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AN UNDERSTANDING OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This paper focuses primarily on evangelical Christianity in America. References to evangelical Christians or evangelicals assume an American context unless otherwise noted. References to Israel indicate the Jewish people individually, the Land of Promise, and the nation.¹ The context indicates whether one, two, or all three definitions apply. In point of fact, all three make up the larger definition of the word *Israel*, and reference to one or more of the subsets is common throughout the Bible.

Over the past few years, several surveys of evangelical support for Israel have been conducted, including Pew Research in 2013 and Lifeway Research in 2013 and 2017. Each of these surveys revealed consistently similar attitudes regarding evangelical support. Due to the similarity, this paper utilizes the 2017 Lifeway Research survey results unless specifically stated otherwise.²

1. Israel Inside, dir. Wayne Kopping, perf. Tal Ben Shachar, Jerusalem Online U, digital download, 2012, makes the point that the word *Israel* speaks of the Jewish people, the land of covenant promise, the national State of Israel, and all that makes the Jews a unique people in a diverse world.

2. Lifeway Research (2017), Evangelical Attitudes Toward Israel: A Representative Survey of 2,002 Americans With Evangelical Beliefs, Lifeway Research, <http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evangelical-Views-on-Israel.pdf>, (accessed 3/19/2021). The respondents were slightly more female (54%) than male (46%) and comprised many denominations with Baptists (32%) the largest, followed by Non-Denominational (19%). Two-thirds attends church once a week or more. There was a fair representation between age cohorts, although the 18-34 (20%) were the smallest and the 50-64 (33%) was largest. Spread across four U. S. regions, the South (54%) had the greatest participation, followed by Midwest (20%), West (16%) and East (10%).

EVANGELICAL SUPPORT FOR THE MODERN STATE OF ISRAEL

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EVANGELICAL SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

We minister with one of the older U. S. Christian-based ministries to the Jewish people, The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc. It was founded by a group of evangelical Christians in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, out of a concern for Jewish refugees who were under the severe persecution of the Nazi Holocaust. As World War II drew to a close, the ministry's focus expanded; and it grew into a worldwide Christian organization, proclaiming biblical truth about Israel and the Messiah, while bringing physical and spiritual comfort to the Jewish people.

In our work with the Jewish community, Jewish people often ask us, "How long have there been Christians who support Israel?" Over the years, we have come to appreciate why they ask. History teaches that Christians, more than any other people group, have persecuted and tortured the Jews for the past two millennia. Almost any Jewish person will tell you the Holocaust was a Christian event.

But the issue goes much deeper than the atrocities of World War II. Christianity has been at the forefront of Jewish persecution for much of the Church Age. The rise and prominence of Replacement Theology in the second and third centuries turned the church's love and appreciation for the Jewish people into hatred and rejection.³

Over time, the legal sanction and eventual prominence of Christianity, combined with the church's disdain for the Jewish people and its view that it had superseded Israel, coalesced into anti-Semitism and led to violence against the Jews in the name of Christ. This legacy of Christian anti-Semitism has taught Jewish people to be extremely cautious, if not fearful, of Christians.

It is no wonder they are often surprised to learn The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry began in 1938, ten years before the modern State of Israel came into existence; and yet, from its inception, the words *The Friends of Israel* have been a part of our ministry name. This is why

3. Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church*, Rome, Italy: Evangelical Biblical Institute of Italy, 2000, p. 69-71.

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Jewish people also ask us, “You mean before there was a modern State of Israel, there were friends of Israel?”

In spite of the prominent view held by many Christians that the church has taken Israel’s place in God’s promises, evangelical Christians have long felt an affinity for Israel. This affinity is not a recent phenomenon, nor did it begin in 1938. The apostles and early church fathers looked favorably on Israel, as seen in the New Testament. This outlook is also evident in more modern church history, dating to the Reformation.

A turning point in church history came during the Reformation with the invention of the printing press, which published translations of the Bible in the common man’s language at an affordable cost, putting the Word of God into the hands of the masses. No longer did they have to rely on what the church leaders taught them about God and the Bible. In fact, they learned to read and write using the Bible as a textbook.

For the first time, ordinary people could read and study the Scriptures. The open study of God’s Word in the 16th and 17th centuries led many European Christians to reject the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and define their faith based on a literal reading of the biblical text. Through their study, many came to see a future for the Jewish people, clearly defined and taught within the Word of God.

Former Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren’s insightful, historical work, *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present*, masterfully shows that the connection between America and the Middle East is part of our historical, religious, and cultural fabric, dating back to the founding of our great nation. Many early settlers seeking religious freedom in the New World saw parallels between the Israelites fleeing the bondage of Egypt and their flight from the bondage of Europe. The Atlantic Ocean voyage was their wilderness wandering, and America was their promised land.⁴

The Great Awakenings that swept across the country in the 18th and 19th centuries sparked the evangelical church in America.

4. Oren, Michael B., *Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 83–85.

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The word *evangelical* identifies the church as an entity that shares or takes the Good News of the gospel to a lost and dying world, and it emphasizes the duty of believers to share this great message of hope in Christ with anyone who will listen.

