

Where does Israel Fit In?

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matt. 23:37–39; and Lk 13:34–35). In Matthew, this is immediately before the End Time teaching of chapters 24 and 25.

The words read as if Jesus is overlooking the city. He sees there has been pain in the past “you who kill the prophets”. There is also shame in the present “I longed to gather you, but you were not willing”. Sadly, future horrors await “your house is left desolate”. But there is also the promise of a return “you will not see me again until you say blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”.

The role of Israel and Jerusalem in the End Times is disputed. The dispute revolves around the timing of the Return of Christ and his reign on the earth. There are three different views, named after the phrase, “a thousand years” (Rev. 20:2–7); the Greek word is *chilioi*, which means either a literal millennium or an indefinite time of great length. The following chart identifies the three views and their opinions regarding the kingdom, the time of the Return, Israel, and Old Testament prophecies.

	<i>Kingdom</i>	<i>Timing</i>	<i>Israel</i>	<i>Prophecies</i>
Pre-Millennial Christ returns before he reigns	Literal The Kingdom is coming	The Kingdom is established after his return. Jesus reigns with the Church	Central to his return and reign	Many of the prophecies have a literal fulfilment
Post-Millennial Christ returns after the reign	Literal The Kingdom is here	The Church reigns and establishes a literal Kingdom before Christ returns	The Church has replaced Israel which is irrelevant	Prophecies have spiritual fulfilment in the Church
A-Millennial There is no literal reign	Spiritual The Kingdom is now	Church & Kingdom are synonymous. No future kingdom, some time Christ will return	The Church has replaced Israel which is irrelevant	Prophecies have spiritual fulfilment in the Church

When there are divergent views on any subject in the Christian faith, it is important to

- (1) acknowledge there are different views;
- (2) know what you believe and why;
- (3) be tolerant towards those who hold a different view;
- (4) identify if the subject is essential to salvation.

We do not consider that a person's salvation is determined by their view of the Kingdom and the End Times.

The Post-Millennial and A-Millennial views are very similar; both consider that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan. They consider the New Covenant has superseded all previous covenants, and the unfulfilled prophecies and promises finding their spiritual fulfilment in the Church.

Post-Millennialism and A-Millennialism would consider the events in Israel since 1948, the establishing of the State of Israel and the migration of Jews to their homeland are coincidences and an expression of Zionism. This is a nationalist, patriotic movement with no spiritual connections.

We must remember that all three views are opinions based on how the Bible is interpreted and understood. We will now examine what Jesus and Paul said about Israel.

Israel in Matthew

In Matthew 24, Jesus describes the signs that will identify his return and calls them "the beginning of birth pains" (Matt. 24:4-8). He then moves from the future into the present and how the early believers will be persecuted. Despite this, the gospel will be preached in the whole world, "and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:9-14).

Jesus then moves back to the future and speaks specifically about Israel. He talks about "the holy place" and "the abomination that causes desolation" (Matt. 24:15); those in Judea are to flee (24:16) but hopefully not on the Sabbath (24:20). "Then there will be great distress unequalled from the beginning of the world until now" (24:21). The word distress means severe oppression, or great tribulation. Immediately after this distress is the return of Christ (24:29-30).

The terms holy place, abomination, Judea and the Sabbath are entirely Jewish terms and have no relevance to the Church. Jesus is talking about the Jewish people, the land and the city of Jerusalem.

The phrase “the abomination that causes desolation” (24:15) is a reference from Daniel 9:27 and refers to something Jews consider utterly sacrilegious and totally offensive. Paul speaks of the Antichrist setting himself up in the temple and proclaiming he is God (2 Thess. 2:4). In Revelation, John saw the False Prophet “a beast out of the earth” (Rev. 13:11) cause the world to worship Antichrist “a beast out of the sea” (13:1). The False Prophet sets up an image to honour the beast (13:14).

Temple abominations have happened before. In 168 BC Antiochus Epiphanes, a Greek Syrian king, offered a pig on the altar in the temple. In 40 AD Emperor Caligula planned to set up a pagan altar in the temple precincts but was assassinated before it happened. In 70 AD, when Titus attacked Jerusalem, his soldiers set fire to the temple. The gold from the furnishings melted in the heat and ran between the flagstones. The soldiers prised apart every stone to find the gold, as predicted by Jesus (Matt. 24:2). Roman feet on the holy ground desecrated the temple.

There is a conundrum here; both Jesus and Paul spoke of the temple, but this was before the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. There is no temple in Jerusalem today; on the site of what was Solomon’s temple is the Dome of the Rock, a mosque, one of the most holy places in Islam. It is fascinating, but we should observe what is happening in Jerusalem without making speculations or listening to conspiracy theories.

Israel in Luke

Luke’s account follows the content of Matthew 24 but adds; “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk. 21:24). This verse is translated by Kenneth Wuest, a Greek scholar as, “Jerusalem will be under the heel of the conquering Gentiles until the period of Gentile domination has run its course”. When Israel took possession of the entire city following the Six Day War in 1967, they declared Jerusalem to be their eternal capitol. Has the period of Gentile domination run its course? If this is true we are living in extra time, with the final whistle about to blow.

Israel in Paul

Romans has three sections; doctrinal (Chaps. 1–8), historical (Chaps. 9–11), and practical (Chaps. 12–16). The historical section charts the history of Israel and how they stumbled over righteousness by faith (9:30–33). Paul’s prayer is for the Israelites to be saved (10:1) and then makes an incredible statement; “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved” (11:25–26).

Paul uses an analogy of a natural and a wild olive tree. Some branches of the natural olive tree (Israel) have been broken off, and shoots from the wild olive (the Gentiles) have been grafted in (11:17). For any Israelites who do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted back in, “for God is able to graft them in again” (11:23).

Has the new covenant voided all previous covenants? Is God obliged to honour covenants with people who do not believe? Paul claims that even though Jews are enemies because Gentiles are included in the new covenant, “Israel is loved on account of the patriarchs” (11:28).

David and Jonathan made a covenant about their families. Years after Jonathan’s death, David honoured his oath by showing kindness to Jonathan’s son Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9). If a human king honours his oath, how much more will heaven’s King honour the covenants with the people, the city and the land?

Sadly, the vast majority of Jews are either atheists or agnostics. This may be a grim result of the holocaust. They are still hardened and spiritually blind (Rom. 11:25).

How should the church respond to Israel? We are going to conclude this study by suggesting some practical ways how we can do this.

Next week, session 5, “The Role of the Church – The Parable of the Workers”

Suggested answers about how the Church should respond to Israel.

1. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6). Jerusalem means, the place or possession of peace. The city has rarely been at peace and more troublesome times are ahead. Our response should be to pray for peace.
2. Pray for Jewish people to find salvation in Jesus. There is a small, but growing number of Messianic Jews; that is, those people who have placed their faith in Jesus as their Saviour. It is important to remember that by observing the law, no one will be justified (Gal. 2:16), the most devout Jew is lost without Jesus.
3. As we pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for Jews to come to faith in Christ, we should equally pray for a spiritual outpouring on the Arabic people. God does promise he will pour out his Spirit on all people.
4. Keep watching the signs of the times and in particular Israel and Jerusalem. However, it is more important that we focus on the harvest.