

# WHY ISRAEL CAN'T BE IGNORED

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In the musical *Fiddler On The Roof*, Tevye, the tradition-minded father of a Jewish family, knows that being a “chosen people” has its downside. In his well-known prayer about the burden of being Jewish, he lamented, “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t You choose someone else?”

But why would a people known for their “favored nation” status in the pages of the Bible seem destined for trouble and international conflict?

As the following pages show, the issues aren’t just oil, Middle East stability, or the challenge to take sides either with Israel or with its neighbors. The real issue is about a principle of “one-for-all” that none of us can afford to ignore. *Mart De Haan*

# ISRAEL IS DESTINED TO GET OUR ATTENTION

**W**hether loved or hated, the land, the people, and the story of Israel are a magnet. From all corners of the world, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim visitors stream through Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport to see a few acres of land that are tied to their deepest thoughts and beliefs. From its cities, mountains, and valleys, emotional pilgrims stare into someone else's past to reflect on their own future.

## **Its People Claim The Same Father.**

Most of those who come here claim a relationship to a once-childless father (Gen. 15:2). Arab people see themselves as the children of Abraham's first son, Ishmael. Jewish people trace their heritage through

a second son, Isaac. And Christians see themselves as the spiritual children of Abraham's faith (Gal. 3:7).

## **Its Location Is**

**Strategic.** Positioned on an ancient landbridge and trade route to Africa, Asia, and Europe, Israel of the past sat at the crossroads of the world. Today, Israel still gets more than its share of international attention. After the Holocaust, the people returned to their ancestral homeland from all over the world, and the conflict with their oil-rich neighbors was renewed. For both new and old reasons, the world feels compelled to watch Israel to protect its own interests.

## **Its Land Is A Stage.**

At Israel's longest and widest points, its rock-strewn landscape is a 260-by 60-mile platform on which the most important drama of history has played before a watching world.

Its story is a romance of inexpressible affection, and a tragedy of immeasurable pain. No other nation has risen so high or sunk so low. No other people have been dispersed and scattered among the nations of the world and then regathered to their ancestral homeland. No other nation has done as much to provide a stage and a backdrop for the greatest story ever told.

### **Its Story Has International**

**Meaning.** According to the Bible, the historical record of Israel tells us about our God, ourselves, and our relationship to one another. In the best and worst moments of a chosen people, a promised land, and a long-awaited Messiah, we find our past. In the predictions of its prophets, we find our future.

Those who have the opportunity to visit this land

are not necessarily made better by walking where Israel's temple stood or where Jesus walked. Hearts are not permanently changed by touching the Wailing Wall or by gazing into the Armageddon landscape of the Jezreel Valley. But those who visit this land, read its story, or reflect on the pictures of its mountains and valleys have before them tangible evidence of the unfolding drama of God.

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According to the Bible, the people chosen for this land were called to tell the whole world about the God of gods, and the King of kings. The land promised to them has a similar meaning. It was given to show people of all nations the God who offers ultimate satisfaction and security to anyone who trusts Him.

## ISRAEL'S NEIGHBOR ISSUES AFFECT ALL OF US

**B**ad blood in the Mideast flows from generation to generation like an ancient river of oil and water. From the days of Abraham to our own breaking news, there

seems to be no end to the fatal rivalry of Ishmael and Isaac.

The conflict that began with the patriarchs of the Arab and Jewish people affects all of us. It costs us at the gas pump. It even divides us at church. Some of us think that our faith demands that we be pro-Israel. Others think a Good-Samaritan theology favors the Palestinians.

**Some Of Us Are Inclined To Side With Israel.** Some of us have been sympathetic to the Jewish struggle for a homeland. We remember that the God of the Bible gave the Promised Land to the descendants of Abraham. We are embarrassed by the way some of the church fathers expressed contempt for the nation of Israel, and we want to disassociate ourselves from any hint of the hatred seen in an

ancient Haman (Est. 3:6) or a modern Hitler. Some of us see Israel's rebirth not only as evidence for the truth of the Bible but also as confirmation of our view of prophecy. Most important, we believe the God of the Bible when He said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; cp. Acts 3:25). But in the process, we may also overlook some other facts.

**We May Have A Tendency To Forget Arab Interests.** It's easy to forget that "to bless" expresses a desire for the good of another and that Israel was chosen to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3). It's just as true that followers of Christ are urged to curse no one (Rom. 12:14).