The Second Awakening in America, which began at the beginning of the 19th century, raised up missionaries with a vision to take the gospel to the world, particularly to the Middle East. There was a growing heart and burden for both Arabs and Jews to come to faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Many thought this missionary movement would lead to the restoration of a Jewish nation that would be ready for the Second Coming of Christ. This concept came to be known as Restorationism, and it was profoundly influential in churches.

However, life in the 19th-century Middle East was difficult and took its toll on many missionaries who ventured there. Disease and death overcame some, while disillusion and discouragement chased others back home. The culture, the land, and the people were so much different from the world the Americans knew.⁵ Despite the failures of many of these missionaries, the concept of Restorationism—of a restored Jewish nation according to Scripture—remained in the consciousness of many believers in America.

Restorationism is, perhaps, the reason Charles Nelson Darby's Dispensational⁶ teaching was so well received and embraced when he came to America in the mid-19th century. Although many factors brought about Israel's rebirth, Dispensationalism played an important role in the process. Darby's dispensational teaching made a significant impact on the church in America and won a number of converts. Dispensationalists became advocates for Zionism—the Jewish people's return to the Land of Promise to become a sovereign nation again—just as God had promised through the prophets.

Is it any wonder the Zionist movement of the 19th century began first in the evangelical church before it took hold in the Jewish community?⁷

5. Oren, Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present, 86–97.

6. Dispensationalism is a theological system that employs a literal, historical, and grammatical hermeneutic to interpret Scripture. Dispensationalism rejects the spiritualizing or allegorizing of Scripture, particularly biblical prophecy unless it is supported by the context of a passage. Dispensationalism holds to a future, literal, 1,000-year restored Millennial Kingdom of God on Earth following the return of Christ and thus is premillennial. Charles Nelson Darby was a famous Plymouth Brethren orator and theologian from England; and though not the father of Dispensationalism, he was extremely influential in teaching it in churches and schools in Europe and North America in the 1860s and 1870s.

7. Thomas D. Ice, "Christian Zionism," Article Archives. Paper 30. (2009): 4, http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/pretrib_arch/30 (Accessed Nov 10, 2015).

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Perhaps the most famous Christian Zionist, although not the first, was William E. Blackstone, born in 1841. He was a very successful Chicago businessman turned evangelist. Blackstone, an evangelical Christian from age 11, committed his life to preaching and writing about the premillennial restoration of Israel and the Rapture of the church. He authored *Jesus Is Coming*, a popular dispensational book that deals with the return of Christ.

In 1888 he visited the Holy Land with his daughter at a time when Jewish people in Russia were suffering greatly under the pogroms.⁸ His visit left him convinced that the only possible answer to ending the severe persecution of the Jewish people was their return to the Promised Land where they could defend themselves.⁹

Upon his return to the United States, Blackstone organized and held the pro-Zionist Conference on the Past, Present and Future of Israel at the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Chicago in November 1890. This was seven years before Theodor Herzl would hold the first World Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland. Blackstone's conference, attended by both Jewish and evangelical Christian leaders, called for the world powers to return the land of Israel to the Jewish people.¹⁰

In 1891, Blackstone began a petition supporting the call to return the Holy Land to the Jews. It came to be called the Blackstone Memorial. Four hundred thirty-one prominent American-Christian and Jewish leaders signed the petition, including John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, Cyrus McCormick, senators, congressmen, the chief justice of the United States, leaders of all major denominations, university and seminary presidents, and editors of major newspapers—including *The Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and many others. Calling on America to support the Jewish restoration to Israel, Blackstone presented the Memorial petition to U. S. President Benjamin Harrison in March 1891.¹¹

8. Pogrom is a Slavic term used to describe the 19th- and 20th-century violent riots aimed at the massacre or expulsion of Jewish people in Russia. The pogroms led to the deaths of thousands and made many more thousands homeless. The term has come to be used universally of riots that primarily target Jewish people, but it also can include other ethnic groups. "Pogrom," Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pogrom> (accessed March 10, 2021).

9. David B. Green, "This Day in Jewish History an American Cleric Presents His Own 'Balfour Declaration,'" Haaretz, March 5, 2014, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/this-day-in-jewish-history/> (accessed September 14, 2015).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

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In 1916, at the behest of Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, Blackstone updated his Memorial petition, which carried the endorsement of the Presbyterian Church, and presented it to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. The petition was influential in gaining the president's support for Zionism and, in time, America's support for the Balfour Declaration in 1917.¹²

The popularity of prophecy conferences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries fueled the Zionist support of evangelical Christians, as they learned of the significant role Israel plays in God's future plans to complete His redemptive program. Jewish mission organizations, such as the Cleveland Hebrew Mission, American Board of Missions to the Jews, American Messianic Fellowship, and The Friends of Israel Relief Society (later renamed The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry) began to minister to the Jewish people. Many were instrumental in helping the disenfranchised children of Jacob flee the clutches of Adolf Hitler.

Following World War II, evangelical Christians threw their support behind the formation of the modern State of Israel. President Harry Truman, a Southern Baptist who knew the Bible, spoke favorably of the Jewish nation being reborn and was quick to recognize Israel shortly after David Ben-Gurion declared its independence on May 14, 1948.

