

Response to the sermon, “The Place of Israel”, by the Rev. John Stott and to those who believe that the Church has replaced Israel in God’s purposes.

John Stott, Rector Emeritus of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, is well known as a speaker and author and for his biblical interpretation of Scripture. He has helped many people in the Christian faith. I have appreciated his contribution to the Christian Church and to the evangelical cause. It is therefore with regret that I respond to this sermon, believing biblically that on the subject of Israel, he is incorrect.

According to Stott there are “at least four ways in which the word ‘Israel’ may be used”. These are:

1. ‘Israel’ was that devious scoundrel, the younger son of Isaac and Rebecca.
2. ‘Israel’ was the chosen, covenant people of God in the Old Testament.
3. ‘Israel’ is the Messianic community, the people of Jesus, the true descendants of Abraham because they share Abraham’s faith.
4. ‘Israel’ today for most people means the Israeli nation. Promised a national home by the Balfour Declaration of 1917, they were given it in 1948.

“Thus ‘Israel’ has four distinct meanings. It means Jacob. It means Jews. It means Christians. And it means Israelis. To which of these four meanings are we referring, then, when we ask about ‘the place of Israel’ in the purpose of God?”

Stott’s differentiation between four so-called meanings of Israel is unhelpful. Israel is indeed Jacob, the people called to serve, the believers in Christ and the nation. We may not separate out this multi-layered, Biblical definition of Israel, as Stott does. Having affirmed this unbiblical differentiation, Stott then affirms that the Church of Believing Jews and Gentiles, has replaced covenant Israel.

I believe the interpretation that the Church has replaced Israel, deprives us of much of the sheer wonder of God’s grace, love and condescension in binding to Himself a sinful people for their redemption and that of the world. It demonstrates a failure to understand the real nature and depths of Christ’s atonement and God’s dealing with the world through Israel. It also fails to appreciate the nature and significance of God’s promises.

God’s Covenant of Grace with Israel is within His Covenant of Grace with all humankind. God, in His love and determination to redeem, has bound His sinful people to Himself in a living personal bond. God’s Covenant, fulfilled and confirmed in Christ, is a Covenant of Grace and cannot be broken. Its continuance does not depend on human response. Consequently, I believe that the Biblical definition of Israel should not be differentiated and reinterpreted to suit our human understanding. It should be embraced with gratitude.

God’s Covenant with all Creation and with Israel.

God created the world out of nothing through His Word and affirmed that all He created was good. In doing so, He made a Covenant of Grace with humankind. His Covenant embraced all creation, in that God did not put men and women in an alien environment, but within one created and controlled by God. Despite the fact that through Adam and Eve sin entered and spoiled the world, God reaffirmed His Covenant of Grace many times.

Within the Covenant of Grace and in order to redeem humankind and all creation, God made an inner covenant with a particular people. God chose Israel and settled them in the Promised

Land. His choice of Israel was neither because they were a numerous people nor because they were righteous, but rather that through them He might reveal Himself to them and through them to the nations of the world. He revealed Himself to them over hundreds of years until at last there were some people within Israel who would recognise Him when He came; understand what He came to do in redeeming the world; and launch His Gospel to the world. He also chose them as His special instrument that they might under God, be used to bring about God's Atonement in Christ for the salvation of the world.

God's Covenant with Israel was not a covenant external to their life and being as a nation, nor was it a contract between two contracting parties. It was a covenant which embraced the entire life and being of Israel and drew them, as a sinful nation, into a binding personal relationship with God in His holiness. The Bible speaks of God's relationship with Israel as a marriage relationship. That is no mere metaphor. As man and woman in marriage give themselves to one another and become one flesh, one whole person, so God in His love and determination to redeem Israel and the world, bound Himself to Israel and Israel to Himself in an eternal bond. The prophet Jeremiah said, *"For as a belt is bound around a man's waist, so I bound the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah to me, declares the Lord, to be my people for my renown and praise, and honour. But they have not listened"* (13:11). God did not do this for any other nation in the world. So ensued the long and often anguished history of Israel, who because of their sin shattered themselves on the rock of God's love and faithfulness to His Covenant. In His love, God would not let them go.

