Israel ישראל

Israel is mentioned in almost every news bulletin. Why is this tiny little nation so newsworthy? Why is there continual conflict between Arab and Jew? Why do many world events now seem to relate back to the actions and even existence of Israel? How will it end? In order to answer these questions we need to look at God's plan for Israel.

Israel's Origin and Purpose

Abram (later called Abraham) was called by God to go from his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and travel to a land that God would give to him and his descendants. That land was Canaan, the area we now call Israel. God told Abram that his descendants would become a great nation and that through this nation all the nations of the earth would be blessed **(Gen 12.1-7).** Later God confirmed this promise by a covenant:

'"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you ... I will give to you and your descendants ... all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."' **(Gen 17.7,8)**

'"By Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have ... not withheld your son ... I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens ... in your seed, all the nations of the earth will be blessed ..."' **(Gen 22.16-18)**

The covenant between God and Abraham was now ***unconditional;*** God had sworn it by Himself. It was certain that from Abraham would come a great nation and a great blessing to the nations, and Abraham's descendants would be given the so-called 'Promised Land' of Canaan (Israel) as an everlasting possesssion. Why? God's plan was to create a special nation
(Israel)
to be His witness to the nations:

'But now, says the Lord, ... He who formed you, O Israel, "Do not fear ... I have called you by name; you are Mine! ...You are My witnesses ... and My servant whom I have chosen ..."' **(Isa 43.1,10)**

Things Didn't Go Quite To Plan

Things went wrong when Abraham listened to his wife instead of believing in God's promise of a 'seed'! Abraham followed her suggestion (and custom of the day) and he took his female servant Hagar, an Egyptian, as wife (Gen 16.3). She bore him a son, Ishmael, but this was not God's plan for Abraham. When Abraham asked God to bless Ishmael as a servant of God, he was told "No"! God had other plans. In fact, Ishmael was prophesied to be a violent man 'with his hand against everyone' (Gen 16.12) **This separation of the blessing is crucial to the understanding of the modern-day Arab-Israeli conflict.** God said:

'"No, Sarah your wife will bear you a son (even though she was old), and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him ... as for Ishmael, I have heard you; ... I will bless him, and make him fruitful ... and I will make him a great nation ... but My covenant I will establish with Isaac."' (Gen 17.19-21))

Here we see the birth of two great peoples; Israel and the Arab nations. But the covenant promises of blessing and the land of Canaan went with Isaac, not Ishmael. Abraham subsequently gave all that he had to Isaac, but to Ishmael and his other sons he gave gifts and sent them 'to the land of the east' (Gen 25.5,6).

Having said that, God instructed Israel to care for the stranger in their land; they were not to expel them:

'"When a stranger resides with you in your land, you should do him no wrong ... (he) ... shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself ..."' **(Lev 19.33,34)**

So we have the concept of national Israel, a special nation in their God-given land, embracing all strangers who happen to live in the land. This again is a crucial factor in today's Arab-Israeli conflict. Strangers should be welcomed, but they must accept the existence and land-rights of national Israel.

Despite man's failings, God continued His covenant plan and we find a line of descent from Isaac, through Jacob, Judah, David and eventually to the Messiah Yeshua. Paul takes the reference to Abraham's 'seed' as a reference to Yeshua **(Gal 3.16),**
whose genealogy is traced back to Abraham in Matthew's gospel
(Mat 1.1-17).
This is the first reference to the gospel that would be proclaimed as good news to the gentile nations as well as to the

Jews. Yeshua's offer of salvation for all through His death and resurrection was the promised blessing to all nations. Christ brings 'good news to the afflicted, binds up the brokenhearted, and gives liberty to captives'
(Isa 61.1).
Abraham's 'seed' also refers to the nation of Israel itself. In line with His promise to Abraham, God renamed Jacob 'Israel' and said:

'"The land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you."' **(Gen 35.12)**

The descendants of Jacob (Israel) are of course the 12 tribes of Israel, **and so modern-day Israeli's claim the land of Israel to be theirs through God's covenant with Abraham.**
In Old Testament times this land was to extend from 'the river (brook) of Egypt to the river Euphrates'
(Gen 15.18).
Abraham's failing with Hagar was not the only thing that didn't go according to God's plan! The 12 tribes were subsequently split into a southern kingdom (called 'The House of Judah', embracing Judea and Jerusalem) and a northern kingdom comprising 10 tribes (called 'The House of Israel', or simply 'Israel') see
Jer 11.10.

