

What Israel Means to God

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We often hear people speak of what God means to Israel, and this is eminently Scriptural. In his closing address to his people, Moses had been constrained of the Spirit of God to say: "The eternal God is thy dwelling place, And underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut 33:27). In the prayer of Moses found in the ninetieth Psalm, we find these words: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place In all generations" (Ps 90:1). So we could multiply Scriptures to show what God means to Israel.

But how many have ever heard what Israel means to God? Yet this is a truth which has ample proof in Scriptures also. Let us note first the inception of the nation. The failure of Adam is known to everyone who has read the Bible and to many who have not. The sin and crime of Cain is also written large on the sacred page. Nor was the generation of Noah one whit better, until God saw He must destroy the whole earth by a great deluge. The flood, however, did not put an end to the failure of the human race, for soon we find men devising plans whereby they might build a city and make a name for themselves. God in His righteous judgment confounded the language of the race and scattered His creatures over the face of the whole earth. From this great mass of human wreckage and sin God called one man, Abraham, and His first promise to him was (and most significant it is too): "I will make of thee a great *nation*." Before God ever promised to bless him or make his name great, He covenanted that out of the man of His sovereign choice, there should issue a nation. But this gracious promise seemed impossible of fulfillment on the human side because of the advanced age of both Sarah and Abraham. So God performed a miracle to bring into existence the miracle nation, Israel. God, then, had purposed to use a nation as the channel of His purposes in the earth. Nothing could be more clear than this from a study of the very structure of the Book of Genesis, the seed plot of the entire Word of God. In eleven chapters God occupies Himself with the story of the creation of the material world, the creation of man, the entrance of sin into the world, the flood, the propagation of the race, the beginning of nations, the multiplication of languages, and the diffusion of the race over the earth. In the remaining thirty-nine chapters of Genesis God is engaged in setting forth the inception, growth, and expansion of but one nation from its progenitor, Abraham. Surely there is divine wisdom here as in all His works, for God reveals that He intends to use the nation for His purposes.

When we thus consider the origin of this miracle nation and then further note its history and God's dealings with it throughout the centuries, we are constrained to say that Israel means a great deal to God. Yea, further, we are emboldened to assert-and we do it with all reverence-that God, since He has condescended to use secondary means and agents, has needed and does need Israel for several specific purposes. What these purposes are we proceed to show.

First of all, God needed Israel-and these are the reasons Israel means much to God-to witness to the unity of God. All the highly concocted views of the destructive critics to the contrary notwithstanding, Israel never had an evolution in its faith from a supposedly original animism, totemism, or polytheism. There never was a time in the history of Israel, even during the periods of her greatest declensions, when she was unaware of the fact that she had been called by the true and the living God, and not by a multiplicity of gods. To us in the twentieth century this may appear but a small or unnecessary task for a nation, but it serves only to show how far we are

removed from the times and conditions of the patriarchs. At the time of Abraham, or even later in the time of the kings of Israel and Judah, witnessing to the unity of God was not analogous to carrying coal to Newcastle. Even today, when the truth of monotheism has long held its place in the minds of men, there is a need of witnessing to the unity of the living God in view of the countless heathen that are worshipping their gods. But even in so-called enlightened countries there is a crying need to stress the one true God, when one is informed that in France today men are worshipping in their chapels Satan, the opposer of God. In America we have something almost as bad in the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism.

But Israel, although many have been their departures from God, have always testified to this calling of theirs. To this day the national motto of Israel is: "Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah." They have kept in mind the words of Isaiah: "Ye are my witnesses, saith Jehovah, and my servant whom I have chosen; that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am Jehovah; and besides me there is no saviour." This passage certainly reveals two facts: Israel is God's witness and the witness is to the Person of God. Ever since the return from Babylon, Israel could not be accused of idolatry or the worship of more than one God. Every orthodox Jew in his daily prayers in the synagogue or at home recites at the conclusion of his praying the thirteen articles of faith drawn up by Maimonides, the great Jewish rabbi and philosopher of the Middle Ages. The second article of faith reads thus: "I believe with a complete faith that the Creator, blessed be His name, is One and there is no unity like him in any manner whatsoever, and He alone is our God who was, who is, and who shall be."