While recognizing Israel's

need for a homeland, it's important to consider the non-Jewish families whose ancestors homesteaded and farmed the area after Israel's loss of the land in AD 70. Many of them also trace their roots back to father Abraham.

**We May Have Forgotten God's Love For Ishmael.** Although Ishmael was born into the home of Abraham and Sarah, he was conceived as a result of his father's relationship with an Egyptian woman named Hagar.

At Sarah's suggestion, Abraham fathered a child by her live-in housekeeper. But the attempt to solve their childlessness gave birth to family jealousies. Later, when Sarah miraculously conceived a son of her own, the stage was set for conflict between the two boys and their mothers. At Sarah's urging, Abraham kicked

Hagar and Ishmael out of the house.

According to Genesis 21:17-20, God responded tenderly to the tears of Hagar. The Angel of the Lord gave her son the name Ishmael, which means “the LORD has heard your affliction” (16:11). God Himself assured Ishmael of His ability to help him (21:20) and also promised to make him into a great nation (17:20).

In the process of coming to the aid of Hagar and Ishmael, however, God warned of the painful consequences that would result from Abraham’s actions. Of the child that he and his wife banished into the wilderness, God said, “He shall be a wild man [lit. wild donkey]; his hand shall be against every man, and every man’s hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (16:12).

Ishmael seemed destined to show us that hurt people hurt people. Being thrown out of the house probably contributed to his own approach to life and to a survival attitude that became a part of his legacy.

### **We May Need To Remember That God Chose One For All.**

Several factors can help to balance our understanding of what God was doing with Isaac and Ishmael:

1. God’s choice of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the “line of promise” was intended to be for the good of everyone, not just their own children. From the beginning, the God of the Bible made it clear that He was choosing one nation for the sake of all (Gen. 12:1-3).

2. Although Genesis predicts that Ishmael would be a rebel, there were equally unflattering names and predictions in the Jewish legacy. Jacob, the

father of the 12 tribes of Israel, was given a birth name that meant “betrayor, or deceiver.” Later, the prophets of Israel described their own nation as a prostitute (Jer. 2:20), as a lusty donkey (v.24), and as a community that made Sodom and Gomorrah look good by comparison (Ezek. 16:48-52).

3. According to the Bible, being a chosen people was a heavy burden. Not only were they singled out to show the whole world the power and goodness of the one true God but also to show all the nations of the earth what happens when we wander from the love and wisdom of our Creator (Dt. 28–30).

4. Even if God’s hand can be seen in Israel’s rebirth, the nation’s spiritual condition has always been an issue. In the 6th century BC, the prophet Ezekiel foresaw in his vision of the

dry bones that in the last days Israel would come together physically before being reborn spiritually (Ezek. 37:1-14). For that reason alone, there may be a difference between what God is doing in Israel and what Israel is doing without God.

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5. If Israel tries to find security in military strength or international alliances, it could be repeating the mistake of Abraham and Sarah who tried to have a son by using Hagar.

Is there a better way? According to the God who chose Israel for His own purposes, there is.

# ISRAEL'S GOD WANTS TO FORGIVE OUR ENEMIES

**O**n *Yom Kippur*, the most solemn day of the Jewish calendar, a big fish story is read in synagogues. As worshippers fast, confess their sins, and reflect on the words of Moses and Isaiah, they listen once again to the account of a catch-and-release that is so amazing no one would believe it if it weren't in the Bible.

Of all the readings that could have been chosen for the highest holy day of the year, someone started the tradition of reading the story of the prophet Jonah. But why Jonah? Why do Jewish people read about the reluctant prophet who ran from God, only to be swallowed by a big fish and then miraculously released to complete a dangerous

mission in what is now the nation of Iraq?

## **What Do Rabbis Say About Jonah?**

Jewish rabbis have different explanations for reading Jonah on the Day of Atonement. One teacher of Israel says the story of Jonah is more about repentance than it is about the fish. Some explain that Jonah is evidence that no one can escape the presence of God—even while trying to run from the Almighty. Others believe that Jonah is read on *Yom Kippur* with the hope that listeners will learn from the reluctant prophet's mistakes. One rabbi says, "God cares for everyone. Jonah cares only for himself. God wins."