God's Covenant with Israel embraced the Land just as God's Covenant with humankind embraced all creation. When Israel is blessed the Land is blessed. When Israel is cursed the Land is cursed (Deuteronomy 28:1-68 & 29:22-28). His concern for the redemption of both Israel and the Land testifies to His concern both for the redemption of humankind and all creation. Those who believe the Church has replaced Israel, fail adequately to see the full Biblical connection of people and land and therefore, the connection between the redemption of humankind and all creation in Christ.

God's Covenant with Israel was and is a call to serve. Those who believe the Church has replaced Israel, fail adequately to see this.

God's Covenant with Israel was in order that through them *"all nations on earth will be blessed"* (Genesis 18:18 & 22:18). They were called to serve. They were and are God's servant in order that through them, God might reveal Himself to the world and redeem the world. We fail to see the everlasting nature of God's Covenant with Israel, if we fail to grasp that fact. The everlasting nature of God's Covenant with Israel is emphasised many times in Scripture.

God's Covenant with Israel His servant, which is within God's Covenant of Grace with all humankind, was and is a Covenant of Grace. It is an everlasting covenant and is dependent on God's faithfulness not on Israel's obedience.

God did not call Israel because they were a numerous people (Deuteronomy 7:7f) nor because they were righteous (Deut. 7:7f. & Deut. 9:5,6). They were a sinful people whom God chose to represent the sinful nations of the world. He did so in His love, both for them and for the world.

Israel's sin is important. Without sin they would not represent the peoples of the world. Through their sin and oft-repeated rebellion against God we are given the revelation not only of God's judgement on sin but of His amazing patience, mercy and forgiveness. Without Israel's sin we would not have the Old Testament in its present form. God said to Pharaoh in Egypt, *"I have raised you up for this very purpose that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth"* (Exodus 9:16). The same can be said of the reason for God's choosing of Israel (Romans 9). Here however, we must be cautious; Israel is not more sinful than other nations, even today. Frequently she is more righteous. In judging Israel, as the nations today so often do, they are judging themselves before God.

Effectively, there is only one Covenant of Grace reaffirmed at different times and revealed in different forms, which God established with all humankind. It was fulfilled, confirmed and sealed in Christ and can never be broken. Within that one Covenant, God's Covenant with Israel for the undeserved salvation of the world was fulfilled and confirmed in Christ, not set aside or cancelled. Neither the sin of the world, nor the sin of Israel, can ever cancel God's Covenant.

The blessings of the Covenant can only truly be received and enjoyed by those who believe. That is to say, the enjoyment by Jew or Gentile, of the blessings of God's Covenant is conditional on faith and obedience. The Covenant itself is dependent on God's grace and is not conditional. This is confirmed many times in Scripture.

In Israel, there is a covenant within a covenant. Although God's Covenant and call to serve was to all Israel, and all Israel was embraced within it, there is an inner covenant with those who believe and obey the Lord. There is an inner remnant who enjoy the blessings of the covenant. They are through faith, the true children of Abraham. Unless we understand the existence of the inner covenant we cannot rightly understand what Paul says in Romans 2:23-3:4 and chapters 9-11.

In chapter 9 Paul says of all Israel as a nation, *"Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen."* Then Paul speaks of Israel's call as a nation to serve or witness to God. He says that through them, as through Pharaoh in Egypt, God revealed both His wrath and His mercy. In chapter 10 Paul makes clear that salvation is only in Christ. In chapter 11, he speaks both of the remnant who believe in the Lord and also of all Israel. God's purpose and His Covenant embraces both groups of people.

Israel in their sin was called to play a vital part in Christ's atonement. Those who believe that the Church has replaced Israel fail to understand this.

Here however, we need to hold our breath or to put our hand over our mouth, in awe. Israel was called in her sin, as a sinful people to represent the sins of the nations, (our sins), which God took on Himself in Jesus Christ in order to atone for the world. Israel's sin is important for God's purposes of redemption. So we have the mysterious words of Isaiah 6:9,10. *"Go and tell this people: 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving'. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their hearts dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed"*. This passage, quoted six times in the New Testament is quoted in part by Christ.

