

GETTING ISRAEL RIGHT

By Steve Schmutzer

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A pastor, an atheist, a Bible class teacher, and a businessman walked into a bar....

You're thinking this is the opening line of a joke, right? Wrong. I am the Bible class teacher, and before you get worked up about us being in a bar, it was the only part of the restaurant that had available seating.

The lunch meeting was about a business matter. I knew all the parties, and I had made the introductions. There were mutual opportunities to provide some expertise.

The meeting went well and the mood was relaxed. With the main agenda concluded, our conversations turned to this and that. Above and behind me, the TV news was playing. I could not see it, but the businessman could and he was watching it.

"I hope they blast them to bits," he muttered. I pivoted to look. The other parties glanced up too.

The news anchor was discussing reports that Russian forces in Syria had fired on Israeli warplanes. The Kremlin was denying it, but the Israelis saw the situation differently.

We watched for a few moments before I turned back around and said, "I'm not worried about Israel's abilities to defend herself. They have one of the best militaries in the world."

"I'm hoping the Russians blast the *Israelis* to bits," the businessman growled. He shot me a steely gaze.

An awkward pause ensued as I realized I had misread him. I sought for an appropriate reply, but none came.

The atheist broke the silence. "The Balfour Declaration is one of the greatest blights on world history," he volunteered. "The current problems in the Middle East can be traced back to letting the Jews think they have rights to that land."

"What's the Balfour Declaration?" the pastor asked.

This was my chance to lend some much-needed perspective. "The Balfour Declaration was issued towards the end of WW1, around 1917. It outlined Britain's intentions to establish a homeland for the Jewish people in the area we now know as Israel. Back then it was called Palestine, but it wasn't until...."

"And it still should be!" the atheist interjected. He was on a roll. "It's criminal the way the Palestinians have been mistreated by the Israelis. The Jews have managed to convince everybody that Palestine is their rightful homeland. Our dumb leaders just play along with the whole deception, giving the Israelis everything they ask for."

"That's my point!" the businessman retorted. "They'll fight to keep the Golan Heights, and that territory belongs to Syria. The Israelis have no business being there in the first place. They are going to drag us all into WW3."

I glanced at the pastor, hoping for some words of wisdom. Reason had abandoned the premises.

The pastor cleared his throat. “Well,” he slowly mused, “I know a lot of people feel the Jews have a right to their ancestral homeland, but I don’t believe that is what the Bible teaches.”

I sat in stunned silence.

He continued, “Perhaps my new friend here (he smiled at the atheist) might have imagined that’s what I believed, but many Christians misunderstand these issues. God’s promises to the Jewish people were for a specific period of time, and the Bible teaches that God has moved beyond the problems of the Jews. He is now focused on the church.”

The pastor paused and glanced at me. I was still speechless.

“I think the holocaust was a very tragic time for the Jews,” the pastor pontificated. “However, all people have suffered at the hands of others throughout human history. We were unjust to the Native Americans as a case in point. Should we just turn over this entire country to all the Indian tribes since this was their ancestral homeland? Of course not! It was wrong to displace the Palestinians, and it’s the right thing to pursue a two-state solution now.”

I could continue narrating this discussion, but the picture is painted. This meeting took place a few weeks ago, and I’ve tried to relate the dialogue as I recall it.

Let’s evaluate the responses of the parties here. The businessman professes to be a Christian, but I don’t see much evidence of it in his life despite the fact that he regularly attends a popular mega-church in this area. I’m confident he’s not well-read on the Middle East, so his views are probably formed by the media and opinions of others.

I’ve watched him play both sides. I’ve seen how he acts one way around one type of crowd and another way with a different group. I’ve known him for a long time, enough to know that some of his choices show very little governance by the Holy Spirit. I attribute his mounting personal trials to this double-mindedness (James 1:8), and I’m compelled to admit that by Biblical standards he’s probably not a believer.