Each of these explanations makes a good point. But the last one is especially intriguing. The story of Jonah is, after all, about a stubbornly self-centered man who was glad

to receive God's mercy when he thought he was dying in the stomach of a great fish (Jon. 2:9), but who wanted nothing to do with a God who could be "gracious and merciful" to the enemies of Israel (4:2).

### **Why Did The People Of Israel Hate A City In The Region Of**

**Modern Iraq?** Before we are too hard on Jonah, let's look at Nineveh—an ancient enemy of Israel that occupied a region lying just across the Tigris River from the modern city of Basra, Iraq.

In the days of Jonah, Nineveh was the thriving capital of the great Assyrian Empire. Her soldiers had a reputation for torturing their prisoners of war. Rumors of Assyrian atrocities were so alarming that victims often surrendered without a fight.

These are the people to whom God sent Jonah, saying, "Arise, go to

Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me" (1:2).

One of the surprises of Jonah's story is that when he finally shouted the message of God in the streets of Nineveh, the whole city repented. Even the animals wore sackcloth after the idol-worshipping king of the Assyrians spoke like a prophet and declared:

*Let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish? (3:8-9).*

### **What Did God Do For Israel's Enemies?**

To Jonah's dismay, his worst fear came to pass. God showed mercy to Israel's enemies when He saw their

change of heart. Jonah was furious. As if he and his people alone deserved something that no one can earn, he complained:

*Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live! (4:2-3).*

As Jonah sat outside the city waiting to see what would happen, God raised up a plant to give him protection from the sun. For the moment, Jonah was grateful for the shade.

But then God sent a worm to kill the plant. As the plant shriveled, Jonah became furious at God for letting him bake under the

scorching Middle-East sun. Jonah's last words show no change of heart. He was so beside himself with anger that the Lord asked, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" To which Jonah replied, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" (v.9).

Jonah was more concerned about losing the plant that gave him shade than about the people of Nineveh who needed mercy.

### **What About Israel's Mission—And Ours?**

What about us? Could Jonah's story help us make this our own day of repentance by reminding us that God cares for everyone?

From the beginning, the King of heaven poured out His love on the Jewish people for a purpose much greater than themselves. By the gift of a promised land and the visible evidence of His presence, His intent was to use "the chosen people"

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But by the time Jesus appeared on the scene, some of Israel's leaders seemed to have forgotten their national mission. With words and attitudes that were like echoes of Jonah, they considered non-Jewish people unclean, untouchable, and unworthy of God's mercy.

These first-century religious leaders did a pretty good Jonah imitation. By the way they treated lost people and the Good Shepherd who had come to their rescue, they revealed how far they were from the God who wanted to show mercy to them and their enemies.

Two thousand years later, the people of Israel have an even greater problem. Since the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the resulting dispersion of the Jewish people, and then the inexpressible Holocaust of the 20th century, many wonder how they could ever trust a God who would allow His holy city to be destroyed and millions of His people to be scattered and killed like animals.

Such an issue of trust deserves to be taken seriously by anyone who cares about the God and people of Israel.

# ISRAEL'S HOLOCAUST CHALLENGES OUR FAITH

**I**mages of naked and starving prisoners have created a lingering crisis of faith for many Jewish people who lost friends and family to the Nazi concentration camps of World War II. But the suffering and despair that we see in those hollow, hopeless eyes also challenge the faith of anyone who struggles with how a good God could allow such suffering.

I felt some of that emotion when I tried to pen this open letter to a Jewish friend I'm calling Eli.

*Dear Eli,  
Hope you're doing well.  
I've thought often about  
how much help you were in  
helping us to understand the  
story of your people during*

*our recent stay in Jerusalem.*

*I've also remembered with appreciation your willingness to help me understand what it's like to be a Jewish man who's asked to consider faith in Jesus.*

*I also keep thinking about how different our backgrounds have been. You grew up in a home where your mother, after being the only sister in her family to survive the death camps, could not talk about God. I was raised in a home where we were taught to see our Creator not only in nature and in the daily provisions of life, but also in the history of your people.*

*I've also thought a lot about your observation that some people came out of the Holocaust with a complete loss of faith, while others responded not only with belief but also with deep devotion to God.*

*Your candor was refreshing. And when you*

*asked if I thought you were being unreasonable, I knew I could quickly say no—while sensing that you had asked a very difficult question.*

