

A SIGN OF THE TIMES: THE JEWS

*"I will plant Israel in their own land,
never again to be uprooted" Amos 9:15*

At the moment there is a bitter impasse in the theological battle between those who consider the Jews have yet a significant role as a nation in the purposes of God and those who do not. The battle, of course, centres on prophetic interpretation. Such a conflict is not likely to be resolved, however, by more theological debate. That will only increase the contention and bitterness. Since the battle is over prophetic outcome, it is much more likely to be resolved by the emergence of historical facts which either demonstrate the validity of a purpose for the Jews or the opposite. It is worth remembering that the controversy between Peter and the Judaizers over whether all Christians must be circumcised was resolved in the Council of Jerusalem by facts, not theories: what God had actually done to Cornelius (and other Gentiles) in filling him with the Spirit without him being circumcised was the deciding factor. Likewise the theological battle over the validity of tongues in our own generation has been decided by the extraordinary way God caused that gift to spread amongst so many of his saints over the course of the 20th C. Facts are critical.

Accordingly there is a real call, not to revisit interpretive arguments, but to recognise and properly assess historical facts which speak directly into the discussion. That is what this pamphlet seeks to do. Such facts are numerous and important.

1. The Fact of the State of Israel.

We live in a time when a Jewish nation has re-emerged after some 2,000 years of painful exile. By any reckoning that is an astonishing fact. It is a fact which can find no better description than the prophetic utterance given by Ezekiel: *"I will assemble you out of all the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel"* Ez. 11:17. Many other such texts provide a similar description.

In the last 60 years Jews have come to Israel from over 80 different countries where they have lived for centuries. The population of the State of Israel is now over 5,000,000 and has become a focal point of world Jewry. Starting from a very gradual settling of Jews in the Holy Land during the mid 19thC onwards, the flow gradually increased over the years up to 1939, and then in 1948 burst into a veritable torrent. By 1968 a nation had been thoroughly established. The fact astonished and amazed the Jews themselves, and for a great many of them the word "miracle" seemed a very appropriate description. We are, therefore, no longer in the realm of hopeful conjecture (or otherwise) when thinking of a return of the Jews, but in the realm of fact and actuality. It demands an explanation commensurate with its astonishing happening. It cannot simply be brushed off because it does not fit some interpretive theory that has no place for a restoration.

To maintain the view that this return is of no consequence and is not a fulfilment of prophecy it would be necessary to demonstrate there was something in this return that was contrary to prophetic scripture, something that would rule it out of consideration. Would the fact that it was a return which had little spiritual motivation in it constitute such an objection? Is there reason to suppose it is a man-made thing that will be like the brief century interlude of the Jewish nationalist Maccabean kingdom which held brief sway shortly before the Romans took over the Holy Land? Is it a purely secular happening which in due course will simply end in some historical national disaster? The short answer to that is, of course, that only time will tell. The state of Israel is certainly of much greater historical magnitude than the Maccabean kingdom.

There is, however, nothing in it essentially contrary to prophetic scripture. On the other hand there are clear indications there that a return to Zion is foreseen for "the last days" and such a return will be the fruit not of spiritual thinking by the Jews but of strong action by God himself to bring it about.

The State of Israel as a Secular Achievement.

The movement back to Israel by the Jews has only in very small part been a religious or spiritual phenomenon. Two forward looking Rabbis, Alkalai and Kalischer, affected by the enlightenment broke ranks with the general body of orthodox rabbis and argued that some human effort at colonising Israel should be made in preparation for the Messiah. That led to the Hovevei Israel movement, the first colonising settlers. But the main protagonists of a true political Zionism were very much enlightened secularists. The outstanding figure in Zionism, Theodore Herzl, whose book *The Jewish State* became the major catalyst of the movement toward the state of Israel epitomised this secularism. The main concern of such figures was to find a home for Jews where they would be free of the appalling anti-Semitism that surrounded them. Herzl did not envisage a theocracy but a liberal democracy on the European model. Some of the early thinkers and settlers found their "spirituality" in socialism. They could, of course, never escape the concepts of messianic destiny and the lure of the "Land" which were so deeply embedded in Jewish thought, but their interpretations of such concepts were thoroughly secularised: the reign of the Messiah, for example, would be one where they were free to live in enlightenment and peace, without any oppression from antiquated Talmudic strictures.

Does this non-religious motivation nullify any prophetic significance being applied to the 20thC return? Not necessarily. God did many things with the Jews in their early history to achieve his purposes with and without their "spiritual" co-operation. Even the exodus from Egypt was an enterprise God undertook for his people without any real spiritual intent on their part. The plagues of Egypt not only moved the Egyptians out of the way, but moved the Israelites on their way: God brought them out with his "strong arm". Indeed the Israelites insisted on bringing their idols with them out of Egypt and were very reluctant followers of Yahweh..

There are some important indications in the Prophets that God would make the restoration of the last days equally the consequence of his "strong arm": *"Not for your sakes do I do this, says the Lord God, "let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your own ways" Ez.36:32. "I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered ... With a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath" Ez.20:34.* There is abundant space in the prophetic scriptures for a return of the Jews in unbelief.