Sensing he was president of the United States for such a time as this and knowing his State Department opposed the formation of a Jewish nation, Truman moved quickly when news of Israel's proclamation arrived at the White House on the evening of May 14. Truman immediately composed a statement and released it to the public before the U.S. State Department could intervene.¹³ America officially recognized Israel 11 minutes after Israel declared independence.

Everything was done so quickly that Truman's handwritten edits became part of the released statement. U.S. recognition of the newly formed Jewish state was vitally important to

12. Ibid.

13. President Truman had very little support from his cabinet on the U.S. recognition of Israel. In the days following the passage of UN Resolution 181 in November 1947, which called for the partition of Palestine into one Jewish and one Arab state, Truman's advisors opposed any formal recognition of Israel when it declared independence. They believed Israel would be steamrolled by the much larger and better equipped Arab armies that surrounded Israel. Fearing her elimination hours after declaring independence, they reasoned the United States would have blood on its hands if it validated the new state by formal recognition.

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Israel's legitimacy, as other key nations soon followed Truman's lead and issued their recognitions as well.

Evangelical Christian support for Israel continues to this day and is expressed by many who feel a responsibility to act on Israel's behalf. David Brog, former chief of staff for then Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, once said that when important issues related to Israel arose, the senator's office would receive ten phone calls from Christians in support of Israel for every call from a Jewish constituent. David Brog went on to direct Christians United for Israel (CUFI), the largest pro-Israel group in the United States educating and directing Christians to speak in support of Israel. Founded by John Hagee in 2006, it has grown to 10 million members.¹⁴

Why is it that evangelical Christians, more than any other group both within and outside the church, are highly supportive of Israel? The answer is part theological, part political, and part experiential. To say it another way, the evangelical foundation of support for Israel is varied.

14. <https://cufi.org/about/mission/>.

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FOUNDATIONS OF EVANGELICAL SUPPORT FOR ISRAEL

A HEARTFELT AFFINITY FOR ISRAEL

Experientially, evangelical affection for the Jewish people emanates from an appreciation for what the Jewish people have done to bless Christians and all the families of the world (Gen. 12:3b). Not only did God raise up Israel to record His written Word and preserve it with extreme accuracy, but He also used the Jewish people to bear the promised Redeemer of the world. It is that special encounter with a Jewish Savior that makes every believer eternally indebted to the Jewish people. Without Israel, there would be no Bible and no Savior.

Bible-believing evangelicals will always have a difficult time escaping the Jewishness of Scripture. A natural affinity for Israel and the Jewish people occurs by the simple osmosis of the text. Time and time again, passages in the Old and New Testaments remind readers that God chose Israel from among the nations (Dt. 7:6; Rom. 9:4-5), loves Israel (Dt. 10:15; Zech. 2:8; Rom. 11:28), protects Israel (Ps. 121:4), and has a divine plan for Israel (Gen. 12:1-3; Rom. 11:12, 15).

Heartfelt fondness for Israel arises from a spirit of gratitude and indebtedness that God would raise up the Jewish people to inculcate the world with the message of God's plan of redemption through His Son, Jesus Christ—the Jewish Messiah. In addition, God's faithfulness is manifested by the very fact that the Jewish people still exist despite centuries of severe persecution and that Israel as a nation has been reborn, as the prophets promised.

Furthermore, God used Jewish people to pen the Bible. In a span of 1,600 years, God used 40 divinely inspired Jewish men from all walks of life to produce the canon of Scripture. From Moses in the Torah to John in Revelation, a common thread seamlessly connects the two Testaments. Israel's Messiah and the Messianic Kingdom promised in the Old Testament become tangible in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ. God wove everything together with the common thread of His covenant with Abraham and Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob.

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Heartfelt evangelical affinity for Israel also emanates from the fact that Jesus was Jewish. This simple fact is often neglected. The genealogies in Matthew and Luke both trace Jesus' lineage through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Joseph, qualifying Him as the Messianic heir. As Luke wrote, when the census was taken, Joseph went to Bethlehem because "he was of the house and lineage of David" (Lk. 2:4). In addition, Jesus was circumcised eight days after He was born (v. 21) to fulfill the rite that was the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17), signifying that Jesus was religiously considered a Jew. Under the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant, He was part of the community of Israel.

Jesus did not revolt against Judaism. He embraced His Jewish heritage, an acceptance that can be seen in the way He celebrated Jewish festivals, taught in synagogues, honored Jewish rituals, and valued the Law of God. He embraced His Jewishness, but He was extremely critical of the way Judaism was practiced in His society, especially by the religious leaders.

The people to whom Jesus ministered recognized Him as a teacher of the Law, a "rabbi," and a prophet from God (Mt. 21:10–11; Mk. 8:28; 9:5; Jn. 3:2). Religiously speaking, Jesus was a Jew because He lived in obedience to Scripture—based on faith in God. His sole purpose in life was to do God's will (Mt. 26:39). He interpreted the Law according to God's intention, which was based on God's covenantal love for the Israelites. In contrast, the Pharisees twisted the Law in an effort to establish their own righteousness, being far from God in their hearts. Jesus wanted the Jews to live in obedience to God from a pure heart, as Deuteronomy 6 teaches (cf. Mk. 12:28–34). In this respect, Jesus was in line with ideal Judaism.

