

Since the 144,000 are identified as being "from all the tribes of Israel" (Revelation 7:4) some believe that the modern State of Israel will be the focus of God's attention at the end of time. What does the Bible say?

ISRAEL IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

1 All of God's promises to Old Testament Israel were conditional

Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel. He was asked to leave his country and "go to the land" that God would show him. (Genesis 12:1-3.) The promises that God made to Abraham could only be fulfilled if Abraham and his descendants were faithful and obedient. (Read Genesis 15:1-18; 17:1,7,9,10,14; 22:15-18.) Abraham was faithful. (Genesis 26:4,5.) "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Romans 4:3. (Compare Galatians 3:6-9.)

Israel was the name given to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham. The name Israel means "he struggles with God." (See footnote Genesis 32:28.) Jacob's descendants were called the "Children of Israel." They were chosen as God's special people. God said to them, "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured

possession." Deuteronomy 7:6. However, the people were not to assume that they were automatically assured of salvation simply because they belonged to Israel. God's covenant or contract or agreement with them was clearly conditional, for God said, "Therefore, take care to follow the commands, decrees and laws I give you today. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers." Deuteronomy 7:11,12. (Read Deuteronomy 7:7-12 and 30:15-18.)

If the Israelites did not keep their part of the agreement, God was not bound to keep His part. In Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14 we read of the blessings promised for obedience. In Leviticus 26:14-46 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68 we read of the curses and suffering that would follow disobedience. It seems that many have failed to recognize that the promises made by God to Israel were conditional. The Word of God is clear, blessings would come to Israel only if the people remained faithful.■

2 God's promises to Israel did not fail

At no time did the promises of God fail. "Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled." Joshua 21:45. However, there were times when Israel failed to obey God. God promised David that the kingdom of Israel would go on forever. (2 Samuel 7:16.) However, David made it clear to his son Solomon that faithfulness to God was the prerequisite for the fulfilment of this promise. (1 Kings 2:2-4.) God also made this clear to Solomon. (1 Kings 6:11,12.) When Israel persisted in sin and rebellion they failed. God did not fail.

3 Israel did fail

Because of their persistent rebellion and disobedience the Children of Israel, including Judah, were scattered as captives. In 2 Kings we read that Israel was exiled because of sin: "Therefore the LORD rejected all the people

of Israel; he afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until he thrust them from his presence." 2 Kings 17:20. God had not failed them. Israel had failed God. God allowed Israel to fall into captivity in an attempt to alert them to their sinful condition. However, the captivity of Israel by the Assyrians, Babylonians and

others was not their end. (See Jeremiah 4:27; 5:18; 46:28.) Even before they were taken away as slaves, and while they were in exile, God held out to the nation of Israel promises of restoration.

4 All the promises of restoration were conditional

Repentance and obedience were the conditions for complete restoration. "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place." Jeremiah 7:3. (Also read Jeremiah 17:24-27; 18:5-10; 25:5 and Zechariah 6:15.) In the final analysis, the response of ancient Israel to God's commands determined their destiny. His promises of restoration were conditional.

When were the promises of restoration made?

The prophecies concerning restoration recorded by Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Zechariah were all made before the decree was issued to rebuild Jerusalem after the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. Had Israel been faithful, then the promises recorded by the prophets would have been fulfilled upon the return of the exiles. Ezra tells of their return after the decree issued by Artaxerxes in 457 B.C.

What did the promises of restoration involve?

God promised the recovery and the restoration of a "remnant" from "all the countries" in which the Children of Israel had been scattered. Isaiah wrote, "In that day the LORD will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth." Isaiah 11:11,12.

The Lord promised to reach out "a second time." Isaiah 11:11. This is not a reference to the establishment of the present State of Israel in 1948. The first time was when God brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt. The second time was when He brought them from the "four quarters of the earth" after the seventy years of the Babylonian captivity. (See Jeremiah 23:7,8.) The Lord promised to reclaim a "remnant." Isaiah 11:11. This was in contrast to the first time when He brought them "all" out of Egypt.

The promises of restoration found in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Zechariah are not referring to the modern State of Israel. They are promises of what could have happened when the people of Israel returned to Jerusalem after the seventy years of Babylonian captivity. Unfortunately, not all of the glorious promises of restoration were fulfilled to them for Israel continued to rebel. The promises of restoration were conditional.