As God pressed into the heart of the world, sin was aroused. He brought it out into the open and took it on Himself. He took on Himself, the sin of Israel and the world. When the world in its sin was furthest from God in sinful rebellion, God made peace between God and humankind. In the mystery of God, Israel was chosen from the beginning by God, for their particular role in regard to Christ's death and atonement. She was the nations' sinful representative elected to bring about Christ's death. Israel was our representative. Our sins, the sins of the world, put Christ on the cross.

In this, Israel was chosen as a nation (and not simply the remnant), to be a means through which the salvation of Christ was accomplished for the world. Following His death, Christ was resurrected and ascended to the Father. Hence Paul says, *"Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles"* (Romans 11:11).

Israel as a nation, because of her intimate relation to Jesus Christ through the Covenant and because of her sin, literally had to share in Christ's death. Because Christ died Israel had to die; and Israel as a nation did spiritually and physically die with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the subsequent destruction of the nation.

In that, Israel was elected as a pattern for us all. Because Christ, our representative and Saviour died, we must all die. Paul said, Christ *"died for all, and therefore all died"* (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Likewise through Christ's resurrection, all must rise. Because Israel and we all share in Christ's death, so we all must share in Christ's resurrection. Yet, here we have the mystery of sin. Not all will be resurrected to salvation. Jesus warned us that *"those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned"* (John 5:29).

The New Testament anticipates the resurrection to life of the nation of Israel.

In the parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree in Luke 13:6,7 Jesus was warning of coming judgement on Israel for their unbelief and their removal from the Land. The acted parable of the cursing of the unfruitful fig tree, which represented Israel, in Mark 11:12-14,20,21 was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70 and the subsequent destruction of the nation.

In Mark 13:28-31, Jesus again for the third time uses a parable of a fig tree. Jesus said, *"Learn this lesson from the fig tree (that is, the fig tree that is Israel and is "withered from the roots"):* *As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near... right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."* It is the Greek word *genea*, nation, that is used here which is the same as that used in Jeremiah, seen clearly in LXX Jeremiah 31:36. Jesus surely had this passage from Jeremiah in mind when He spoke these words. So, when Jesus says *"As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near,"* He is saying that Israel will as a nation, be resurrected. As the earlier two parables had both a spiritual and physical dimension, so this parable also has a spiritual and physical dimension.

What Jesus said about the resurrection of Israel and their return to the Land is prophesied in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 11:10-12, the prophets said, The Lord *"will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people, from Assyria, from lower Egypt, from upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. ... He will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth."* (see also Isaiah 43:5,6 & Ezekiel 37:1-14). The prophecy, which speaks of Israel

being recalled “from the islands of the sea” or “from the four quarters of the earth”, cannot refer to the return from Babylon. It can only refer to the future return of which Jesus spoke.

Israel’s return to the Promised Land and resurrection as a nation, proclaims that something momentous will happen in the world. What will happen, what God will do and when, we do not know. We are simply in faith, kept in expectation.

The Land and the New Testament. Jesus said, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfil them*” (Matthew 5:17). In fulfilling them, He fulfilled and confirmed all the promises concerning Israel and the Land. If by fulfilling He meant that He had come to replace them He would certainly have said so. His covenant with Israel, which embraced the Land, was far too important and central to Israel’s life and being.

Certainly by His life and what He did in living, dying, rising and ascending to the Father, Christ fulfilled and replaced the liturgical law and forms of worship. However, He did not come to replace His covenant with Israel, which long preceded the giving of the law. “*For God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable*” (Romans 11:29).

Israel was living in the Land during the days of Jesus’ life on earth, so is not surprising that there are relatively few references to the Land in the Gospels. Nonetheless, I believe that John Stott is wrong when he says “Only one New Testament verse can be claimed as referring to the Land”, namely Luke 21:22. “*Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*”. There are several references, of which I mention a few.