Evangelical affinity for Israel and the Jewish people is also wrapped up in Christ's sacrifice, which is grounded in the system of substitutionary atonement that originates in the Mosaic Law. Evangelicals who read the Scriptures plainly are fully aware of the linkage that exists between the blood of bulls and goats that was spilled continually for Israel's sins in the past and the blood of Christ that was poured out once for all to cleanse them of their sins for eternity.

Because of this connection, Jesus Himself interpreted all the prophetic promises as being fulfilled in Him. Jesus was God's beloved Son (Mt. 11:25–27; Jn. 5:31–47; cf. Ps. 2:7; 89:19–29; Isa. 42:1); the prophesied Messiah (Mt. 22:44; Lk. 4:18; cf. Ps. 110:1; Isa. 61:1–2); the Son of

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Man (Mk. 2:10; 14:62; cf. Dan. 7:13); the Suffering Servant (Lk. 22:37; Mk. 10:45; cf. Isa. 53:10–12); and, ultimately, Lord (Mk. 2:28). Jesus' unique interpretation of the Old Testament was based on His authority, given to Him by God the Father. His assumption of this authority ultimately led the religious leaders to challenge His ministry.

Finally, evangelicals empathize with Israel because of the land itself. Israel is more than a random geographical location. It is the one place on the face of the earth that was purposefully chosen by God as the center of the world, where redemption's story would be told for all to hear (Ezek. 5:5). The land plays a critical role in God's plan for the ages. It is inextricably tied to the promise God made to Abraham that, through him, all the families of the earth would find blessing (Gen. 12:1–3). When the Israelites dwelt in the land, their presence was associated with God's hand of blessing on them (Dt. 28:1–14). By the same token, their exile from the land was associated with His divine judgment (vv. 15–68). The tension of spiritual obedience and disobedience, of dwelling and exile, drives Israel's biblical-historical narrative; and the land is at the center of it all.

In the New Testament Jesus mourned over Jerusalem: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes" (Lk. 19:42). He mourned over the peace the Jewish people neglected. This peace encapsulates all the promises of God that include salvation, deliverance, restoration in the land of Israel, and establishment of God's Kingdom on Earth as the prophets promised.

When the apostle Paul noted in his letter to the Romans the role Israel plays in future redemption, he quoted Isaiah 59:20–21: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion; he will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:26–27). The physical location of Zion, also known as Jerusalem, still matters in Paul's eschatological framework. Christ will return to the Mount of Olives (Zech. 14:1–4; Acts 1:9–12).

Evangelicals see that God has protected, preserved, and restored His ancient people to their Promised Land. No people group in world history other than the Jews have been expelled from their land, scattered throughout the nations, and returned home 2,000 years later to become a major player in the global community. Today, pilgrims travel to Israel from around the world to walk in Jesus' footsteps or traverse the paths of the patriarchs. Sites in the Bible that seem almost

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mythical become real in Israel. Nearly 4.5 million tourists visited the Jewish state in 2019 alone. And it's no wonder. The heartfelt affinity for Israel deepens as Scripture comes to life, and God's faithfulness is tangibly seen in the people and land of Israel.

Evangelicals believe God's promise to Abraham that He will bless those who bless the Jewish people (Gen. 12:3) and curse him who curses them. The Abrahamic Covenant informs us all how God wants people to treat Israel. When presented with a choice between being blessed or cursed, evangelicals choose to be blessed. Jesus promised that when He returns, He will judge the nations for the way they treated His family—His Jewish brethren (Mt. 25:31-46).

DEFINING ISRAEL—READING THE BIBLE WITH A LITERAL EYE

THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR ISRAEL

Historically, evangelical theology has been framed by reading the Word of God with a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic. A literal reading of Scripture in the 16th and 17th centuries revolutionized the church and fueled the fires of the Reformation as people began to question the church's teaching after comparing it to God's Word.

One of the things they discovered was that the Bible teaches God is not yet finished with Israel. In fact, God never says He has rejected or replaced Israel or made the church the recipient of His covenant promises to Israel. In reading His Word literally, people discovered passages that spoke of Israel playing a vital role in the restoration of God's Kingdom on Earth with Messiah ruling from Jerusalem.

They learned that, when the Bible is read with a literal eye, it is evident God has a plan to restore the Jewish people to their Promised Land and bring Israel to faith in His Son, the Messiah. God has made important promises to Israel that are yet to be fulfilled. By simply taking Scripture for what it says, evangelicals could see the key role Israel plays in God's redemptive plan.

Reading with a literal eye, Israel easily is understood to mean the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, rather than the church—as Replacement Theology teaches. For example, when the apostle Paul asked, "Has God cast away His people?" (Rom. 11:1), the context argues that Paul had the Jewish people in mind as "His people" and not the church. Not only do the two previous chapters of Romans deal with Israel's past and present, but immediately following his question in verse 1, Paul identified himself as an Israelite—a physical descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. Paul's reply to the possibility that God rejected the Jewish people was emphatic: "Certainly not!" He removed all doubt by adding, "God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew" (v. 2). What could he possibly have said to make God's stance any plainer?

