

SESSION 3

FOUR KEY NT TEXTS FOR CHRISTIAN ZIONISTS

KEY TEXTS 1: Luke 13:31-33

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you [your house is left to you, desolate. Matt 23:38]. And I tell you, **you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”**

A Christian Zionist interpretation

“Jesus envisages a day when there will be a conversion of heart and mind among the Jerusalemites. Whereas they once opposed and murdered their king, they will in the future rejoice and receive him” (Joel Willits).

Problems with this interpretation

“And I tell you ...” not *“But I tell you ...”*

Here and in the other two of Jesus’ sayings about Jerusalem, the emphasis is on judgement. (“If you ... had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from our eyes ... because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” Luke 19:41-44; “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near ... For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people ...” Luke 21:20-24).

Whereas the OT prophets spoke of judgement on Jerusalem followed by restoration, Jesus does not suggest any kind of future restoration of the city or the nation; instead he speaks of the coming of the Son of Man (e.g. Mark 13:24-26; Matt 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-28).

If Jesus is speaking about his second coming, could he be describing the same situation that Paul is thinking of when he says “...so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord ...” (Phl 2:10-11)?

KEY TEXTS 2: Luke 21:20-24

“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near ... and **Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.**”

A Christian Zionist interpretation

Jesus is predicting that Jerusalem will be ruled by Gentiles, non-Jews, for a time; but after that time it will be ruled again by Jews. This was fulfilled in 1948 and 1967.

Luke 21:20-24

An alternative interpretation

This is similar to several predictions in the OT when the prophet says that, after using gentiles to judge Israel, God will in turn judge those gentile nations.

E.g. “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride ...” (Is 10:12-14; cf. Is 33; 47; Jer 50-51; Dan 9:26-27; Ezek 38; Hab 1:11-23, Zech 1:14-21).

Rather than predicting eventual Jewish control of Jerusalem, Jesus is saying that Rome will eventually come under God’s judgement.

KEY TEXTS 3: Acts 1:1-8

3. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (*tes basileias tou theou*) ...

6. “So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘**Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom (*ten basileian*) to Israel?**’ 7. He replied, “**It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come to you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**”

A Christian Zionist interpretation

Jesus doesn't challenge the idea of sovereignty being restored to Israel. So he assumes that it *will* happen at some time in the future, and is therefore simply correcting the disciples' idea about the *timing* of when it will happen. It *will* happen one day, although the disciples cannot know when.

Sovereignty *was* restored to Israel when the state of Israel was created in 1948.

Acts 1:1-8

An alternative interpretation

Jesus has been speaking about *the kingdom of God*. But the disciples' question shows that they are still assuming that *the kingdom of God* must include *the kingdom of Israel*.

Verses 7 and 8 need to be taken together; v 8 gives the disciples a new and different understanding of the kingdom of God: it isn't a literal, political kingdom; it isn't related to one particular nation; and it isn't tied to one particular piece of land.

Jesus therefore is not only challenging their idea about the *timing*; he is challenging *the idea of restoring sovereignty to Israel*. Jesus challenges their ideas in the same way as he challenges the disciples' hopes about Jesus redeeming Israel (Luke 24:13-35). The disciples had to change their idea of the kingdom of God: it's not about Jews enjoying independence in a Jewish state in their own land, but a new kind of kingdom which includes people of all nations.

KEY TEXTS 4: Romans 11:26

Rom 11:1-14

1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham ... **2** **God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew...**

11 So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. **12** Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will **their full inclusion** (*pleroma*) mean! ...

17 But if **some of the branches were broken off**, and **you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree**, **18** **do not vaunt yourselves over the branches**. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. **19** You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.' **20** That is true. **They were broken off because of their unbelief**, but you stand only through faith. So **do not become proud**, but stand in awe. **21** For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. **22** Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness towards you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. **23** And even those of Israel, **if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again**. **24** For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

KEY TEXTS 4: Romans 11:26

²⁵ **So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are**, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand **this mystery**: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number (*pleroma*) of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ **And so** (*houtos*, in this way) **all Israel will be saved**; as it is written,

‘Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.’

²⁷ ‘And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.’

²⁸ As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but **as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors**; ²⁹ **for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable**. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

³³ O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! ...

KEY TEXTS 4: Rom 11:26

A Christian Zionist interpretation

Paul believes that God still has a special purpose for *ethnic Israel*, the Jewish people, and looks forward to the time when “all Israel” will recognise Jesus as Messiah.

The return of Jews to the land must be seen as be part of the whole sequence of events leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus, when there will be either a mass conversion of Jews or at least a larger proportion recognising Jesus.

Rom 11:26

An alternative interpretation

Paul believes that “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (11:2), and that “as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their forefathers” (11:28). But he has also said that “a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly ... Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly ...” (2:28-29).

Paul speaks of Jews who have not accepted Jesus as Messiah as “branches ... broken off because of their unbelief ...” (11:17-24). He is somehow able to believe both that the Jewish people are “loved for the sake of their forefathers” and that those who do not believe are like branches that are” broken off because of their unbelief.”

Although Paul is optimistic about Jews coming to believe in Jesus (“so that .. they too may now receive mercy” 11:31), and prays for their salvation (“my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved” 10:1), he says nothing about the land or a national restoration for the Jewish people, for ethnic Israel.