*Part of me wants to say that the systematic, state-sponsored killing of your people had everything to do with human evil and nothing to do with God. But then I'm reminded of the God of the Jewish Scriptures who had His reasons for allowing pagan nations to tear down the walls of Jerusalem, while breaking His own heart in the process.*

*I've also thought about your comment that the closest you come to sensing God is in the wilderness. I too have felt the wonder of wide-open space and silence. Away from the sounds of the city, I've sensed not only the presence of God but also the capacity for moral choice and consequence that eventually bring me back to the commotion of the city.*

*On a couple of occasions, I've heard the air-raid sirens that wail in Israel on your Holocaust Remembrance Day. I've watched as you stopped whatever you were doing and stood in silence for one minute. In that annual moment of remembrance, I think I've seen something of what it means to be a "chosen people." From the days of Abraham, your people have been center stage in the story of human civilization. Sometimes you have been a guiding light for your neighbors. On other occasions, your story has been like an unnerving siren reminding us that something terrible has happened to our world.*

*No, your ancestors didn't ask to be a "chosen people." Nor do I believe the outcome would have been any different if God had formed or miraculously preserved any other ethnic group. Because human*

nature is universal, the story would have been the same, under a different name. It could just as well have been the French, the Germans, or the Japanese who had to face the reality that it's hard to be a "chosen people." Any other nation chosen to be the people of Messiah would bear the same burden.

In mentioning Messiah, I recognize your suspicion that anti-Semitism has its roots in Gospel records that portray your people as "Christ-killers." Even though the New Testament is written by Jewish authors about a Jewish Messiah, non-Jewish people have made far too much of the fact that some Jewish leaders called for Jesus' death. What too many have forgotten is that the rabbi from Nazareth died voluntarily, under the authority of a Roman governor and at the hands of brutal Roman executioners. When Jewish people are singularly blamed

for the death of Jesus, the good news of God's own sacrifice for the atonement of our sin is missed. Those who point the finger at Jewish people alone also misrepresent the spirit of the New Testament that shows God's love for Israel as an evidence of His love for all (Mt. 23:37; Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1-4).

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But Eli, if you are not ready to read the New Testament, I wish you would at least read again the ancient story of Job.

The sages of Israel have long treasured his life as evidence that people do not suffer in proportion to their sins. Instead, as the Hebrew Scriptures show, God sometimes calls people like Job, the Israelites, and His Messiah to suffer for the sake of others. Job was a good man who suffered to show the rest of us that Satan—not God—is the source of evil. Israel's troubles help us to see the danger of walking away from the protection of God. And the sufferings of God's sinless Messiah are for the atonement of all who have left God to go their own way (Isa. 53).

I don't believe the Hebrew Scriptures give us any reason to see the tragic events of the Holocaust as a picture of God's individual judgment on those who died. Eternity alone will show what heaven was seeing in the hearts of those who suffered in such abandonment and darkness.

But if this event had any relationship to the other tragic national days described in the Hebrew Scriptures, then a chosen nation's troubles can be a spiritual wake-up call for all who are watching.

If I know anything about the God of Israel, He cares more than we ever could about all people—regardless of why, where, or when they suffer.

Yet because of Israel's role as a "chosen nation," it seems that according to your nation's prophets, your people have been called not only to know God and to give birth to His Messiah, but also to bear the inexpressible burden that comes with such a role.

Eli, I hope this will help you to better understand where I'm coming from. I hope to hear from you when you get a chance.

Sincerely,  
One of your Gentile friends

Admittedly, only God can provide the comfort we need in the face of our suffering. Yet one of the ways He does this is by giving evidence that He is present and can help us when we have lost our way. This is the truth that Jewish people all over the world continue to celebrate on their annual holiday of Purim.

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## **ISRAEL'S HOLIDAY OF PURIM CELEBRATES AN UNSEEN PROTECTOR**

**T**he story behind the annual Jewish holiday of Purim shows the ability of an unseen Protector to rise above the failures of His chosen people.

Once a year on Israel's national holiday of Purim, the Old Testament story of a woman named Hadassah (*Esther* in English) is read and celebrated in synagogues. With noisemakers, costumes, and practical jokes, her national family still remembers how an unseen God showed that even during the darkest times and in spite of His people's moral and spiritual failures, He was committed

to their national survival.

