

God's Dealings with Israel

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The history of the nation of Israel began with the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. God told Abraham to leave his relatives and go into the land that He would tell him of, and He would make him a great nation, and bless him, and make his name great, and make him a blessing to others, and God would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him, and all the families of the earth would be blessed in him (2091 B.C.). In Genesis 13:12-17, God further promised Abraham that he would give the land of Canaan as far as he could see in every direction to him and his descendants forever. In Genesis 15:13-18 God revealed to Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved in Egypt for 400 years, until the iniquity of the Amorites was full, before he would actually give them the promised land. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, moved the clan into Egypt to be sustained by Joseph during a famine (1876 B.C.), and the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians after Joseph's death.

When the 400 years of slavery were over, God sent Moses to lead the nation of Israel from Egypt to the land that God had promised them. He described the land as "Flowing with milk and honey." God delivered them from Pharaoh through a series of miracles, and brought them across the Red Sea to the Sinai desert on dry land (1446 B.C.). He sustained them in the desert with manna and water from the rock as he led them to the promised land, but they rebelled against Him at every turn. As they neared the promised land, they sent spies that confirmed its richness and fertility, but they refused to enter the land because of the giants that lived there. God sentenced them to wander forty years in the desert for their disobedience, and fulfilled His promise to Abraham by bringing their children into the land after the adults that had rebelled died.

The Lord brought the Israelites into the promised land under Joshua (1406 B.C.). He instructed them to utterly destroy the heathen nations that they were displacing, but they were slow to conquer the land, and never embraced nearly as much of it as God had allotted to them. Once established in the land, they repeatedly turned away from the Lord to worship the idols of the heathen they were supposed to be replacing because of their idolatry. Each time, God punished them by subjecting them to the heathens they should have destroyed in the first place. When they repented, He delivered them through the various Judges (1346-1051 B.C.) up to the time of Samuel. When they desired a king instead of being led by the Lord's direct communication through the judges, the Lord comforted Samuel by saying, "They have not rejected you, but Me."

God gave Israel an appealing king (1051 B.C.) that stood head and shoulders above the rest of the people, but Saul was rejected for his disobedience to the Lord. God replaced him with David, a man after His own heart (1011 B.C.). Under David's reign, Israel became a world power. God promised to establish a dynasty through David and his offspring (II Samuel 8:25). His son, Solomon (971-931 B.C.), brought wealth and culture unequalled anywhere else to the kingdom. But contrary to the Lord's command, he multiplied heathen wives to himself, and eventually built idolatrous temples to their gods. God tore the northern part of the kingdom, called Israel, from Solomon's son (931 B.C.), but left him the kingdom of Judah for the sake of His promise to David (I Kings 11:28-36).

The northern kingdom of Israel went more or less directly into idolatry. God sent prophets to warn them to repent over a period of two hundred years, and finally allowed them to be carried away as captives by Assyria in 722 B.C. (II Kings 17). These ten tribes were more or less assimilated into the nations where they ended up, and are largely unidentified today.

The kingdom of Judah degenerated more slowly. Despite significant revivals in Hezekiah and Josiah's reigns, its citizens finally became worse than the nations that they had replaced (II Chronicles 33:9). God warned them repeatedly through the prophets, before finally sentencing them, along with the surrounding idolatrous nations, to be conquered for seventy years by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Jeremiah 25:1-11). Jeremiah warned them that those who accepted this sentence would be allowed to remain in their lands and those who resisted it would be killed (Jeremiah 27:8-11), but they remained defiant. After Judah fell (586 B.C.), Jeremiah sent word to those who had been carried away to Babylon that they should seek the welfare of the cities where they were, and the Lord would bring them back to the land at the end of the seventy years (Jeremiah 29:4-10).

Nebuchadnezzar's reign commenced the Gentile domination of the earth, termed the "Times of the Gentiles" in Luke 21:24. Daniel (Daniel 2) interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's vision as announcing the four successive Gentile empires that would rule the earth, starting with Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian Empire (Daniel 2:37). According to the vision in Daniel 8, Babylon was to be followed by the Medo-Persian (v 20) and Greek (v 21) empires. Historically, the last empire in the succession was the Roman Empire.

Daniel obeyed God and supported the Babylonian Empire that had carried him into exile from Judah, but the people that were not carried away rebelled and fled into Egypt (II Kings 25:22-26). When the Medo-Persian Empire began with the reign of Darius (539 B.C.), Daniel began to pray for the promised restoration of Israel (Daniel 9:1-3). He confessed his part in the sins of his past and present countrymen, pleading for their restoration out of God's compassion (Vs 16-19). God replied that seventy weeks (or "Sevens") had been decreed against Daniel's people to finish their transgression and atone for their iniquity (v 24). This was a fulfillment of God's decree that if Israel did not repent when He delivered them over to their enemies for disobedience, He would punish them seven times more for their sins (Leviticus 26:14-18 ff.).

