

MODERN ISRAEL IN THE LAND

(John W. Hilber)

No one questions the relevance of these oracles to the restoration of Israel after the exile. This began shortly after Cyrus's decree in 539 BC to allow deported peoples to return to their native homelands. But contemporary relevance of Ezek 35-37 is a more complicated question, especially in view of current political issues in the Middle East. Space only allows brief comment about ethnic Israel's future and the land after the destruction of Jerusalem and scattering of Jews during the Jewish-Roman wars (AD 66-136). One approach follows from a belief that ethnic Israel has been superseded as the special people of God by the church, who are now the heirs of Abraham by spiritual descent (e.g., Rom 9:8; Gal 6:16; 1Pet 2:9). In the future expectations of this theological view, the physical land promises are no longer relevant. The Bible has no bearing on the question of modern Israel's right to a national homeland. Another view regarding Israel's future is that some sort of physical restoration of ethnic Israel to the land promised to Abraham is necessary in order to satisfy the covenantal and prophetic language in the Old Testament (e.g., Acts 1:6; 3:21; Rom 11:26). This makes the best sense of the grand narrative from Genesis to Revelation. The expectations of Ezekiel and other prophets cannot possibly be fulfilled by events in the postexilic period. More telling, the next unit in Ezekiel (Ezek 36:16-38) stresses just how important it is to God's reputation not to "give up" on the nation Israel. But even assuming the view that God will yet restore national Israel, the application to contemporary, international politics is much more complicated than typically assumed.

First, only a genuine prophet has the authority to declare what God is doing in current events. The United Nations authorization of a national homeland for Jews may or may not be a stage in the fulfillment of Old Testament promises (see commentary on Ezek 37:1-14). More important is the realization that modern-day Israel is a secular state, and from the standpoint of Christian theology, the people as a whole have no allegiance to Israel's Messiah, Jesus. Consequently, the nation is not following covenantal stipulations necessary to rightfully enjoy blessing (see commentary at Ezek 36:16-38). Those who advocate a permissive political posture toward modern-day Israel should be as eager to apply Old Testament legal and prophetic expectations of covenant faithfulness and justice as they are to declare blessing. What of the prophetic pronouncement of covenant curses for faithlessness and injustice? Faithful Christian preaching requires application of God's Word without respect to person or nation (e.g., Acts 7:1-53).

Consequently, without contemporary, prophetic authorization on how to configure political boundaries today, in the Middle East or on any continent, Christians must exercise caution before declaring what God is or is not doing on the geopolitical landscape. What is clear is the mandate to uphold in a consistent manner the Bible's message of righteousness and justice.