Those who believe God has rejected Israel because the Jewish people rejected Christ at

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His First Advent see the church as the ultimate fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. But a literal eye cannot find a single verse in Scripture where God says He has cast away or rejected Israel. Nor are there verses that teach God will use the church to heal this world of sin and its curse. The church's mission is to make disciples (Mt. 28:19) and bring citizens into God's Kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not the church's mission to restore the Kingdom. That mission awaits the return of the only one capable of accomplishing the task: Jesus Christ.

Important promises in the Bible flow through Israel, with whom God made covenants. From the time God cut a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12, He revealed His plan to bless the entire world with the gospel through a descendent of Abraham: "In you, all the families of the world will be blessed" (v. 3; 22:18). Paul reaffirmed that God, foreseeing He would justify Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham when He said, "In you all the nations shall be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). This statement aligns with Paul's declaration that the covenants and promises belong to Israel (Rom. 9:4). In Romans 11, Paul taught that Gentiles, pictured as wild olive branches, are grafted into the olive tree that is rooted in God's covenant promises to Israel.

In the covenant God made with Abraham, God had in view the period of time that has come to be known as the Church Age, when salvation through His Jewish Son would be shared with the world. But God never said the church would replace Israel in His redemptive plan. In fact, without the covenant promises God made to Abraham, God's written Word never would have been revealed to mankind, the Messiah never would have been born, and Gentiles never would have received the gospel.

In God's wisdom, grace, and mercy, He chose to share His salvation with the whole world at Israel's expense. Paul made the point that God has chosen not to remove Jewish blindness to the gospel until His program with the Gentiles is fulfilled. This fact does not mean God has rejected Israel. Rather, it means God is working His plan to share the gospel with the world. And part of His plan is to restore Israel eventually to the place of blessing because the promises of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).

Nothing speaks of God casting Israel away but, rather, of folding Gentiles into the spiritual promise given to Israel of salvation through the Jewish Messiah. Even the removal of the natural branches in Romans 11 is for a limited time so that the wild branches (Gentiles) can

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be grafted in. Paul said the natural branches will someday be grafted back into the tree (v. 24). Drawing from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah, Paul said a day is coming when “All Israel will be saved” (v. 26).

Paul’s point is that God has done something unnatural by grafting wild branches into a natural olive tree so that Gentiles can participate in the same spiritual blessings that are available to Israel through faith in the Messiah. This was always God’s plan before the beginning of time. Taken literally, the Bible defines the church as separate and distinct from Israel but related to Israel through the spiritual promises God made to Israel.

A literal understanding of Scripture teaches salvation came to us through the Jews, not the Gentiles. Jesus declared, “Salvation is of the Jews” (Jn. 4:22). Gentiles cannot replace Israel because God has not replaced Israel. This fact speaks to the essence of why Israel exists: She is uniquely raised up to be God’s instrument through whom He will redeem the world from the curse of sin.

Imposing anything less than a literal understanding on these and so many other key passages concerning Israel is to force one’s viewpoint onto Scripture, rather than to let the Bible speak for itself. It is intellectually alluring to be creative and spiritualize key passages through allegorical interpretation. But unless the context argues for allegory, anything other than literal interpretation renders a meaning that is contrary to what God is saying.

Spiritualizing Scripture, the idea there is a higher spiritual meaning to God’s Word than the literal meaning, was brought into the church by those who rejected Israel and argued that God had done likewise. In the early days of the church, Christianity was an illegal religion in the Roman Empire; and it faced severe persecution. Even though the book of Acts reveals that large numbers of Jewish people initially accepted the gospel, most Jewish people rejected it. This situation threatened the church’s viability during its early days. The church responded by reasoning it was a sect of Judaism, a religion that was legal in the Roman Empire. But the Jewish leaders did not support this assertion; and the Romans rejected the church’s claim, bringing a great deal of Roman persecution against the church.

The Jewish community’s lack of support for Christians and its mass rejection of the gospel led to resentment on the part of church leaders in the early centuries. That resentment

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grew into hatred. In time, these leaders argued that God had rejected Israel, and so should Christians. However, reading with a literal eye shows the Bible teaches otherwise. The apostles all believed in a future for Israel, as is evident in their epistles and their question to the resurrected Christ: “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Allegory provided a way to reinterpret God’s literal promises to restore and bless Israel into God’s rejection of Israel. It laid the foundation for replacing Israel with the church. In time, the church came to be viewed as true or spiritual Israel. Unfortunately, allegory also led to bad theology that produced hatred and physical violence by the church against the Jewish people over the past two millennia.

Reading the Bible with a literal eye leads to the undeniable conclusion that God still loves Israel, has not rejected Israel, and has future plans for Israel. In fact, His redemptive plan flows directly through Israel. It is the repentance of the Jewish people and acceptance of their Messiah that will initiate Jesus Christ’s return (Zech. 12:10–14; 14:1–5; Acts 3:19–21).