The atheist is actually a pretty good guy! He’s got better moral fiber than many Christians I know, and he’s generally regarded as an upstanding person in my community. He is charitable, and he publicly advocates for those who are less fortunate. Politically, he leans left – rather hard left on climate change, immigration, and gun control. I guess it’s no surprise that he remains in-step with that edge of the political spectrum when it comes to his views of Israel.

That said, he and I get along well and he’s told me a few times how much he respects me. I’ve had a number of opportunities to share my faith with him, but he insists on holding to the notion that his good works will place him in good standing “...if indeed there is a God.” I’m continuing to pray for him, and he knows that.

What about me? Well, I’m more than a Bible class teacher since I’m also an entrepreneur, an artist, and a devoted husband and father. But it’s the last seven years of teaching an adult class at my church that has challenged me to put my nose deep into the Word of God, to set aside unfounded notions, and to “study to show myself approved unto God” (2 Tim. 2:15).

It’s this discipline - and the challenges that come with it - that have shaped the views I have and which I believe the Word of God teaches. I accept the Scriptures at face value, so it’s evident to me that the Jewish people were to be regathered back to their ancestral homeland by a sovereign act of God (Ezek. 36). Historically, the early rumblings of this began with the Balfour Declaration, and they climaxed when

Israel became a nation in 1948. For all practical reasons, that regathering continues today, although the Jews remain in spiritual unbelief just as the Bible declared they would be (Ezekiel 20:33-38; 22:17-22).

And because I feel future prophecies will be fulfilled just as literally as past ones were, I believe there will be a second worldwide regathering of the Jews to Israel. This future event will be different than the first one according to Isaiah 11:11-12:6. This next one will be the final such event, and it will signal Israel's imminent blessing as she enters the Millennial Kingdom.

There will be a terrible period of time for the Jews before that point, the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7). Those of them who persist in spiritual unbelief will die (Zech. 13:8-9); the smaller portion will be spared. This is all laid out candidly in the Scriptures, so it's not hard to see.

But the important takeaway here is God has *not* forgotten the Jews! Nor is He "focused on the church" to any exclusion or exception of his chosen people. The presence of national Israel today is not "irrelevant" - or even "problematic" - as many church leaders claim.

I know the Bible well enough to know that such ideas are heresy. I don't care who teaches them, how many degrees they have, how big their audience is, or how many books they've read or sold - they are wrong! God still has great plans for his chosen people, and they are the same intentions He spelled out a long time ago. He hasn't changed His mind, regretted His decisions, or moved on to 'Plan B.'

Now, I'm convinced of my views because I don't contort the Scriptures to mean something other than what they are saying. So I don't need to overlook the stalwart truths of Romans 9-11 which make a watertight case for God's continued devotion to the Jews. The Jews have rebelled as God declared they would, the world has reviled the Jews as God prophesied it would, and the Jews have regained their ancestral homeland as God predicted they would.

Furthermore, I don't need to argue that the Millennial Kingdom is really a 'spiritual kingdom' or that "Israel" now means "the church." Neither position is true. The Millennial Kingdom is a literal earthly kingdom with Israel and Jerusalem as its headquarters. And "Israel" means Israel, just like it says. I don't need to hold to any position concerning the current situation in Israel or any of the regions around it other than it's all coming together according to God's perfect and prophetic plan.

As I study the Bible, it affirms that God remains the same yesterday, today, and forever. The modern state of Israel amounts to a miracle in our time, and it is profound evidence that God says what He means and He means what He says. Any other position on this matter confirms one's inability - or unwillingness - to accept the Biblical definition of who God really is.

And that point brings me to the fourth party in our little meeting: the pastor. This guy dismays me the most.

This is an acquaintance of mine and he's highly-educated from a renowned conservative seminary - which just goes to show formal education is not all it's cracked up to be. He and I are not close, but we've met socially a few times. By standard assessments, his church is doing well and people speak respectfully of him.

So why doesn't this guy regard Israel the way he ought to? The real question is, "Why do so many church leaders fail to interpret the Word of God as it needs to be interpreted?"

They don't want to.