5 Israel was given a special period of time

Towards the end of the seventy years of Babylonian captivity, the prophet Daniel prayed that God would forgive the rebellion of Israel and restore the city of Jerusalem and the temple. Daniel was told that the nation of Israel would be given a further 490 years - encompassing the time of the Messiah's arrival. This period began with the decree of 457 B.C. (See Daniel 9:24,25.) True to this prophecy the Messiah arrived 7 years before the end of this allocated period. (See Daniel 9:25 and compare Luke 3:1-3, 21-23.) Tragically, although accepted by thousands of Jews, the Messiah was rejected by key leaders of His people. (John 1:11 and Matthew 26:47-27:66.)

ISRAEL IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

1 Israel and Jesus

When some of the key leaders of Israel rejected Jesus and plotted to kill Him, it was announced to them that they could no longer consider themselves as God's special chosen people. Christ said to the leaders of the nation, "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." Matthew 21:43. (Read Matthew 21:33-46. Also read Matthew 23:37-39.) Jesus Christ did not say that there would no longer be a nation of Israel. However, He said that they alone would no longer be God's special, chosen nation. But be clear about this: individual Jews can still be saved. Many Jews did repent and found salvation through Jesus

Christ. In fact, all writers of the New Testament, except for Luke, were Jews who accepted the Lord Jesus Christ. Many thousands became believers - including many priests. (Acts 2; 4; 6:7.) Paul's illustration of the olive tree also makes it clear that all literal Jews who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. (Romans 11:1-32.) But Paul also clearly states that not all literal Jews will be saved for they are not all believers. (Romans 11:5,14.) However, "all Israel," all overcomers and believers, will be saved. (Romans 11:25-27.)

2 The New Israel

The New Testament speaks of two Israels. There are (1) the literal Jews, and (2) the believers in

Jesus Christ who are called spiritual Jews. Believers in Jesus Christ have become God's chosen nation of people. Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." Galatians 3:28,29. (Also see Romans 2:28,29; 9:6-9; and Galatians 3:7.) Believers in Jesus Christ are now the "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." 1 Peter 2:9. (See 1 Peter 2:4-12.) Whether one is a literal Jew or a literal Gentile is now no longer the issue. In Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 and the Revelation, Jesus Christ reapplied the Old Testament prophecies and promises to the Christian believer.

QUESTIONS CONCERNING ISRAEL TODAY



Q1 **Is God obligated to fulfill all the promises He originally made to Old Testament Israel to the modern State of Israel?**

The promises made to the nation of Israel in Old Testament times were always conditional. The "kingdom" has now been given to believers. The present-day return of the Jews to the land of Israel does not imply the reinstatement of the Jews as God's nation either in the present or the future. God's nation is now made up of believers, whether they are literal Jews or literal Gentiles, and the holy city is the heavenly New Jerusalem. Being members of the Jewish nation in the State of Israel does not mean membership in the nation of believers any more than being the member of a particular Christian Church. We must be believers in Jesus Christ.

Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Luke 21:24. The context is clear that Jesus Christ was speaking of the literal city of Jerusalem. (See Luke 21:20-24.) The "times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" when Jesus Christ comes in glory. (See Luke 21:25-28 and Daniel 2:44,45.) There is no promise of restoration after the treading down. The word "until" does not indicate restoration, but simply the time when the treading down will end. It is simply saying that Jerusalem will be trampled upon until Jesus Christ comes. (Compare the use of "until" in Revelation 2:25 and 1 Corinthians 15:25.) In the parable of the vineyard the original tenants do not receive the vineyard again. (Matthew 21:36-46.)

Although the Jews have governmental control over the city of Jerusalem today, tensions continue - and, the Islamic Dome of the Rock and the El Aqsa Mosque stand where the temple of Jerusalem used to stand.



Q2 **What are the "times of the Gentiles" spoken of by Jesus? When will the "times of the Gentiles" be "fulfilled"?**

Jesus Christ said, "They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations.



Q3 **Is the reference of Jesus to the fig tree in Matthew 24:32,33; Mark 13:28,29 and Luke 21:29-31 a reference to the Jews?**

The context would indicate that it is simply an

illustration of how to read the signs of Jesus coming the second time and not a specific reference to the Jews.■

IN CONCLUSION . . .

The story of the rejection of the Messiah and the Saviour by many of the nation of literal Jews is a tragic one. However, just as sad and tragic is the rejection of Jesus Christ, His truth and His commandments by many men and women of all nations.

Let us learn a lesson from the Jews. Their rebellion, along with the evils of anti-Semitism (often fostered by Christians), has caused them untold suffering down through the centuries. At this time we each need to follow and obey Jesus Christ. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is soon coming to gather His nation of believers. That will be the "harvest" - "the end of the age." Matthew 13:39. Are you ready to meet your Saviour Jesus Christ?■