Not surprisingly, the Bible has the greatest influence on evangelical beliefs about Israel because evangelicals generally read the Bible with a literal eye. A measure of the Bible’s importance to evangelicals is seen when they were asked what influenced their view of Israel the most, the Bible (45 percent) was three times greater than the second choice, the media (15 percent).¹⁵

God Gave the Promised Land to Israel

The promise of land that God made to Israel, as recorded in the Bible, is never-ending. The promise lasts forever and cannot be withdrawn, canceled, or transferred to anyone else (Gen. 17:2, 7–8; Ps. 105:7–12). God’s land promise was given to all the Jewish people and not merely to the remnant of Israel—the true believers among Israel who walk by faith. Nor was the promise for a “spiritual” land, as some argue. It was for physical real estate on Earth that God chose with clearly identifiable borders (Gen. 13:14–17; 15:18). Sixty-three percent of evangelicals believe the Bible says God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people.¹⁶

Evangelical support for Israel’s right to the Promised Land emanates from the Land

15. Lifeway Research (2017), p. 9.

16. Ibid, p. 17.

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Covenant God made with Israel. Although God warned the Jewish people their privilege of living in and enjoying the land was contingent on obedience to His commands (Dt. 28–30), He never revoked Israel’s everlasting right to that particular piece of real estate in the Middle East. Through the prophets, God told the people of Israel they would one day return to the Promised Land from the four corners of the earth where He had scattered them (Dt. 30:3; Isa. 11:12; 43:5; Jer. 29:14; 31:8–10).

Replacement Theology teaches that the church took Israel’s place in the promises God made to Israel –but that Israel keeps the curses. There are several basic problems with this view. Nowhere in Scripture does God say His covenants can be split and the promises transferred to another. Nor is there any passage that says the church replaced Israel in God’s covenants. This cherry-picking takes the best parts of the covenants (the promises) and leaves the worst parts (the curses) for Israel. If it were possible for the church to appropriate Israel’s promises, then it would also have to appropriate the curses.

This belief that the church replaced Israel led theologians to redefine Israel from meaning the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to meaning spiritual descendants only. The church came to be viewed as the covenant community. However, this understanding pushes the beginning of the church from Acts 2 back to Genesis 12 and the Abrahamic Covenant. It confuses the clear distinction the Bible makes between Israel and the church. The word Israel in Scripture now becomes defined as the true believers in God. However, this interpretation renders many passages incomprehensible because one cannot make sense of many references to Israel unless the word refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Once the church was seen as Israel, then it was believed the Law still applied to the church. The church came to define obedience to the Law as simply keeping the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. Redefining Israel also led the church to believe priests were still necessary to intercede between man and God, making the church the dispenser of grace and elevating the two ordinances of baptism and communion into sacraments of grace.¹⁷

It took the Reformation to correct some of this bad theology. However, the reformers brought the basic tenets of Replacement Theology, the belief that the church superseded Israel,

17. Diprose, p. 169-71.

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with them into the reformed churches. To this day, many mainline denominations hold to Replacement Theology and fail to see any biblical support for the modern State of Israel.

Israel Is the Historic Homeland of the Jewish People

Empires, nations, and peoples have disputed the Jewish people's legitimate claim to the land of Israel. In May 2021, the Jewish state again was under attack as Hamas terrorists in Gaza launched more than 4,300 rockets into the country.¹⁸ Hamas was emboldened by its mission to cleanse the land of Jews and reclaim what it believes rightfully belongs to the Arabs. But on what basis do Arabs make such a claim? Historically, Israel is Jewish land.

The international 1920 San Remo Conference was convened following World War I to determine how to divide the conquered Ottoman Empire. The conference Mandate Resolution formally recognized the Jewish right to the Promised Land under international law and incorporated the Balfour Declaration into the British mandate for Palestine.¹⁹

Israelis trace their ownership of Israel to the biblical promise God made some 4,000 years ago. Arabs, on the other hand, argue their descendants owned the land before Israel declared its independence in 1948. Consequently, legal ownership can only be determined through a historical record, one that predates both Jewish and Arab occupation of the Holy Land.

The only such record that exists is the Word of God. In 1947 a Bedouin boy in the Judean desert stumbled on a pre-Christian, 2,000-year-old Hebrew Bible now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The timing of this discovery was divine and providential. That year, the United Nations voted on Resolution 181, a partition plan permitting the Jewish people to establish a state in their ancestral homeland. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was like uncovering the unimpeachable, ancient deed connecting the Jewish people to their land.

The truth is, neither Israel nor the Palestinians originally owned the land. It is God who owns it, as well as the whole earth.

18. Sebastien Roblin. "How Hamas' Arsenal Shaped The Gaza War Of May 2021." Forbes.com, Forbes, 25 May 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sebastienroblin/2021/05/25/how-hamass-arsenal-shaped-the-gaza-war-of-may-2021/?sh=6df09ab379df>.

19. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-san-remo-conference> (accessed 3/10/2021).

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It is His name etched on the title deed (Ex. 9:29; 19:5; Lev. 25:23; Ps. 24:1). God in His kindness and wisdom chose the nation that would receive the right to His land, and He bestowed that right on Israel (Dt. 7:6–7).

Two biblical pacts detail in legal terms Israel's entitlement to the land: the Abrahamic Covenant and the Land Covenant. These agreements delineate Israel's boundaries and mark out the specific portions God set aside for His people Israel. The size of the land grant was determined "according to the number of the children of Israel" (32:8). God's decision to give the Jewish people the land on which the State of Israel rests today was made millennia ago in His promise to Abraham.

