Tel Aviv is Haifa, with a population of 175,000. The growth of the cities has kept up with the growth in population which has almost tripled since 1948, reaching over two million in 1960.

Educational System And Revival Of Biblical Hebrew

One of the impressive sights in Israel is the spectacular rise of its educational system. Not only are new elementary schools built throughout the country to take care of the expanding population, but the Hebrew university with an enrollment in 1959-60 of seven thousand is one of the finest in the Middle East. In addition the Israel Institute of Technology has some twenty-five hundred students with training in various aspects of modern science. In the entire educational system Biblical Hebrew is used as the spoken and written language and has restored this ancient language to popular usage in Israel. New terms are being coined to meet modern situations. The revival of Hebrew inevitably ties the people of Israel to their ancient Scriptures in a way that otherwise would have been impossible.

The revival of Hebrew has also paved the way for a renewal of Biblical studies. Unlike American universities which neglect the Bible, the Old Testament is taught in public schools, including the universities, and is considered essential to any true education. Some four hundred study groups have been formed by the Israel Bible Study Association with a membership approaching twenty thousand. The reading of the Old Testament is popular, though often attended by little theological discernment. Even the New Testament is read as religious literature, though not considered on a par with the Old Testament by orthodox Jews. To some extent the new interest in the Bible has created an increased interest in the Jewish religion as such.

Religious Life Of Israel

It is to be expected with the rebirth of the nation and its renewed interest in the Bible that attendance at the synagogue has taken on new life in Israel. Visitors normally will find the synagogue crowded, though meeting in new and spacious buildings. It soon becomes evident, however, that the religious life of Israel is to some extent one of outer form. The religious exercises are devoted primarily to revival of their traditions, their reassurance of the general providence of God, and the application to some extent of moral standards. For Israel their religion is one of works rather than of faith, and their redemption is to be achieved by their own efforts.

The religious life of Israel is directed by some 430 rabbis who actively carry on their duties. It is to these leaders that Israel turns for direction. As a result of the revival of Judaism, the Sabbath is strictly enforced and everyone observes it, even those who never attend the synagogue. The religious life of Israel is largely in the hands of the orthodox, though the majority of ordinary Jews in Israel do not necessarily follow their leaders. The revival of interest, therefore, in the Jewish faith and the religious activities which characterize it, to some extent is an expression of patriotism and enthusiasm for the progress of the state rather than for theological or spiritual reasons. Nevertheless, the movement is a phenomenon without parallel in the modern history of Israel and is doing much to revive their ancient faith. The land of Israel which historically has been the cradle of Judaism, Christianity, and the Moslem faith is once again witnessing a revival of that which held sway for centuries.

Political And Prophetic Significance Of The New State Of Israel

The significance of the new state of Israel is bound up with the growing importance of the Middle East in international affairs. The land of Israel is located geographically in the hub of three major continents. Because of this strategic location, it is involved in the economic life of the world. Any major nation seeking to dominate the world would need to conquer this portion. Its military value is also obvious, for the Middle East is not only a channel of world commerce but is the gateway to the immense reserves in oil and chemicals found in that portion of the world. It is inevitable that any future world conflict would engulf this portion of the world as a primary objective. It is especially significant that from a Biblical standpoint the Middle East remains a center of interest. World events which are yet to unfold will find this area also its major theater. It is for this reason that students of the Bible, whether Jews or Christians, find the development of the new state of Israel one of the most important and significant events of the twentieth century.

The repossession of a portion of their ancient land by the new state of Israel is especially striking because of the promise given by God to Abraham of perpetual title to the land between Egypt and the Euphrates. As recorded in Genesis 15:18 the covenant of God with Abraham included the promise: "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." This promise was subsequently repeated in Genesis 17:8 in these words: "And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Consideration will be given to these passages in later discussion, but their mention at this time demonstrates the great significance of the reoccupation of this area by the new state of Israel.

In the subsequent history of Israel neither Abraham nor his immediate posterity were able to possess the land and, as stated earlier, only at the time of the Exodus was the land ever actually possessed. Of great importance are the Scriptures which describe the dispersion of Israel in the captivities of Babylon and Assyria and the later scattering of Israel resulting from the persecution of the Romans. This will be followed by Israel's ultimate regathering. A study of some of the great promises relating to this future restoration of Israel to the land will be examined in detail later. The revival of Israel after these many centuries of dispersion introduces the major questions relating to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and whether the creation of the new state of Israel is indeed a confirmation of Israel's continuance as a nation.

The return of Israel and the organization of the new state of Israel is especially significant in the light of prophecies to be examined concerning Israel's future time of trouble when Israel is pictured in the land, as for instance in Matthew 24:15-26. The predictions of the grand climax of the nation's history, given in Daniel 9:26, 27, when Israel is described as making a covenant with the future world ruler, is of special importance in the light of their renewed presence in their ancient land. Of the many peculiar phenomena which characterize the present generation, few events can claim equal significance as far as Biblical prophecy is concerned with that of the return of Israel to their land. It constitutes a preparation for the end of the age, the setting for the coming of the Lord for His church, and the fulfillment of Israel's prophetic destiny.

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