2. The Prayer Factor

It is a profound and important principle that in working out his purposes God seems invariably to draw out from his people a heartfelt cry for those purposes. Prayer is always the first stage of his activity. Luke carefully noted a crucial example of this in

revealing the intercession of Simeon and Anna who were praying earnestly for the Messiah just before Jesus was born. In similar fashion, before the exodus from Egypt took place a great cry went up from the Israelites in their bondage, and God heard it and answered it in the birth of Moses. What evidence do we have of intercession for the Jews and their return prior to or alongside their 20thC return? Such evidence would be an important fact to reckon with.

The Reformation brought about a great re-discovery of fundamental biblical truth. One such truth was that God was intent on spreading the gospel across the world and converting people from all nations. This revelation released a very powerful stream of intercession from the evangelical world for the conversion of the "heathen". Over the last three centuries that stream has grown enormously and, more significantly, so has the spread of the gospel. The prayer and the answer are there for all to see. However, the stream of prayer included within it an element which had a focus on the Jews. It grew commensurate with the prayer for the nations, and a great concern for the conversion of the Jews is very discernable in the last three centuries. As time has gone on that prayer has included very specific request for the restoration of Jewry to its land. As with the nations generally prayer for the Jews is stronger than it has been at any other time. The people involved in such praying have not been people on the fringe but those who have been again and again at the heart of the major revival movements that have brought so much advance to the church. It is to be noted that a very great deal of this has taken place in Britain from the Puritans onwards.

The Jewish people have always for centuries kept up their prayer for restoration. Whilst doubtless these were perfunctory for many, it is equally certain that for others it was deep and earnest. We have no way of measuring the great cry that went up from Jews during the anti-Semitic oppressions of the 20th C., and especially just prior to and during the horrific years of the Holocaust., but such a cry certainly existed and was very profound. It echoed the cry in Egypt just before the exodus under Moses.

3. The State of Israel and the Holocaust.

Perhaps the most startling fact concerning the Jews' return to Israel is the extraordinary juxtaposition of that event with the Holocaust. The "final solution" began in 1942 and was to destroy 6,000,000 Jews. In the same year the German army was poised to overrun Palestine, which would have brought obliteration of the incipient Jewish state. Even in 1945 the situation hardly seemed much better with Jewry devastated and Britain adamantly opposed to Jewish settlement in Israel. But within 6 years of the start of the final solution and within 3 years of the end of the war the State of Israel had come into being. Within a further 20 years some 2-3 million Jews were settled in the land as Israeli citizens. The move from national genocide to national state in so short a time is simply stunning and seems to compel recognition of a divine hand. This nature of this juxtaposition was certainly not lost on many Jews, for whom the impact was that of a resurrection.

The whole episode has an awesome note, and it compels comparison with the equally awesome and parallel pattern of events that made up the exodus from Egypt. In that exodus a real threat of destruction was the prelude to deliverance, and God was certainly author of that deliverance.

4. The Concurrent Global Spread of the Gospel and the Return of the Jews.

The 20thC is notable for the widespread advance of the gospel into virtually every nation. It was a century of major revivals in every continent and hundreds of millions of converts. The century was quite unique in its impact. It was also the century in which increasing settlement was made by Jews in Israel, and in which finally the State of Israel emerged. That also was unique. Those are the facts. Is there any significance in that concurrent dual Jewish and Gentile development in the one century?

We certainly have to take that possibility into account when looking at some of the most debated prophecies about the Jews. Jesus said, "*Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is come*" Lk. 21:24, and Paul said, "*Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.*" Rom. 11:26. Both of these statements seem to point clearly to the fact that a time of release for the Jews is directly connected with the gathering in of the Gentiles. There is some synchronisation indicated. Isaiah's great prophetic statement about the work of the Messiah also bears this out: "*And now the Lord says - he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to himself - he says, 'It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth'*" Is. 49:5ff. There is a dual work for the ascended Jesus: the gathering in from the nations and the restoring of Jacob. When we see real evidence of the former getting much closer and the latter physically appearing we are bound to sit up and take note. These are signs of the times.

5. The Providences of History

The Old Testament is full of descriptions of the acts of providence that God worked for Israel. There is a strong emphasis on calling the Jews to recognise them and remember them. Their God is found in their history. That lesson should not be ignored today, even if our modern assessments cannot be of the same order as those in scripture. Note the following pointers:

- (i). The defeat of the massive German onslaught ideologically and physically on the Jewish nation, with the consequent utter destruction of Germany, bears comparison with the biblical episodes of the exodus and of Haman and all other genocidal attempts. The unassailable lesson of scripture is that God keeps a watch on his people.
- (ii). The removal of Britain's mandate over Israel and post war British opposition to the return of the Jews. At the same time the proposal of partition with the unique agreement of the two mutually antagonistic superpowers of Russia and America, and the recognition of the legal right of the new state by both superpowers gave totally unexpected status to Israel.
- (iii). The deliverance from concerted military attack from the vastly more numerous Arab world at a point of extreme vulnerability both in 1948 and 1967. N.B. the extraordinary acquiring of arms from the Czechs and later the French at those crisis points.
- (iv). The settlement of several million Jews from all parts in a very short period after 1948 defied all reasonable expectations considering the utter lack of Israeli economic and financial resources, and the huge drain of constant military demands on money and manpower. It was as much a miracle as success in defence.
- (v). The formation of very strong and numerous American Jewry from 1881 onwards gave critical support for the Israeli State.