In the Abrahamic Covenant, God gave the land of Canaan to Abraham and his son Isaac (Gen. 17:19–21) and to Isaac's son Jacob (26:3; 28:13) and his descendants (Ps. 105:7–11) as an eternal possession in perpetuity (Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 17:8). Canaan is legitimately and legally owned by Israel today. The covenant is unconditional, which means its viability rests exclusively in God's faithfulness to fulfill it. No responsibility rests with Israel. As the writer of Hebrew puts it, "For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself" (6:13).

The thrust of the Abrahamic Covenant (it promises land, descendants, and blessing) continues through the Torah and was confirmed in what is known as the Land Covenant, also made with the nation of Israel (Dt. 28–30). Through Moses, God stipulated the spiritual standards Israel was required to maintain in order to be blessed in the land. However, He warned that Israel's rebellion would lead to the nation's exile and dispersion. Yet, because of God's unconditional promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the covenant also provided for restoration to the land through repentance. Interestingly, Jeremiah's prophetic vision of a New Covenant is related specifically to Israel's covenant unfaithfulness and God's desire to establish a New Covenant that would protect the nation from perpetual dispersion and destruction (Jer. 31:31–40).

The unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant can be seen even in the New Testament events that surrounded the births of Jesus and John the Baptist (Lk. 1:67–73). Seeing the coming of his son and the birth of Jesus the Messiah, Zacharias, John's father, felt compelled to say that God raised up a horn of salvation "to remember His holy covenant, the oath which He swore to our father Abraham" (vv. 72–73).

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When the apostle Peter preached to the Jews in the Temple, he encouraged them to repent and said through their repentance, the times of restoration and refreshing would come because “You are the sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25).

The apostle Paul clearly knew Israel’s future was tied to God’s covenant faithfulness. He called his brethren “my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites” (Rom. 9:3–4) and said to them belong “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen” (vv. 4–5).

When Paul highlighted the covenants, promises, and patriarchs, he drew a line back to the Abrahamic Covenant—which included land, descendants, and blessing. The Covenant is why Paul called them Israelites, a term linked to their national identity. He could have used the term Jews, which would have identified them ethnically wherever they lived. But he chose Israelites to connect them to the land God promised them.

Paul stated emphatically that God’s plan for Israel was not finished even though Christ died, was resurrected, and had ascended: “I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew” (11:1–2).

To this day, Israel remains the historic homeland of the Jewish people. Their identity with the land is divinely woven into the ancient biblical promise, along with historical and archaeological proof. Even through the millennia of dispersion, a continual Jewish presence in such cities as Jerusalem, Tiberius, and Safed has kept the Jewish identity grounded in the Promised Land.

Israel Plays a Vital Role in Future Prophecy

Evangelicals consider Israel important, not only in the past, but also in the present and future. Slightly more than half of evangelicals (52 percent) believe Israel is essential in fulfilling biblical prophecy.

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But a whopping eight in ten evangelicals believe modern Israel's rebirth is a fulfillment of prophecy and a sign the return of Jesus Christ is getting closer.²⁰ God promised in the Tanakh (Old Testament) that He will redeem a remnant of Israel from Gentile oppression and reestablish the Jewish people in their own land. That promise will be fulfilled when the Messiah returns to rule the world from David's throne in Jerusalem.

The prophet Micah revealed the details of this prophetic event of renewal and restoration (Mic. 4:1-13). His vision was a microcosm of Israel's bright, prophetic future.

Micah began by defining the timing of these events: "In the last days" (v. 1). This will be a traumatic time in Israel's future— a time of great tribulation, which will occur immediately prior to Christ's Second Coming to restore the nation and establish Jerusalem as the center of His divine rule on Earth. Before Israel entered Canaan, even Moses in the Torah prophesied concerning this tribulation and restoration (Dt. 4:30).

As the tribulation comes to an end, God will establish His rule on Earth through the reign of His Son, Jesus Christ. Here the pre-exilic prophet envisioned the mountains and hills surrounding Jerusalem, where the Temple once stood, flattening when Messiah returns (Zech. 14:4). The city, as well as the Temple Mount, will be elevated above the surrounding area. The vision also illustrates the meteoric rise of Jerusalem above all other cities, to become the Kingdom capital that will receive the attention of all nations.

Nations will stream to Jerusalem to worship God, "and peoples shall flow to it. Many nations shall come and say, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob'" (Mic. 4:1-2). "In the last days," all roads will lead to Israel as people around the world will encourage one another to go up to worship in Jerusalem. The prophet Zechariah saw a day when the nations will go to Jerusalem for the Israelite festival of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16-19), to celebrate God's eternal presence among them.

The nations will be taught by the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem: "'He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths;' for out of Zion the law shall go forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Mic. 4:2).

20. Lifeway Research (2017), p. 7, 17.

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Revelation on how to live a righteous life and keep the Lord's commandments will radiate from Jerusalem.

Biblical peace, justice, and righteousness will emanate from the city: "He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (v. 3). As a result, nations will live in safety and security. "Everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" (v. 4). This terminology used to describe peace, plenty, and prosperity (1 Ki. 4:25).

Micah compared the remnant of Israel that will be restored to a flock of sheep that was lame, sick, afflicted, and dispersed—which is best understood as Israel's condition during the Great Tribulation (Mt. 24:15–28). Afterward, God will regenerate and restore the Jewish population (Zech. 13:9). When Messiah Jesus returns, this remnant of Israel will look upon Him whom they pierced, and all of Israel will be saved, having the veil of unbelief lifted from their collective eyes as they find true salvation in their Messiah (Zech. 12:10; Rom. 11:26).