Israel was meant not only to witness to the unity of God, but they were intended by God to show the blessedness of serving God. This thought was in the mind of Moses when he commanded Israel after this fashion: "Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, even as Jehovah my God commanded me, that ye should do so in the midst of the land whither ye go in to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, that shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what great nation is there, that hath a god so nigh unto them, as Jehovah our God is whensoever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that hath statutes and ordinances, so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?" (Deut 4:5–8). Moses closed his public ministry to Israel with these recorded words: "There is none like unto God, O Jeshurun, Who rideth upon the heavens for thy help, And in his excellency on the skies. The eternal God is thy dwelling-place, And underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before thee, And said, Destroy. And Israel dwelleth in safety, The fountain of Jacob alone, In a land of grain and new wine; Yea, his heavens drop down dew. Happy art thou, O Israel: Who is like unto thee a people saved by Jehovah, The shield of thy help, And the sword of thy excellency! And thine enemies shall submit themselves unto thee; And thou shalt tread upon their high places" (Deut 33:26–29). As long as Israel remained in the path of God's will and served Him, they were an example to all the surrounding nations and to us of how God will bless such. When God wanted to show how He could bless those who serve Him, He took the nation Israel to exhibit it on a national scale.

But God needed Israel for more than these purposes already outlined; He purposed to use them in the reception, preservation, and transmission of the Scriptures. The nation had explicit instructions for the preservation of the words of God: "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou

liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.” To this day, these specific injunctions are kept. Parents are diligent in teaching their children the sacred Scriptures that have been handed down to them. They also place these words upon their hands and between their eyes in the use of the phylacteries, the praying paraphernalia of the orthodox Jews which has portions of Scripture encased in leather which are bound around the left hand and around the forehead. And the third command is kept in placing *mezuzoth* (small wooden or metal receptacles with the portion of Scripture from Deut 6:6–9) upon the door-posts of the house. In other ways also Israel has preserved the sacred text, so that today scholars still marvel at the wonderful preservation of the Hebrew text. Paul, you remember, considered this one of the advantages of the nation: “What advantage then hath the Jew? or what is the profit of circumcision? Much every way: first of all, that they were intrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:1, 2).

Throughout the centuries, moreover, Israel has shown to the world the sustaining power of the Scriptures. We do not argue that Israel has always been obedient to the Word, but even during the times of her disobedience, she has manifested how capable the Scriptures are of sustaining. The writer still remembers with much feeling how his father, after he had completed reading a portion of the Scripture for his own comfort and joy, would not close the sacred page before kissing it tenderly. It is just this devotion to the Word that has kept Israel buoyed up through the centuries when persecutions, that would have broken the morale of the mightiest of nations, came upon them like an overwhelming flood. It is as though God had said: “I desire to show to the world how powerful my Word is to sustain even though not always followed, and I choose Israel to convey this message to the world.” Does not Israel mean much to God in this way? The thought we have been dwelling upon is well brought out by a poem from the pen of Chaim Nachman Bialik, one of the greatest of Hebrew poets who died recently. The poem is all the more wonderful when we consider that the poet was not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. (We take the liberty of changing one word in the last line: “Talmud’s” to the word “Bible’s”).

The Source of Strength

“And shouldst thou wish to know the source
From which thy tortured brethren drew
In evil days their strength of soul
To meet their doom: stretch out their necks
To each uplifted knife and axe,
In flames, on stakes to die with joy,
And with a whisper, ‘God is one’
To close their lips?
Then enter thou the House of God,
The House of Study, old and gray,
Throughout the sultry summer days,
Throughout the gloomy winter nights,
At morning, midday, or at eve;
Perchance there is a remnant yet,
Perchance thy eye may still behold
In some dark corner, hid from view,
A cast-off shadow of the past,
The profile of some pallid face,

Upon an ancient folio bent,
Who seeks to drown unspoken woes,
In the (Bible's) boundless waves."

Many a time has it been the privilege of the writer to see this very thing in the synagogue. Multitudes upon multitudes in Israel have said and could say with the psalmist: "This is my comfort in my affliction; For thy word hath quickened me." Again, "Unless thy law had been my delight, I should then have perished in mine affliction" (Ps 119:50, 92).