The Old Testament book of Esther is the story of a beautiful Jewish woman's humiliation and courage. The drama can be told as a four-act play. *The plot?* An unseen Protector uses a morally and religiously compromised Jewish orphan to block a plot of racial genocide. *The place?* The capital of the Persian empire. *The time?* In the 5th century BC during Israel's national exile.

## **ACT I** **A Proud King Deposes His Wife.**

For 6 months, the king of Persia had been showing off his wealth to officials from all corners of the realm. For the finale of his palace open house, Ahasuerus hosted an extravagant 7-day banquet.

On the seventh and last day of the royal party, drinks were flowing freely, and the

intoxicated king called for Queen Vashti to parade her beauty before his drunken guests.

To the king's embarrassment, Vashti said no. Her response shook the palace. The king's advisors said if such insubordination were tolerated, women all over the empire would follow her example and look with contempt on their own husbands. The queen had to go.

So Ahasuerus issued an edict that served notice to women everywhere. Vashti was to be dethroned and banned from the king's presence. Men were to be the masters of their own homes. The king's command became a law of the Medes and the Persians.

## **ACT II** **A National Search For A New Queen.**

When the king's anger cooled, he remembered Vashti and

what he had lost. His advisors consoled him by coming up with a plan to find someone more worthy of the crown. They sent messengers to the 127 provinces of Persia to bring the most beautiful young women of the land to the king's palace.

One of those selected to participate in the national search for a queen was a young Jewish woman named Hadassah. Since the death of her parents, she had been living under the care of her older cousin and guardian, Mordecai. At his insistence, Hadassah went by the Persian name of Esther so she wouldn't call attention to her Jewishness.

Esther's beauty destined her for the national spotlight. The eyes of the empire turned to her when she emerged from obscurity to wear the crown of the Queen of Persia.

## **ACT III**

### **Mordecai Remains**

**Nearby.** One day, while sitting at the palace gate, Mordecai overheard two guards conspiring to kill the king. He got word to Esther, who told her husband. The two conspirators were then arrested and hanged. As a result of his information, Mordecai was given a line of honorable mention in the national record of Persia.

Mordecai's honor, however, was soon forgotten. Before long, he got in trouble for refusing to bow to Haman, the king's prime minister. When Haman learned that Mordecai was a Jewish man who bowed only to his God, he convinced the king that the Jewish people were a national security risk. He explained that they had their own laws and resisted assimilation. He urged the king to solve the Jewish problem by signing a law calling for their elimination.

The king went along with the plan, not knowing his wife was a Jewess.

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When Esther discovered the plot, she found herself in a difficult spot. To side with her people against the law of extermination would mean revealing her Jewishness. In all likelihood, such disclosure would result not only in the loss of the crown but in the loss of her life as well. Mordecai, however, gently urged, “If you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from

another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (4:14).

Esther sensed her destiny and the risk that was before her. She agreed to use her influence to come to the aid of her people, and said, “If I perish, I perish!” (v.16).

**ACT IV**  
**Heaven Helps The Queen.** The king had a sleepless night and asked that the national record be brought to him. As an attendant read the routine details of the kingdom, he came to a line about a man named Mordecai who had reported a conspiracy to kill the king. Ahasuerus realized that he had done nothing to honor the man who saved his life.

When the morning dawned, intrigue turned to irony. The king asked his

second-in-command to honor Mordecai. Haman had to sing the praises of the man he despised! Soon afterward, Esther cleverly exposed Haman as the man who had conspired to kill her and her family. Ironically, Haman was hung on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. Instead of a Jewish ethnic cleansing, the exiles found the strength they needed to overcome those who had been intent on killing them.

**Esther: A Story For Today.** God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther. Yet in the unfolding drama of the Bible, this chapter of history shows that God doesn't have to be mentioned to be present.

The story of Esther is a timeless tribute to the God who doesn't have to be announced or understood to be present. He is the God of the sleepless night and the

surprise ending. He is the God who works for us in the darkness, confusion, and fears of our lives. He is also the God who can, for His own purposes, work through people who, in spiritual and political exile, have sunk to the moral depths of a pagan king's whims and lustful desires.

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Yet, as Purim points to an unseen Protector, Israel's national, annual cycle of holidays tells the bigger story of a Messiah who has already begun a visible process of rescue.