When the Messiah returns to Jerusalem, He will restore the daughter of Zion to her "former dominion" (Mic. 4:8) and guarantee the nation of Israel protection, peace, political power, and prosperity. The picture is reminiscent of the early Davidic dynasty, which was united, strong, steadfast, and resistant to attacks from other nations. Micah's prophecy gave hope to a nation that would soon suffer the pain of destruction and captivity.

Unlike past Davidic kings, however, Messiah Jesus will rule from Jerusalem with justice and righteousness (Isa. 9:6–7). He will not be held captive by the human desires of lust, power, and greed, which crippled David and his descendants. Instead, God will "raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old" (Amos 9:11–12).

Nations will stream to Jerusalem to see the King of kings, and Israel will experience a glorious victory over her enemies and enjoy redemption through her Messiah. Then Jerusalem will be exalted as the capital of the world.

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Through the prophet Amos God declared, “I will bring back the captives of my people Israel; they shall rebuild the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,’ says the Lord your God” (vv. 14–15). Israel has a glorious prophetic future that awaits her (Rom. 11:26).

God Commands Christians to Love Israel

The simple fact that God loves Israel with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3) and promises to bless Gentiles who bless Israel (Gen. 12:3) is sufficient motive for many to support Israel.²¹ Christians are to love what God loves, and 42 percent of evangelicals believe the Bible instructs Christians to support Israel. Though some claim the promise of receiving blessing in return for blessing Abraham’s descendants is motivated by selfish gain, God is clear that He wants the nations to treat His Chosen People favorably. They are His instrument through whom He is blessing the nations; and He expects the nations to respond by blessing the Jewish people. Someday He will judge the nations on that basis (Joel 3:1–3; Mt. 25:31–46).

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said, “Evangelical Christians are Israel’s best friends in the world!”²² Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer was quoted as saying, “People have to understand that the backbone of Israel’s support in the United States is the evangelical Christians. It’s true because of numbers and also because of their passionate and unequivocal support for Israel.”²³

This “passionate and unequivocal support” does not stem from politics. It stems from a God-given mandate that spans generations: “Bless those who bless you” (Gen. 12:3) and “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem! May they prosper who love you!” (Ps. 122:6).

21. Ibid, p. 17.

22. Remarks made during an address to participants at the Christians United for Israel convention in July 2017 <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-evangelical-christians-are-israels-best-friends/> (accessed 3/26/2021).

23. Jacob Magid, “Dermer suggests Israel should prioritize support of evangelicals over US Jews” <https://www.timesofisrael.com>, May 10, 2021.

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The presumption that things will continue as they have been is a mistake. Strong evangelical-Christian support for Israel in the past does not ensure strong evangelical support in the future. Already, we are seeing signs that younger evangelicals are not nearly as supportive of Israel as past generations.

A poll of young evangelical Christians between the ages of 18 and 29, conducted by Barna Group in March and April 2021, shows a marked decrease in support for Israel in the “Israel-Palestinian dispute” over the past three years. Only 33.6 percent favored Israel, which is down from 69 percent in 2018. That is a startling drop. Conversely, support for the Palestinians rose from 5.6 percent in 2018 to 24.3 percent. Those who favored neither side rose from 25.3 percent to 42.2 percent.²⁴

Although young evangelical Christians do not represent the majority of the evangelical community, they accentuate the challenge of maintaining strong evangelical support for Israel over the long haul. If such downward trends hold, in a few years evangelical support for Israel will be markedly lower and could eventually decline to a level of insignificance. It is dangerous to assume that because older generations strongly support Israel, younger generations will do likewise.

This decline in young-adult, evangelical support indicates the church is failing to teach the important role Israel plays in God’s redemptive plan. In siding with Israel’s enemies, young evangelicals fail to see the Arab-Israeli conflict in biblical terms of the greater battle between God and Satan. In addition, the powerful, well-developed Arab narrative paints the Palestinians as victims of Israeli oppression; and a strong sense of social justice attracts young evangelicals to the Palestinian cause.

The church has a lot of work to do. Helping younger evangelicals understand the biblical teaching that ultimate and lasting social justice awaits Israel’s repentance and Jesus Christ’s

24. Jacob Magid, “Support for Israel among young US evangelical Christians drops sharply – survey” <https://timesofisrael.com>, May 25, 2021.

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return is a first step toward restoring strong evangelical support among the younger generation. In God's economy, Israel is the key to everlasting social justice and not the obstacle.

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FRIENDS OF ISRAEL GOSPEL MINISTRY

Nearly 80 years ago, the Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry (FOI) was founded as a compassionate effort to meet the spiritual and physical needs of Jewish people whose lives were displaced and tragically affected by the Holocaust. Since its inception in 1938, the ministry continues to stand against every form of anti-Semitism and support the right of the Jewish people to live in their ancient homeland, Israel.

MISSION

We are a worldwide evangelical ministry proclaiming biblical truth about Israel and the Messiah, while bringing physical and spiritual comfort to the Jewish people.

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