In addition to what has been indicated above, God needed Israel as a channel for the Messiah, for He so purposed to bring the Saviour into the world. When God promised the woman in the garden of Eden that of her seed would come the great Deliverer, the promise was most general, for He could have come from any group or nation of the human race. But with the call of Abraham, God made it very clear that in Abraham's seed would all the nations of the earth be blessed. Paul explains this in the third chapter of Galatians as referring to the Messiah. With the passage of time the promises with regard to Him became more and more circumscribed and more and more detailed. Note the narrowing down of the predictions: first it was the seed of the woman, then Abraham's seed, then Isaac's seed, then Jacob's seed, then the tribe of Judah, and finally the house and lineage of David. If one has intelligently read the Old Testament, by the time that he reaches Matthew 1:1 where he reads: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham," he visualizes in his mind the appearance of One who is of the human race, of the royal line of David, One to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, and of a virgin of some branch of David's house other than that of the rejected and despised Coniah (Jer 22:24-30). Such was Christ: He alone of all who have walked the earth fulfilled all the blueprint specifications for the Messiah explicitly laid down in the Old Testament Scriptures. And He was of the nation Israel. Truly, Israel must mean much to God when He found that He could use them as the channel for the incarnation of His own ever-blessed and well-beloved and only-begotten Son. When Paul is enumerating the blessings of Israel, the account of it reads after this manner: "Israelites; whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom is Christ as concerning the flesh, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen" (Rom 9:4, 5). He, the Christ of God, is the climax and the capstone of all Israel's distinctions and blessings.

But God has had and does have further purposes in Israel. He chose them to show all men His graciousness and longsuffering in dealing with sinful man. When God purposed to show the exceeding riches of His goodness to sinful man, He decided to do it on a national scale with Israel as the nation of His choice. The writer has heard, and no doubt the reader has also, many preachers who hold lengthy discourses on the disobedience and perverseness of Israel as God dealt with them throughout their early history and their later development. It seems never to have struck these preachers that God, desiring to show His longsuffering even with us of His children today, gave us a diagram of His ways and methods in His transactions with Israel. If I want to see how patient God is with me in my own life, which is marred from time to time with sin and disobedience, I have only to study the pages of God's Word to note how longsuffering He was with Israel. This is more wise, to be sure, and more along the purposes of God's plans (Rom 15:4) than to scan the pages of Israel's history to see how disobedient they were, in order to heap condemnation upon them. Let us note some instances in which the character of God's dealings with Israel was manifest. When sinful man became estranged from the presence of the holy God through his own sin and disobedience, God provided in the Levitical offerings and ministrations an effective, though not a permanently adequate, way of approach to Himself. The longsuffering