God precisely delineated the span of the first sixty-nine seven-year periods (483 Jewish years) of this sentence against Israel. They were to start at the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem and last until Messiah the Prince was cut off (vs 25,26). Although the temple was rebuilt under Ezra's leadership in 515 B.C., the decree to rebuild Jerusalem was not issued until the twentieth year of Artaxerxes reign, in 445 B.C. (Nehemiah 2:1-10). Sixty-nine times seven equals 483 Jewish years of 360 days which is equivalent to 476 solar years of 365.25 days. This period would end in 31 A.D., which, allowing for some error in establishing exact dates, would coincide pretty well with the crucifixion of Christ--when Messiah was cut off.

The seventieth seven-year period of Israel's sentence seems to encompass a firm seven-year covenant that a "Prince who is to come" would make with the majority of the Jews (Daniel 9:27). This is called their "Covenant with death" in Isaiah 28:18. Since the people of this prince who is to come were the ones who destroyed Jerusalem (v 26), he will probably be the dictator of a revived Roman (European) Empire (Revelation 13:1-8) because the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 69 A.D. This despot is the first beast of Revelation 13. He will make the covenant with the Antichrist, or false Messiah of Israel, who is the second beast of Revelation 13. Together they will put an end to the Jewish worship of God in the middle of this seven year period by substituting their own abominations for the reinstated temple sacrifices. This will herald in a desolator who will be able to successfully challenge Israel's treaty with

Europe, and ravage the land of Israel (v 27) for the rest of the seven years. This coincides with the Lord's warning for those in Jerusalem to flee to the mountains the instant they see the ABOMINATION OF DESOLATION spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (Matthew 24:15-21). It places the seventieth seven-year period of Israel's punishment near the Lord's coming and at the "End of the age" that was the subject of the Lord's Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:3). This is commonly known as the Tribulation.

Evidently, then, God's specific dealings with the children of Israel were put on hold from the time that they crucified their Messiah until the end times. This gap in God's dealings with Israel obviously corresponds to the Christian era, or church age on earth, which will end with the "Rapture" of the church (I Thessalonians 4:16,17). Then, with the essentially Gentile church safely in heaven with Christ, God will once again turn His attention to the final seven year stage of Israel's punishment, and their permanent restoration to the blessings He has promised them when the "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) is fulfilled.

God's relationship with Israel was filled with wonderful promises from the very beginning. They are found throughout the Old Testament. Besides the five Books of Moses and other places, the promises abound in the Psalms and the prophetic Books that were written as Israel degenerated within the promised land. Amos and Hosea prophesied in the northern kingdom of Israel as it decayed, while Micah, Isaiah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah as it decayed. Their warnings of judgement for the sins of the children of Israel abounded with glowing prophesies of their restoration. It almost seems that the worse they behaved, the more God enlarged on these promises, even as He disciplined them. And the post-exile prophets like Ezekiel and Zechariah continued to speak of the blessings they would experience in a future Messianic kingdom in their own land.

Christians legitimately spiritualize much of the Old Testament. "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our learning" (Romans 15:4). Who can deny that Abraham's offering Isaac on the mountain (Genesis 22) typifies God sacrificing His only Son on Calvary's cross for our sins? The journey of Israel from the slavery of Egypt to the blessings of the Promised Land corresponds well to the Christian's journey from the slavery of sin to the blessings of the heavenly position of holiness that we are called to. And Israel's conquest of the Promised Land corresponds to the Christians struggle to attain the resurrection state (Philippians 3:11) of holiness through victory over sin and self and Satan. And we see our own sins, unfaithfulness, and failure mirrored--perhaps even prophesied--in theirs.

The Holy Spirit spiritually applies some of Israel's promises to Christians in the New Testament. An example is, "*I will dwell in them and walk among them, and I will be there God, and they shall be My people*" (II Corinthians 6:16--from Exodus 29:45 & Leviticus 26:12). But the legitimate spiritual application of Israel's promises to Christianity in no way denies their literal fulfillment to the nation of Israel, as discussed in Romans 9-11. They did not stumble so as to fall, but that by their transgression salvation would come to the Gentiles--to make Israel jealous (Romans 11:11). There is yet to be a "Fulfillment" for them (v 12). The Gentiles are not to be uninformed of this lest they become conceited. A partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. Then all Israel will be saved, when the Deliverer comes from Zion and removes ungodliness from Jacob and establishes His covenant with them. It is in this context that the gifts and calling of God are said to be irrevocable (Romans 11:25-29, ff). God did not make false promises to Israel. The crucifixion, which was predicted as the promises were given, does not annul them.

God's initial promises to Abraham included a land (which God would show him), a great nation (of his offspring), wealth (God's blessing--Genesis 24:35), honor (a great name), the welfare of his friends and divine vengeance on his enemies, and a coming Messiah (Galatians 3:16) who would bring blessing to the whole earth.

His promises to Israel were in keeping with these earthly blessings. While there is an obvious overlap, they are in contrast to the heavenly blessings of the church, which is viewed as "Seated in the heavenly places with Christ" (Ephesians 2:6). The Israelites fought the enemies of God for their lands while the Christians joyfully accepted the seizure of their property, knowing that they had a better and abiding possession in a heavenly realm (Hebrews 10:34). The Israelites fought a physical battle while the Christian's battle is spiritual. *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:12).* Israel's restoration should not be confused with the church's hopes.