# ISRAEL'S HOLIDAYS POINT TO A MESSIAH WHO HAS ALREADY COME—AND WILL RETURN

Even though the religion of Judaism rejects Jesus as Messiah, almost all of the thousands who made up His first followers were Jewish. In addition, the Jewish apostles and authors of the New Testament made a point of showing how Jesus fulfilled the principles and spirit of Israel's Scriptures, temple, sacrifices, and holidays to show that He was their Messiah. For example, one of the most obvious and striking things Jesus did was to link the events of His death, burial, resurrection, and giving of His Spirit to the first four harvest festivals of Israel.

**A Cycle Of Annual Holy Days.** According to the instructions of Moses found in Leviticus 23, Israel was to celebrate an annual cycle of special days that were of great national and spiritual significance (v.2).

Ever since, these “feasts of the LORD” have provided the basis for a national calendar of holy days and holidays of the Jewish people. Altogether, these holidays are rooted in a series of spring and fall harvest festivals that are linked to the national history of Israel, and also to the saving life and work of Israel's Messiah.

**Jesus And The Spring Festivals.** The first three of these holy gatherings were linked to three successive days in the first month of Israel's religious calendar. In the Hebrew month of Nisan, which corresponds to our March-April, the Jewish

people remember their Passover escape from Egypt.

That first month, together with the first three “feasts of the LORD,” became the staging dates for Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. On Passover, He fulfilled the imagery of Israel’s Passover Lamb (Lev. 23:5; Jn. 19:14).

As the Feast of Unleavened Bread began on the day immediately after Passover (Lev. 23:6), Jesus was in the grave. The combination of His burial with the beginning of 7 days of Unleavened Bread looked back to Israel’s Passover escape from Egypt and forward to the new life He was making possible for those who would trust Him (1 Cor. 5:7-8).

On the next day, the day after the Sabbath (Lev. 23:10-11), Moses instructed Israel to celebrate a Festival of Firstfruits. In Israel’s

spring harvest cycle, these firstfruits would signal the beginning of the barley harvest. But in the week of Jesus’ death and resurrection, He gave new meaning to the Feast of Firstfruits. The apostle Paul would later write, “Now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). In other words, Jesus became the firstfruits of a future “harvest” resurrection of His people by linking His resurrection to the third holy day called by Moses many centuries earlier.

The fourth and last of the spring festivals is separated from the first three by exactly 50 days (Lev. 23:15-16). Fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits, Israel was to celebrate the beginning of the spring wheat harvest.

Because it follows exactly 7 weeks later, this fourth

holy day is often called the Festival of Weeks. In Hebrew, it's called *Shavuot*. In Greek, it's *Pentecost*.

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Along the way, Jewish rabbis explained that it was on this day that God gave the Mosaic law to His people from Sinai.

The New Testament significance is that it was on this day that Jesus kept His promise to send His Spirit (Jn. 14:16; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4). According to the book of

Acts, it was on the Feast of Pentecost that the Spirit of God united the "firstfruits" of 3,000 Jewish believers into what would become the international body of Messiah, now known as the church (2:41).

Later, the apostle Paul would explain that the life Jesus offers to those who trust Him is not found by keeping the law, but rather by trusting in the enabling inner presence of His Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6). His explanation may show why Jesus picked the fourth "feast of the LORD" to send His Spirit—on the very day that Israel celebrates the giving of their law.

Over the centuries, observant Jewish people have seen in these four holidays a rich picture of God's provision. And ever since the first century, Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus have seen in them not only God's provision of

a physical harvest, but in Jesus the greater spiritual harvest of all who would receive His forgiveness and everlasting life.

**Jesus And The Three Fall Feasts.** After the fourth spring festival, several months pass before another series of feasts. These intervening months correspond to the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth months of the summer growing season. Not until the seventh month of the religious calendar does Israel celebrate, again in quick succession, the fifth, sixth, and seventh feast, collectively known as the fall feasts.

Because rabbis of Israel have long seen the last three festivals as connected with the future reign of Messiah, the imagery is provocative not only for the nation of Israel but also for followers of Jesus.

If Jesus personally gave

new meaning and fulfillment to the first four feasts of Israel's calendar, then the remaining three give us another reason to understand why Israel can't be ignored. The last three

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feasts seem to provide rich imagery that anticipates the events that will precede Jesus' promised return (Jn. 14:1-3; Mt. 24:29-31,42-44).

The first day of the seventh month is known

as the Feast of Trumpets, or *Rosh Hashanah*. It's full of symbolism designed to be a spiritual wake-up call. The ram's horn (*shofar*) is blown, followed by 10 days of repentance and reflection.