If you don't like that answer, here are some others to consider:

- **They are stupid.** By this, I mean they are mentally, emotionally, or otherwise incapable of responsibly processing the truth. In a national park a while back, a woman walked right up to a wild buffalo to photograph it. It gored her badly. The signs warned her about this, the bystanders told her not to do this, and common sense advised against this, but she did it anyways. She was stupid! She did not process relevant information the responsible way. For one reason or another, she lacked the essential capacity.
- **They are fools.** This is a bit different than the first reason though the end results are similar. The Biblical definition of a fool is one who is unable to learn (see “stupid”) or is unwilling to learn. This latter element leans toward a spiritual problem. Proverbs says a lot about fools, and their outcomes are never good because they violate God’s Word and they rebut God’s standards. Basically, they get what they deserve. We draw nearer to the core problem here with this notion of “fools.”
- **They are deceived.** Here, we take one step closer to the terminal issue. It’s easy to lose your way when you’re not paying attention to the signs, and that’s exactly what’s happening with a lot of church leaders today. By failing to respect God’s Word as they should, and by willfully ignoring its instructions, they are opening themselves up to influences and interpretations which cross the grain of divine truth. As a result, “deceptive spirits” are unleashed (1 Tim. 4:1), political correctness invades, and lowest common denominators are elevated to highest esteem. When deception enters a church, Biblical truth is always mocked and doubted.
- **They are depraved.** Okay, now we’re fundamentally back to “they don’t want to” since it’s our depravity that causes us to make wrong choices. God’s Word is either right or wrong. It’s all black and white here; there’s no gray. If you believe it is right, then you must believe everything it states, even if that’s inconsistent with the world’s opinions or the ones you want to have. The worst thing to do is willingly dismiss or dilute the truth that “...will never pass away.” (Matt. 24:35). It’s mortally dangerous to flirt with eternal consequences.

Perhaps some are thinking, “Now wait a minute! Don’t be so dogmatic. What if I just have a different understanding of these passages about Israel and the Jews? What if I genuinely believe that the Bible is saying something different here? Isn’t that alright?”

No, it’s not.

God’s Word should not be subordinated to spineless relativism and personal opinion. Its animate and divine nature is the reason it convicts and changes lives (Heb. 4:12). If you question its accuracy, intents, and effect, it’s tantamount to doubting its Divine Author.

Moreover, we are specifically instructed to hold to proper prophetic interpretations (2 Peter 1:20) which is one way of saying there’s no room for any “You’ve-got-your-opinion-and-I-have-mine” postures. As I said before, there are clear standards with God’s Word, and it’s our obligation to seek them out and conform to them.

Misinterpreting Biblical passages about the Jews and Israel amounts to leaving your brain at the door. These are among the clearest prophecies in the Word of God. The only way to derive from them something they are *not* saying is to refuse to accept what they *are* saying. In that case, anybody’s opinion is as good as the next person’s, and there is no Biblical standard anymore.

It necessarily follows that the Bible always extols truth and correct interpretations. Since the Scriptures do not contradict themselves, will we not contradict each other when we responsibly interpret them.

Alternative explanations which steer us away from God's intended message are neither correct nor are they from God. It is man's rules and interpretations that always render our service to God ineffective (Matt. 15:9), and we can ill-afford such compromise in tenuous times as these.

Let me conclude by returning to that lunch meeting and to the errant views of my companions. A time is coming when God will put the people of earth on trial for how they *treated the Jews* and for how they tried to *divide up the land of Israel* (Joel 3:2). God Himself will preside as Judge, and no corruption will taint the outcome. The evidence will be weighed and the facts will be made clear. The guilty will know they are guilty.

John MacArthur said, "If you get Israel right, you get your eschatology right." He is correct. Israel is prophetically significant in so many respects, and God is still at work with His chosen people. While events with the Jews and with Israel may yet take place which tax our knowledge and test our faith, we cannot permit the instability of human reason to override what the Word of God teaches.

Israel is God's covenant land, and the Jews are His covenant people. The Bible makes this clear. God takes His oaths with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and their descendants) very seriously!

We should too.