A catalogue of all God's promises for the restoration of Israel would be redundant, but a few examples will demonstrate that they seem to correlate with His original promises to Abraham concerning a specific land¹, a specific people² (Abraham's descendants), their wealth³, their honor⁴, their relationship with others⁵, and their Messiah⁶. These promises simply have not been fulfilled either in the Jew's return to their land in the Old Testament or in their return to Israel in modern times.

(1) The Promised Land was an extremely fertile place when Israel came there. It became a desolate desert because of their sins (Leviticus 26:20). But God promises that the desert of Zion will blossom like a rose and waters will break forth in the wilderness (Isaiah 35). The Dead Sea will become fresh water, providing fish for food (Ezekiel 47:8-10). The area from Geba to Rimmon south of Jerusalem will be changed into a plain (Zechariah 12:10). The tongue of the sea of Egypt will be destroyed (Isaiah 11:15). There will also be a huge temple in the land (Ezekiel 40-45) in contrast to the Holy City that represents the church, which has no temple since God and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21:22).

(2) The Lord has promised to gather all the people of Israel from the nations where they are scattered, and bring them to the wilderness to judge them (Ezekiel 20:33-44). Their arrival on horses, chariots, mules, camels, and even litters (Isaiah 66:20-24) hardly sounds like a reference to the rapture. The rebels and transgressors among them will be purged in the wilderness, and the rest brought into their land. They will look on the Messiah Whom they pierced, and each tribe will repent separately (Zechariah 12:10-14). The two kingdoms will be joined back together under "David My servant (Ezekiel 37:1-15). And God will put His law within them, and write it on their hearts so they will instinctively know the Lord (Jeremiah 31:33, 34).

(3) God promised that a great abundance of gold, silver and garments from the nations that fight against Jerusalem in the end times will be given to Israel (Zechariah 14:14). The wealth of the nations will also come to them as gifts to the point where gold will be as bronze and silver as iron (Isaiah 60:5-8, 11, 17). And each Israelite will relax with his neighbor under his own vine and fig tree (Zechariah 3:10).

(4) The Lord promises to give Israel renown and praise among all the peoples of the earth when He brings them back into their land (Zephaniah 3:20). This is in direct contrast to the way the Jews that are back in the land in unbelief today seem to be hated of all nations. And where they were forsaken and hated, God will make them an everlasting pride, and a joy from generation to generation (Isaiah 60:15).

(5) God's promise to judge the nations that conquered Israel (Assyria, Isaiah 10:5-16) and Judah (Babylon, Jeremiah 25:12, 13) for the way they mistreated them has only been partially fulfilled (Joel 3:20, 21 *NASB*). The definitive fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to bless them that bless him and curse them that curse him awaits the JUDGEMENT OF THE NATIONS (Matthew 25:31-46), when the Son of Man comes to His throne and gathers the nations (Gentiles) to judge each individual on how he treated the godly remnant of Israel during the tribulation. And the nations and kingdoms that refuse to serve Israel when the millennial kingdom is set up will perish (Isaiah 60:12).

(6) God's promises of the Messiah are intricately connected with Israel, though the Gentiles would be blessed in Him too (Genesis 12:3). He will return to the Mount of Olives as vividly as the lightening in the sky (Matthew 24:27), literally splitting it in two (Zechariah 14:2). And He will occupy the throne of David in Israel (Ezekiel 37:21-28) in fulfillment of God's promise that David would never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel (Jeremiah 3:17). This is in contrast to sitting on His Father's throne during the church age (Revelation 3:21).

The Jews were never able to reconcile the prophecies of a suffering Messiah (like Psalms 22 and Isaiah 53) with the prophecies of an exalted Messiah. They never figured out that His promised advent would be divided into a coming in weakness and humiliation for the world's redemption, and a return in power and great glory for Israel's restoration. Similar problems arise in trying to integrate the prophecies of Christ's return for His church (the "RAPTURE") and His return to earth to establish His promised millennial kingdom for Israel. If we fail to perceive that Christ's second coming also occurs in two stages, we generally end up spiritualizing away God's promises to Israel by applying their earthly blessings to our heavenly ones.

From reviewing God's dealings with Israel we conclude that the TIMES OF THE GENTILES began with Babylon's defeat of Israel and will end with Israel's restoration to preeminence in the END TIMES. The church age is an intermission in God's dealings with Israel that began after the crucifixion and will end with the RAPTURE of the church to be with Christ before Israel's seventieth week of TRIBULATION begins. At the end of the tribulation Christ will deliver Israel and establish His MILLENNIAL KINGDOM to reign in righteousness over the earth from Israel. Although the Church will live and reign with Him over that 1000 year period, its character will be as heavenly as Israel's will be earthly. Satan will be loosed at the end of that time and stir up a final rebellion against Christ (Revelation 20:7-10). After He puts all enemies down, Christ will deliver the kingdom up to God (I Corinthians 15:24). The heavens and earth will melt with fervent heat and be replaced with new heavens and a new earth (II Peter 2:10-13), ushering in the ETERNAL STATE where righteousness will dwell and the church will reign with Christ forever (Revelation 22:5?).