On the tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) is observed. In Israel it is the highest holy day of the year, and the whole nation comes to a standstill. It's the only festival that is not a feast. It's a fast. On this day, Moses instructed the people of God to afflict themselves (in the awareness of sin), while waiting on God for personal and national forgiveness.

Five days later, the last of the seven feasts begins. Known as the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot* in Hebrew), this is Thanksgiving Day in Israel. It signals the most happy holiday season of the year. The harvest is in. The barns

are full. And spiritually sensitive people know that the hard work would not have paid off if God had not given conditions necessary for the harvest.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, Moses instructed the children of Israel to live in "booths" for 7 days to remember their days in the wilderness. For generations to come, this annual national "camp-out" would be a rich opportunity not only to remember what God had done for them in the past, but also to anticipate what He would yet do in the future.

The Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles form a group picture of what is still ahead. According to the prophets, God will blow the shofar, awaken and regather Israel, judge His people, give the nation a spirit of repentance, and then cover them with the blood of

Messiah's atonement (which the temple sacrifices anticipated).

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*At the blowing of the shofar, God will awaken and regather Israel, judge His people, give the nation a spirit of repentance, and then cover them with the blood of Messiah's atonement.*

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Then, and only then, the feasting will begin. Messiah will enter His temple and, according to Zechariah 14:16-19, all nations will come annually to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.

These seven "feasts

of the LORD," however, represent only one way in which Jesus personally fulfills the history, beliefs, and spiritual culture of the "chosen people."

## **ISRAEL'S MESSIAH FULFILLED MORE THAN PREDICTIONS**

One reason that some have a hard time believing that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah is that, at times, some of His followers have overstated the clear predictions that Jesus fulfilled.

Over the years, many have claimed that one of the strongest reasons for believing that Jesus is the true Messiah of Israel is that He fulfilled hundreds of predictions in the Jewish Scriptures. Others, however, have asked where those

“hundreds” of prophecies are. The challenge is important. Often, the prophecies that the New Testament points to seem to be rooted in obscure or mysterious statements, written in the past tense, and referring historically to someone other than a future Messiah.

The gospel writer Matthew, for instance, built some of his case for Jesus on such passages. To convince his Jewish countrymen that there was a relationship between their Scriptures and Jesus of Nazareth, he repeatedly claimed fulfillments where most of us would probably have a hard time seeing clear predictions.

One example occurs when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt. Matthew said this happened “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, ‘Out

of Egypt I called My Son’” (Mt. 2:15). But where was the prediction? Matthew was quoting the ancient prophet Hosea who, in context, seemed to be looking back to the birth of the nation of Israel rather than forward to the birth of Messiah (Hos. 11:1).

**What Was Matthew Seeing?** Throughout his gospel, Matthew made it clear that when he wrote about “fulfillment” he was thinking of more than specific predictions.

For example, in chapter 5, Matthew quoted Jesus as saying: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill” (v.17). Jesus went on to say that His mission was to fulfill every detail of the law and prophecies (v.18).

By saying that He was fulfilling not only the Prophets but also the Law (Torah), Jesus made it clear

that He was claiming to fulfill more than “clear predictions.”

**A Fulfilled Story.** As Matthew reflected on the life and teachings of Jesus, he saw ideas and events that, in his eyes, gave fullness of meaning to patterns and principles that were a part of the written history of God’s chosen people. As a Jewish follower of Jesus, Matthew saw, as many rabbis would agree, that the Jewish Scriptures as a whole are far more “messianic” (in that they anticipate God’s promised King and salvation) than the casual reader might see.

As followers of Jesus now can affirm, Israel and her long-awaited Messiah were both chosen servants. Both would bring blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:1-3). But there was to be an important difference. The people of Israel would live and die as an example of

what happens to those who either trust or reject their God. Her Messiah would live and die in perfect faithfulness, to become God’s sin-bearing sacrifice, not only for the sins of Israel but for the sins of the whole world (Isa. 53; Jn. 3:16).