The latter had a succession of godless kings and despite repeated warnings from the prophets, they rebelled against God. Eventually God's warnings gave way to judgement and He uprooted them from the Promised Land and scattered them throughout the nations:

'"I will scatter you among the nations ..."' **(Ezek 22.15)**

From hereon The House of Israel ceased to be a kingdom, and the Babylonians and others settled in the cities of Samaria in their place **(2 Kings 17.24).** The scattering was complete around 722 BC. The House of Judah was also rebellious and eventually suffered the same judgement. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed around 597 BC and by 586 BC all of the southern kingdom had been deported to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. Apart from a remnant of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi which returned to rebuild Jerusalem, the whole of national Israel was now dispersed amongst the nations **(James 1.1)** and Jerusalem was occupied by Gentile nations.

The Restoration of National Israel

It would seem that God's covenant with Abraham has only been partially fulfilled. Whilst the seed of Abraham was fulfilled in Messiah, God's flagship nation and chief witness had lost its identity aongst the nations. It was scattered in disgrace and some maintain that the New Testament Church has now replaced Israel as God's witness. But since God gave Abraham an ***unconditional*** covenant, then national Israel must one day fulfil its role as God's witness and return to the Promised Land (this is also required by other key prophecies). Infact, God did not *destroy* national Israel, He simply gave her a 'writ of divorce' (see for example Jer 3.8) - and there are many prophecies of the re-gathering of national Israel and her 'remarriage' to her God. For example:

'"Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone ... and bring them into their own land ..."' **(Ezek 37.21)**

'I will say to the north,"Give them up! ... bring My sons from afar and my duaghters from the ends of the earth"' **(Isa 43.6)**

'And *(the Lord)* will lift up a standard for the nations, and assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth'
(Isa 11.12)

In fact, the regathering started in the late 19th century. Consider a few facts:

1. 1882: First wave of emigration (first Aliyah or ascent) to Palestine, particularly from Russia and Romania

2. 1917: General Allenby liberated Jerusalem from the Turks, giving Jews access to the city

3. 1948: State of Israel established; David Ben Gurion became the first Prime Minister

4. 1950: Law of return passed by Israels Parliament opening Israel to Jews from over 60 countries

5. 1967: Jerusalem came under Jewish rule

6. Population Growth (whole country): 1900: 0.5 million; 1935: 1 million; 1958: 2 million; 1983: 4 million; 2007: 6.5 million

Note that 1967 saw all Jerusalem returned to the control of national Israel **(after some 2500 years).** This was direct fulfilment of Yeshua's prophecy:

'"Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles unitl the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled"' **(Lk 21.24)**

Note also that the population growth of Israel corresponds to an amazing 1200% increase since 1900! Today, Israel has highly developed banking, health, and University systems, and her industries include high-tech electronics, textiles, food processing, mining, agriculture and forestry. Since the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, she has been in continuous conflict with the surrounding Arab nations and the **so-called** Palestinia n Problem is continually in the media. It is interesting to observe that God's covenant with Abraham included the phrase:

'"... and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies"' **(Gen 22.17)**

Here 'seed' clearly refers to the nation of Israel, and the implication is that God has given Abraham's descendants the ability to conquer their enemies. The concept of 'divine protection' also appears elsewhere. For example, in relation to Israel God says:

'"Whoever assails you will fall because of you ... no weapon that is formed against you will prosper"' **(Isa 54.15,17)**

'"I will be a wall of fire around her ... he who touches you, touches the apple of (the Lord's) eye"' **(Zech 2.5,8)**

Certainly, the evidence to date is that each time Arab nations attack Israel, their end-state seems worse than their first!