

CHAPTER 2

SIGNS OF THE LAST DAYS AND THE COMING OF MESSIAH

Sign 1: The rebirth of Israel

One of the tasks of the Messiah, according to the rabbis quoted in this booklet, is to bring peace to Israel and the world. Rabbi Winston acknowledges that bringing an end to human conflict, particularly in the Middle East, is ‘a tall order.’ Some might say it is an impossibility, given the level of hostility against Israel in the Middle East and the conflicts between people living in the countries surrounding Israel. Much of this hostility is fuelled by radical Islam, which is growing in power and is implacably opposed to the existence of a Jewish state in what Muslims regard as the Dar al Islam (house of Islam). For radical Islamists like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, peace with Israel would only come with the destruction of Israel.

However, the Bible does say that there will be a day when peace comes to Israel and to the world through the reign of the Messiah King from Jerusalem:

‘Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; he will teach us his ways, and we shall walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people. They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.’ (Isaiah 2.2-4)

The question is: “How will Israel and the world reach this state? ”

The rebirth of Israel as a Jewish state is one of the most extraordinary events of modern times. Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, famously said:

“In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.”

Israel’s establishment and survival against all the odds is a sign of something miraculous taking place. This started with Israel’s survival and victory over 7 Arab armies that attacked the Jewish state at birth in 1948 and has continued

with many signs of divine intervention in wars which took place since in 1967, 1973 and up to the present time.

Over the last hundred years, Jewish people have returned to Israel from countries around the world, coming from the north, south, east and west as the prophets had said they would. After the terrible events of the Holocaust, Israel became a nation again on 14th May 1948 after the UN voted in favour of establishing a Jewish State in part of Palestine. Since that time, Jewish people have returned to Israel from all over the world. The Hebrew prophets spoke of such an event:

'He will set up a banner for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.' (Isaiah 11.11-12; see also Isaiah 43.5-6)

This would be a sign to the nations of the world:

'Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.' (Jeremiah 31.10)

Ezekiel prophesies a time when the land, which had become desolate, would become fertile again as the people of Israel return to it:

'But you, O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches and yield fruit to My people Israel for they are about to come.' (Ezekiel 36.8)

During the time when the Jewish people were out of the land the rainfall decreased to the point where the land did become the barren and unfruitful land described by travellers to Palestine in the 19th century. Mark Twain described the land in 1867 in his book, 'Innocents Abroad':

'Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince ... It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land ... Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies. ... Palestine is desolate and unlovely.'

As Jewish people began to return to the land in the late 19th century, the rains began to return with the heaviest rains recorded in 1948, the year of Israel's rebirth as a nation. Millions of trees were planted on the hills and the desert places began to be irrigated and farmed.

The prophecy of Ezekiel goes on to speak of the return of the Jewish people to the land and the spiritual rebirth which they will experience at the time of the end:

'For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.' (Ezekiel 36.24-28)

The physical rebirth of Israel has happened in our time. The Bible indicates that there will also be a spiritual rebirth as Israel looks to the Messiah.

A time of trouble . . .

In Jeremiah chapter 30, we read that, after the Lord causes 'My people Israel' to 'return to the land that I gave their fathers' (Jeremiah 30.3), there will be a unique time of trouble:

'We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear and not of peace. Ask now and see whether a man is ever in labour with child? So why do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labour and all faces turned pale? Alas! For that day is great and none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob's trouble but he shall be saved out of it.' (Jeremiah 30.5-7)

At this time people may be looking for a peace settlement, but it will fail and instead there will be the time of trouble that will take place at the end of days (אחרית הימים *acharit ha yamim*) according to Jeremiah 30. If we look at similar passages in the prophets (Ezekiel 38-9; Joel 2-3; Daniel 12; Zechariah 12-14) and passages in the New Testament (Matthew 24.15-31; Revelation 16-19) it is clear that, without the intervention of God, Israel would fall. Nevertheless, all these Bible passages indicate that Israel will be saved out of this time of trouble.

From the beginning of its existence, Israel has faced hostility from those who say the land should be given to the Arabs to rule and that the Zionist claim to the land is null and void. Added to this, the restoration of Israel as a Jewish homeland in our time has taken place in the midst of the Islamic world. From 638CE onwards until modern times (apart from the brief Crusader period in the

Middle Ages), Islamic powers have ruled over Jerusalem and the land known as Palestine. In Islamic thinking once an area has been ruled by Muslims, it should remain Islamic until the end of days. Therefore Islam can never accept the creation of a Jewish state called Israel in the region, which they regard as the Dar al Islam (House of Islam). This explains a number of passages in the Bible, which prophesy the hostility to Israel from the surrounding nations in the last days.

In Psalm 83 we read of countries which can be identified as neighbours of Israel today and are also Islamic. These countries make a confederacy seeking to eliminate Israel, saying:

*‘Come let us cut them off from being a nation,
that the name of Israel be remembered no more’ —*

words that have been spoken by nations hostile to Israel in recent years, almost literally by Nasser of Egypt in the days leading up to the Six Day War in 1967.