The three parables of the fig tree which represent Israel, and to which I have referred, had each a spiritual and physical dimension. The disciples asked the risen Christ, “*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*” Jesus did not deny the validity of their question, although a kingdom implies land. He did not say that Israel would never again be a kingdom. He simply said, “*It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority*” (Acts 1:6,7,8). Until the time that the Father decides to restore the kingdom of Israel they much preach the Gospel “*in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*”

Again, Paul says in Romans 11:12, “*If their transgression means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater will their fullness bring!*” Scholars readily say that because of Israel’s stumbling (Romans 11:11), Israel was destroyed as a nation. That is to say, their spiritual stumbling had a physical, material dimension. To be consistent in our interpretation of Scripture we must say that their fullness, which is spiritual, must also have a physical, material dimension, which can be nothing else than a restoration to the Promised Land, which is frequently prophesied in Scripture.

The Faith of Israel and the Land are closely linked in Scripture. It could not be otherwise. Their knowledge of the Lord is of the One who redeemed them out of Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land, which He gave them for an everlasting Covenant.

When Israel sinned she was banished from the Land. Their return to the Land is linked with faith in the Lord. Sometimes there is faith before returning to the Land as in the case of Ezra and Nehemiah. Other times, a return to the Land precedes faith in the Lord, their return being a wonderful act of God’s grace (Ezekiel 36:16-38 & Ezekiel 37:114). Israel’s faith in the Lord is closely linked with her living in the Land and we err if we do not see this.

Since Israel returned to the Land in 1948, something quite profound has happened to Jewish consciousness. Jews have come to faith in Jesus Christ in Israel, in the USA and in other countries, in larger numbers than since the days of the Early Church. Their restoration to the Land has had a profound spiritual effect. In the Land of Israel they are still a small minority, although their numbers are growing significantly. This is a foretaste of what Paul anticipates in Romans 11:26. The day will come when *“all Israel will be saved.”* Although that may not mean every single Jewish person, we should anticipate that the nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus Christ.

The Distinction between what is physical and what is Spiritual is biblically wrong. According to John Stott, *“In olden days ‘Israel’ was a physical designation, meaning the descendants of Jacob and ‘Israel’ today is a spiritual designation, meaning believers in Jesus, whether they are descendants of Jacob or not.”*

If we interpret all that is said of Israel and the Land in the Old Testament physically and all that is said in the New Testament purely spiritually, we are drawing an unbiblical distinction between the physical and the spiritual, which leads to dualism. Dualism, which was basic to Greek philosophy, has troubled both theology and philosophy for two thousand years. It has many grave consequences. It gives a wrong view of human nature and the problems that we face, and it leads to a kind of deism against which the Early Fathers and Reformers on biblical grounds battled. It tends to distance God from His created world, and implies that God is not active among the nations in the real world in which we live. I have no doubt that John Stott and those who share his view may not wish to go so far. But the dualism, which they advocate, leads to it.

We need not be surprised that Israel, as she continues to share in the sins of the nations, does many wrong things today. As a representative people, Israel reflects the worst and the best of the human race. She is like a magnifying mirror in which everything is writ large. Nations see themselves in Israel. They do not like what they see, and they get angry. Their anger is really against God!

God continues to use Israel in her unbelief as His servant. The very presence of Israel reminds the nations of God. Through Israel and her long history, in which God revealed Himself in mercy and judgement, God is challenging the nations. The nations’ attitude to Israel reflects and highlights their attitude to God, although in their sin the nations do not recognise this.

Today as Christians we need humbly to acknowledge the hand of God in restoring Israel to the Land as promised in Scripture. We need to recognise something of the way that God is challenging the nations and challenging our nation. As Christians we need to be humble and grateful for the role which God has called Israel to play, for our salvation and the salvation of the world.

The destiny of Israel, the destiny of the Church and the destiny of the world belong together. Far from the Church being a replacement of Israel, the Church is grafted into Israel (Romans 11:17-21). When Israel comes to faith there will be a great leap forward in world mission. As Paul says, it will be *“life from the dead”* (Romans 11:15). It will be like a new Pentecost.

We therefore need to pray, and to pray with urgency for Israel and the nations, that the eyes and hearts of all will open to receive Christ. In so doing we should anticipate that the end of all things, when Christ returns to His world, may not be far distant.

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