Paul is looking forward to the time when “the full number (*pleroma*) of the gentiles has come in” (11:25) – i.e. *come into Israel*. So when he says “and so (*houtos, in this way*) all Israel will be saved,” he means that it is by the full number of Jews (“their full inclusion,” *pleroma*, 11:12) coming together with the full number (*pleroma*) of gentiles that “all Israel” will be saved. This is the “mystery” – the open secret: that Jews and gentiles come together in the body of Christ. This is the same understanding of “the mystery” as in Eph 3:1-6: “... my understanding of the mystery of Christ ... that is the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body.”

Romans 11:26

An alternative interpretation

If Paul's argument is about Jews and gentiles coming together in the body of Christ, would it not be a strange climax to the whole argument (which leads into his doxology) for Paul to be saying "And in this way *all the Jewish people* will be saved"?

Four OT texts are linked together, and the three texts from Isaiah (Is 2:3; 59:20-21; 27:9) speak of how the renewal of God's covenant *with Israel* will bring blessing *to the gentiles/nations*.

This fits well with Paul's reference to "the Israel of God" in Gal 6:16: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, *even (kai)* to the Israel of God" (NIV).

Paul is challenging wrong gentile attitudes towards the Jewish people: "do not boast over the branches," "so do not become proud," "so that you may not claim to be wiser than you are."

Session 3 CONCLUSION

Jesus' sayings about Jerusalem in Luke don't suggest that he wanted his disciples to believe that there would one day in the distant future be an independent Jewish state in the land. Like the OT prophets he spoke of divine judgement on Jerusalem; but unlike them, he had nothing to say about its future restoration.

The disciples almost certainly believed that the establishment of an independent Jewish state in the land was part of the coming of the kingdom of God. But there is nothing to suggest that they continued to hold onto this belief after the resurrection and their final meetings with Jesus.

While Paul was confident that Jews would continue to come to believe in Jesus, he didn't hold out any hope of return to the land or national restoration. The open secret of the gospel is about Jews and gentiles coming together in the body of Christ.

The disciples eventually embraced a new understanding of the kingdom of God – a kingdom which embraces people of all nations and all lands. Gentile believers in Jesus are incorporated into Israel; and the church is therefore the continuation of Israel.

What's the message of Ezekiel?

(Part 2 of *Christian Zionism and the Restoration of Israel*)

1. How would Ezekiel's prophecy have been understood during and immediately after his lifetime?
2. How do NT writers understand the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy?
3. Can Ezekiel's prophecy be related to contemporary history?

3 reasons why it can't: (1) There are significant differences between the return of exiled Jews after the Babylonian captivity and the return of Jews to the land since the 1880s.

(2) The return in the 19th and 20th centuries has not been preceded by repentance, and therefore doesn't fulfil the conditions laid down in Deuteronomy 30:1-10.

(3) It's hard to separate the prophecies about the return to the land from all the other prophecies that speak about the spiritual renewal of the nation of Israel.

What's the message of Zechariah?

(Part 3 of Christian Zionism and the Restoration of Israel)

1. Zechariah interpreted as a literal description of the end times
2. Zechariah's message in its own context
3. Zechariah as interpreted in the Gospels and Epistles
4. Zechariah's prophecy as understood in Revelation

HOW STRONG IS THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN ZIONISM?

- Because of the way NT writers interpret the OT, it's difficult to see how Zionism and the creation of the state of Israel should be seen by Christians as a/the fulfilment of biblical promises and prophecies.
- If the creation of Israel has no special theological significance for Christians, there is no reason why they should support Israel any more than they support other nations.
- A Christian Zionist interpretation of the Bible makes it difficult to understand the nature and history of the conflict or to appreciate the realities on the ground at the present time. These issues, as well as the justice issues, need to be discussed alongside biblical interpretation.
- If Christians want to understand the nature and history of this conflict, they need to adopt the same approach and the same values that they adopt to understand any other conflict.
- Christians are called to respond to immediate human need (Luke 10:25-37), to hunger and thirst after righteousness/justice (Matt 5:6), to be peacemakers (Matt 5:9), and to be witnesses to Jesus with all parties in the conflict (Acts 1:8).

What about Armageddon?

“The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east ... to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty ... And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon.

The seventh Angel poured his bowl into the air ... The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath ...” (Rev 16:12-19).

A Christian Zionist interpretation

There will one day be a literal battle at Megiddo when nations will join together to attack Jerusalem (as predicted by Ezekiel and Zechariah).

Armageddon

An alternative interpretation

Since this is apocalyptic - not straightforward prophecy - this cannot be read as a kind of “video of the future.” All the symbols (including battles and even the name “Armageddon”) have to be interpreted.

Chapter 16 is about the pouring out of “the seven bowls of the wrath of God,” which are leading up to their climax in the 7th bowl, which represents the fall of Babylon – i.e. the fall of Rome. “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!” (18:2).

These chapters are not speaking about an attack on Jerusalem in the “end times,” but about the end of Rome.

What about the Millennium?

“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for **a thousand years**, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until **the thousand** years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw **the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God**. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ **a thousand years**. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until **the thousand years** were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will reign with him **a thousand years**” (Rev 20:1-6).

A popular Christian Zionist interpretation

John is describing a literal period of 1,000 years when Jesus will reign from Jerusalem.

The Millennium

An alternative interpretation

Since all the numbers in Revelation (like 3,7 and 10) are symbolic, we can hardly understand the 1,000 years as a literal period of time.

There is no reference here to the return of Christ in his second coming.

There is no suggestion that “the millennium” takes place *on earth*.

The main focus here is not on the whole church, but on the martyrs and the way they share in the victory of Christ.

The vision speaks of how martyrs are sharing *at the present time* in the victory of Christ.