of God is all the more apparent when we remember that the blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin. It was because in the mind of God, the Lamb was slain from the foundation of the world, that He graciously accepted the Levitical offerings which He had commanded in His goodness. Surely this was grace upon grace! How patient God can be with punishment-deserving sinners is further seen in the account of the wilderness wanderings. Sometimes it wears out our patience to read of these oft-repeated disobediences, but they never proved God to be anything but of long patience and infinitely kind. Just call these events to mind: the murmuring at Marah over the bitter water; the murmuring in the wilderness of Sin for some food like the flesh-pots of Egypt; the striving at Rephidim for water; the worship of the golden calf at Sinai; the murmuring at Taberah; the stubbornness at Kibroth-hattaavah; the contention of Miriam and Aaron with Moses over his Cushite wife; the unbelieving report of ten of the spies who went into Canaan; the consequent rebellion of the people at Kadesh-barnea; their wilfulness and defeat at Hormah; the rebellion of Korah; the murmuring of the people because of the death of Korah and his allies; the striving at the waters of Meribah; their complaint over the wilderness life while compassing the land of Edom in their journeying from mount Hor; and the sin at Peor. But as though these were not sufficient, the tale of sin in the time of the Judges completes the dismal picture of the early history of Israel from their exodus from Egypt to their conquest and settlement of the land. The entire Book of Judges is one long contrast between what God commanded Israel under Moses and Joshua not to do, and what they did in spite of the warnings. It records step after step their prolonged degradation. The course of the history of the period is well summed up in these words: "And the children of Israel did that which was evil in the sight of Jehovah, and served the Baalim; and they forsook Jehovah, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods, of the gods of the peoples that were round about them, and bowed themselves down unto them: and they provoked Jehovah to anger. And they forsook Jehovah, and served Baal and the Ashtaroth. And the anger of Jehovah was kindled against Israel, and he delivered them into the hands of spoilers that despoiled them; and he sold them into the hands of their enemies round about, so that they could not any longer stand before their enemies. Whithersoever they went out, the hand of Jehovah was against them for evil, as Jehovah had spoken, and as Jehovah had sworn unto them: and they were sore distressed. And Jehovah raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those that despoiled them. And yet they hearkened not unto their judges; for they played the harlot after other gods, and bowed themselves down unto them: they turned aside quickly out of the way wherein their fathers walked, obeying the commandments of Jehovah; but they did not so. And when Jehovah raised them up judges, then Jehovah was with the judge, and saved them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge: for it repented Jehovah because of their groaning by reason of them that oppressed them and vexed them. But it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they turned back, and dealt *more corruptly* than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their doings, nor from their stubborn ways" (Judg 2:11–19). What an epitome and commentary this is of the period of the judges in Israel! Later history, as it is recorded, shows Israel departing time and time again from the Lord and yet His patient faithfulness never failed. Malachi revealed the secret of it all: "For I, Jehovah, change not; therefore ye, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal 3:6). And what shall we say of their subsequent refusal to accept their King Messiah? But are all these things revealed to show Israel more sinful than any other nation God has formed? A thousand times no! God was showing throughout how merciful and tender He can be to judgment-deserving sinners. Truly, Israel meant much to God in making this universal exhibit of His own longsuffering.

Yet there are still other ways in which Israel has meant and does mean much to God. When God in His sovereign counsel determined to reveal to the world the futility of works as a means of acceptance with Him, He chose Israel for the purpose. With reference to the history of Israel before they had come to Mt. Sinai, God had said: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exod 19:4). Yet at the very first suggestion of the law, Israel as one man declared: “All that Jehovah hath spoken we will do” (Exod 19:8). After all the commandments had been outlined, Israel said again: “All the words which Jehovah hath spoken we will do” (Exod 24:3). What consummate confidence in and reliance upon the flesh this was! So from that time on, Israel has committed itself to the task of becoming justified before God by the deeds of the law. How they have succeeded, or rather failed, is revealed in Rom 9:30–10:4; “What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who followed not after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith: but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works.... For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believeth.” When the eternal and omniscient God wanted to prove experimentally and without a doubt before the world that by the works of the law no flesh would be justified in His sight, in His great permissive will He allowed Israel to be the instrument of this demonstration. Surely no one after this should be in doubt as to whether works will really “work” or not. They do not accomplish the desired end in salvation. Yet what a pitiful picture we see in many evangelical Protestant churches today: men and women who have had God’s truth that all is by faith, nevertheless feel called upon to aid God in His plan of salvation for them by adding a smattering of works. It is as though God were saying to them: “Do you not see that such a procedure will avail you nothing? Have I not demonstrated it on a national scale with My own people Israel and proven it be a failure? Can you perform more works than they have outlined for themselves in the keeping of the law?” What a lesson this is to teach a sinful world that loves to hide the sin nature behind a smoke screen of so-called “good works” and how necessary God found Israel for this purpose!

But God has used Israel, furthermore, to manifest His faithfulness to His promises. Many delight to think of the promise in Rom 11:29: “For the gifts and the calling of God are not repented of.” But they forget that this refers primarily to Israel, for the apostle declares in the preceding verse: “As touching the gospel, they are enemies for your sake: but as touching the election they are beloved for the fathers’ sake.” In fact, the main design of the three chapters on Israel in the Epistle to the Romans—chapters 9, 10, and 11—is to show that, in spite of the fact that God has placed both Jew and Gentile in the same need of salvation and has placed salvation on a basis where it is free to both, yet God has abrogated none of His precious promises to Israel. If one is in doubt as to the reality of these promises, he needs only to begin with Genesis and will find them all along the way through the Old Testament, particularly in the prophecies of the prophetic books. It seems, from our limited human standpoint, that God has ample ground for annulling every promise He has made to Israel because of their disobedience, but God is faithful to all His unconditional promises. With what confidence, then, is the child of God today to look to his heavenly Father in all that He has promised to His believing children. If God has kept and is keeping faith with Israel in all that has been promised them, then there need be no fear that God will fail to bring to blessed fruition all that He has ever spoken of regarding anyone. Israel,

as it were, serves as a test case in the matter: since God has manifested His faithfulness with them, then He can be trusted by all.