**A Fulfilled Sacrificial System.** Looking back, the Gospel writers saw how John the Baptizer had anticipated Jesus’ fulfillment of ritual sacrifice. At the very beginning of Jesus’ public life, John pointed to the rabbi from Nazareth and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). It would be 3 years before those words could be understood. Yet, by the 20/20 vision of hindsight, we can see the pieces of an ancient puzzle falling into place. The detailed Mosaic laws of sacrifice, together with the prophet Isaiah’s mysterious suffering servant

(Isa. 53), would find fulfillment of meaning in the execution of a faultlessly honest miracle worker who insisted that He had to die for the sins of His people.

Only after Jesus' resurrection did it become clear that the entire Jewish system of sacrifice was fulfilled when God's own Son died for our sins (Heb. 10:1-14).

**A Fulfillment Of Clear Predictions.** In addition to fulfilled patterns of history and temple worship, the prophets of Israel also gave us some clear and compelling predictions. They told us when and where the long-anticipated Son of Abraham and David would be born. The prophet Micah foresaw that a mysterious, eternal ruler would come out of Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2; Mt. 2:2-6). Daniel, writing hundreds of years before Christ, predicted the time

of Messiah's coming (9:24-26).

For these reasons and more, many have concluded that no one but God could have orchestrated all of the patterns, principles, and predictions that were fulfilled in Jesus. Together, many layers of fulfilled history, worship, and prediction show why the Gospel writers concluded that:

- As our Creator, He is the beginning of all history.
- As the perfect Israelite, He fulfilled the spirit and letter of the law and history of the "chosen people."
- As our Judge, all history ends in His courtroom.
- As our Savior, He offers mercy to all who trust Him and find fulfillment, not in what we have done for God but in what He has done for us in Christ (Gal. 2:20).

By doing for us what we could not do for ourselves, the Messiah of Israel gave personal fulfillment to the “one-for-all” meaning of “a chosen people.”

## **ISRAEL'S MISSION AND MESSIAH ARE “ONE FOR ALL”**

**I**n summary, there is one overarching reason why the nation of Israel cannot be ignored. In all of the international and spiritual issues we have mentioned up to this point, Israel and her Messiah stand in a *one-for-all* relationship to the world.

Such a claim may seem difficult to believe in light of the relationship between the conflict in the Middle East and the related threat of international terrorism.

The one-for-all principle might also be difficult to understand in light of the

fact that the Bible itself tells the story of Israel's repeated inclination to leave God and to live for themselves at the expense of others.

But the facts remain as the apostle Paul reviewed them in his letter to the Romans (9:1-5). God used the nation of Israel to give us a revelation of Himself that focuses on His interactions with a people “chosen” for all. Through Israel, God gave us the law that sets a standard for orienting ourselves to right relationships. Then through Israel, the God of creation tells the story of the joys of those who trust Him, and the eventual sorrows of those who don't.

Most important, the Bible shows us how God used Israel to give us the ultimate expression of one-for-all. Nowhere do we see the burden of the one-for-all principle more clearly than in the rescuing, suffering,

and sacrificial death of Jesus. Even though the prophets of Israel had anticipated the mysterious death of Messiah (Isa. 53; Dan. 9:26; Zech. 12:10), first-century leaders of Israel were so convinced that Jesus was not the Messiah that they plotted His death without ever imagining that they were fulfilling prophecy in the process.

Alarmed by Jesus' popularity with the crowds, especially after raising His friend Lazarus from the dead, the ruling council of the Jewish people convened, saying: *"What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation."* And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, ". . . It is

*expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." . . . Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death (Jn. 11:47-53).*

When Caiaphas said that it was necessary for one man to die for all, he was saying far more than he realized. Jesus Himself had been telling His disciples that He needed to die—but for reasons other than the national security issues that the high priest was concerned about.

Years later, the apostle Paul explained how the sacrifice of One had paid for the sins of all (Rom. 5:12-21). Contrasting the different outcomes of Adam's sin and Jesus' sacrifice, he wrote:

*For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience*

*many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:19).*

Looking back, the one-for-all death and resurrection of Israel's Messiah in our place brought fulfillment to what God had originally said to Abraham. At the very beginning of God's call to Abraham, He had said:

*Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).*

The issue never was just about Israel. From the beginning, God had chosen this nation to reveal Himself to the world. And in the end, it was a Son of this nation

of whom the apostle Paul would say:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:28-29).*

According to the New Testament, our personal well-being depends on whether we put our faith in Jesus the Messiah.

His ability to reconcile us to His Father, and to one another, is why one people were chosen—for the sake of all—and why, for so many reasons, Israel cannot be ignored.

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