Ezekiel 38-39 describes an attack on Israel by an alliance of countries coming down from the north, led by ‘Gog of the land of Magog.’ There are different interpretations of where ‘Magog’ is. Some identify it with the present territory of Russia, others with the region around eastern Turkey and Syria. Included in the list of nations coming against Israel in this attack are countries which today are Muslim countries hostile to Israel, notably Persia (Iran). Ezekiel describes these armies being defeated by God’s intervention, before the return of the Messiah.

About 2500 years ago, the Hebrew prophet Zechariah prophesied that the status of Jerusalem would be a focal point of attention for Israel, the surrounding nations and even the whole world:

*‘Behold I will make Jerusalem a cup of drunkenness to all the
surrounding people ... a very heavy stone for all peoples.’*
(Zechariah 12.2-3)

‘I will gather all the nations together to battle against Jerusalem.’
(Zechariah 14.2)

Following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Jerusalem was a divided city. The western part was in Israel and the historic Old City (where the Temple stood) was in the eastern part, ruled by Jordan. Since the Six Day War of 1967 Israel has ruled over Jerusalem as a united city.

As far as the Muslims are concerned, they should rule Jerusalem. At the present time there is a proposal agreed by the world powers and the UN to resolve the Arab Israeli conflict through the ‘two state solution’, which means setting up a Palestinian state in the territories occupied by Israel in the Six Day War of 1967. This includes Jerusalem, which has been a central issue in discussions over the division of the territory.

Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu has said that Jerusalem remains the indivisible capital of Israel and should remain a united city under Israeli rule. The Palestinians, backed by the Arab Muslim nations, want a Palestinian state with its capital in the eastern part of Jerusalem. Palestinian Authority leader, Mahmoud Abbas, has declared:

“One day, a young Palestinian will raise the Palestinian flag over Jerusalem, the eternal capital of the state of Palestine!”

All of this ties in with the prophecy of Zechariah that Jerusalem will be a ‘burdensome stone’ to all nations (i.e. the status of Jerusalem will be a matter of international concern) in the last days of this age. This will lead to the final conflict, which will draw the hostile nations against Israel and Jerusalem.

Zechariah gives a prophecy of this conflict and the intervention of the Lord:

‘And I will pour on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced and mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son and grieve for him as one grieves for a firstborn.’ (Zechariah 12.10)

Here we have a prophecy of one who has been ‘pierced’ and who comes to save the remnant of Israel both physically and spiritually in the last days of this age. This speaks of Yeshua the Messiah who came once to save us from our sins by His death when He was ‘pierced’ (died by crucifixion). At this time of great crisis the people will look on Yeshua as Saviour and turn to Him for salvation.

Zechariah describes how the Lord will come to Israel’s rescue at the end of this age:

‘Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east ... Thus the Lord my God will come, and all the saints with You ... And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be —“The Lord is one,” and His name one.’ (Zechariah 14.3-9)

The one who is identified as Israel's deliverer in this passage (as in other passages in the prophets dealing with the reigning king Messiah) is identified as the Lord / YHVH – the covenant name given by the God of Israel to Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3). According to Zechariah, this one is not a great man who brings world peace by his wisdom and piety, but the Lord coming in power and in person to bring an end to war and to reign over the earth in the Messianic Kingdom.

The place where He will come to, according to Zechariah, is the Mount of Olives. Interestingly, the New Testament in Acts 1 records that Yeshua ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives after the forty days in which He appeared to the disciples following His resurrection. As He went up, an angel announced that He would come again in the same manner. He will come again to the same place (the Mount of Olives). At this time He will have power as the reigning King Messiah to rule over the nations from Jerusalem, settling all disputes and bringing peace to Israel and to the world, following the judgement of the nations.

Yeshua also spoke about these events:

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those who are in the midst of her depart, and let not those who are in the country enter her. For these are the days of vengeance, that all things which are written may be fulfilled. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! For there will be great distress in the land and wrath upon this people. And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations. And Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21.20-24)

The scattering of the Jewish people began with the destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. From that time onwards Jerusalem was ruled by different Gentile powers. However, Yeshua implies that this will not be a permanent situation. The day will come when Jerusalem will no longer be ‘trampled’ or ruled by the Gentiles and ‘the fig tree’ of Israel's national life will blossom again:

“Then He spoke to them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. When they are already budding, you see and know for yourselves that summer is now near. So you also, when you see these things happening,

know that the kingdom of God is near. Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away.” ’
(Luke 21.29-33)

The fig tree is used as a symbol of Israel’s national life in Hosea 9.10 and Jeremiah 24. Forty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection the ‘fig tree’ of Israel’s national life began to wither, but He said that the fig tree would put forth leaves again, symbolising the restoration of the national life of the Jewish people in the land of Israel just before His return. When we look at the miracle of Israel’s rebirth in our time we are looking at the most significant visual aid to people around the world of a greater event which is to follow - the return of the Messiah.

Yeshua makes this clear in Matthew 24.32-3:

“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near — at the doors!”

The budding of the fig tree – the rebirth of Israel as a nation along with all the other signs which are taking place in our time – is a wakeup call that we are living in the last days and that the Messiah is coming back. He is the only one who will bring peace to Israel. Today we see the signs of His soon return taking place in Israel and the world.

.....