All these features that have been discussed thus far have been more or less with regard to the past of Israel's history. But the Word reveals that Israel will mean much to God in the future, when He uses them as world-wide missionaries. The reader has surely heard, as has the writer, that the world must be entirely evangelized in this age and the task belongs to the Church. This view is prevalent even among many who do not hold that the whole world must be saved before Christ can return to the earth. Much of the error, if not the root of it, lies in a misinterpretation of Matt 24:14: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come." This has consistently been applied to the Church by numbers of people. Such a wrong meaning of the verse can arise from but one thing: a failure to consider the context. The context reveals unmistakably that Israel is being spoken of. The time is the time of Jacob's trouble or the Great Tribulation. It is then that Israel will be God's Paul, multiplied thousands of times, to tell the story of the gospel of the kingdom to all the nations. Who these heralds are, is revealed to us in Revelation 7. They are 144,000 out of all the tribes of Israel. The result of their testimony is also set forth: the great unnumbered multitude from every kindred, tribe, tongue, and nation. When God wants world-wide missionaries, He will again take up Israel. They will be a host of Jonahs back on their right jobs. Note it as a Scriptural truth: whenever God wants things done on a national scale or desires a national testimony, He *always* chooses Israel. Then, think you not that Israel means much to Him?

In the future God will yet employ Israel, His glory, to spread abroad the glory and knowledge of Himself in the millennium. It is true that those who enter into the earthly kingdom of our Lord and Saviour will know Him, but a millennium is a long time. Scripture discloses that there will be birth and death then, so that there will arise generations of men who will need to be taught the knowledge of God. Israel has already been chosen for this important task. Of the many Scriptures possible and available we note two. Isaiah 2:2, 3 reads: "And it shall come to pass in the latter days, that the mountain of Jehovah's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of Jehovah, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of Jehovah from Jerusalem." Zechariah 8:20-23 has this to say: "Thus saith Jehovah of hosts: It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come peoples, and the inhabitants of many cities; and the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to entreat the favor of Jehovah, and to seek Jehovah of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek Jehovah of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the favor of Jehovah. Thus saith Jehovah of hosts: In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold, out of all the languages of the nations, they shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you." These Scripture passages tell a story that needs no comment.

To summarize, then, it has been shown that Israel means much to God, for He has purposed to use them to witness to the unity of His Person; to show the blessedness of serving Him; to receive, preserve, and transmit the Scriptures; to show the sustaining power of the Scriptures throughout the centuries; to be the channel of the Messiah's incarnation; to show His longsuffering in dealing with sinful man; to reveal to the world the futility of seeking to gain acceptance with Him by works of the flesh; to manifest His faithfulness to His promises; to use

them as world-wide missionaries; and to spread abroad the glory and knowledge of Himself in the millennium. If God can so use them, do you not think they ought to mean a great deal to Him? The word to you and to me is clear: “ye that are Jehovah’s remembrancers, take ye no rest, and give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth” (Isa 62:6, 7).

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After Jacob's wrestle with the angel, when he demanded a blessing from the Lord, the angel pronounced a blessing upon him, and a new name to go with it: Isra-El, which can mean "He who prevails with God," or "May God prevail," depending on the context. Likewise with Abram ("Exalted father"), when he was blessed by the Lord in Genesis 17, he was given the name Abraham ("Father of a multitude"), in keeping with the promise of the Lord: 5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I Israel, as God's elect nation, was not ever composed entirely of regenerate people. Israelites do not get to go to heaven simply because they are members of God's chosen people. Though God selected Israel as His chosen people, not all end up as regenerate people who will spend eternity with God. Just as Israel, as God's elect nation, was elected to serve God in a specific task, but this does not mean that every individual Israelite was regenerate, so also, election elsewhere in Scripture has nothing to do with whether or not someone has eternal life, but has everything to do with what role God wants them to serve in His plans and.