

THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

F. Furman Kearley, Ph.D.

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INTRODUCTION

Christians have been in strong agreement for nearly two thousand years that Christ will come again. They have differed widely, however, concerning how, when, and where He will return. Most of these differences have centered around the understanding of Old Testament prophecies concerning the return of the nation of Israel to the land of Palestine and the nature and meaning of the millennium. Though there are many individual variations in attitudes concerning these matters, there are four main groupings or systems of interpretation concerning the prophecies and the millennium.

Antisupernatural/Liberal

First, the secular or liberal approach regards the restoration prophecies and the millennium as literal high hopes or expectations of specific Hebrew and Christian leaders, prophets, and writers such as Isaiah, Zechariah, and John. However, they interpret these as only human speculations and hopes that were over-idealistic. Their hopes never were accomplished; their prophecies never were filled (Richardson, 1947, pp. 177ff.).

Spiritualization/Figurative

The second approach is made by those of the spiritualization/figurative school of thought. Those who hold to this view maintain that the restoration prophecies basically were figurative in nature and pointed to the church (and spiritual blessings in the church) rather than a literal Hebrew kingdom. Similarly, they view the millennium as a figurative period instead of one that is literal in nature. This approach has been adopted by the Catholic Church since Augustine and by most mainline Protestant denominations.

In general, those who accept this approach are divided into two further groups with regard to their attitudes toward the millennium. One is designated “amillennial” because it does not expect a literal millennium but understands this to be a figurative period within the framework of the Christian age. The other, designated “postmillennial,” predicts a specific period and set of events that will constitute a millennium,

though not necessarily a literal thousand years. This period will occur before the Second Coming of Christ. In general, a spiritual nature for the millennium is emphasized rather than a physical.*

Literal/Premillennial

The third system of thought may be designated the literal/premillennial. Those accepting this view expect a literal fulfillment of the Old Testament restoration prophecies and of the millennium spoken of by John. They affirm that the restoration prophecies have not been fulfilled, but that God's Word cannot be broken and eventually must be fulfilled. Therefore, there will be a literal fulfillment in the future. They expect a literal return of the Jewish people to Palestine, then the Second Coming of the Lord, and then the millennial reign of Christ from a literal throne in Jerusalem.**

Within premillennialists there are two major groups. One is designated as historical premillennialism, while the other as dispensational premillennialism. There are some significant but complex difficulties between these groups, but these are beyond the scope of this discussion.***

Fuller Meaning/Conditional

A fourth system may be designated the fuller meaning/conditional approach to prophecy. Those who accept this school of thought emphasize that the message of the Old Testament prophets must be understood in the context of the prophets' lives and that of their immediate audiences. Thus, each prophecy must be studied carefully in its own historical situation. Further, they stress that the restoration prophecies, in their historical context, were speaking of the restoration of the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity.

The emphasis on the conditional nature of prophecy affirms that the restoration prophecies were made on the condition that the Jews in captivity would repent and return in full obedience to God. This approach affirms that the Jews did not return from captivity and live in obedience to God but continued to

* For information on the postmillennial view, see Brown (1882).

** For dispensational premillennial view, see: (1) Shank (1982); and (2) Lindsey and Carlson (1970). For information on the historic premillennial view, see Ladd (1956).

*** See: (1) Clouse (1977); (2) Erikson (1977); and (3) Ehlert (1965).

sin against God in various ways. These sins are documented in Haggai, Ezra, Nehemiah and in the sins of the Jews exposed by Christ in the New Testament. Thus, the conditions were not met and the literal restoration prophecies not only were not fulfilled but, indeed, could not be.*

This approach further emphasizes that the principle of typological prophecy, so clearly manifested in the Old Testament, also was involved in the meaning of many of the restoration prophecies. That is, God and the Holy Spirit had a higher and a spiritual meaning in many of the restoration prophecies beyond the literal meaning understood by the audience of the prophets in olden times. This higher, figurative, and spiritual meaning finds its fulfillment in Christ and the church.

Those who belong to the first, second, or fourth schools of thought discussed above generally do not believe the events in the Middle East are in any way involved in the fulfillment of prophecy. On the other hand, those of the literal premillennial school of thought affirm the present events to be the fulfillment of prophecy. Historical premillennialists take a mild view and say that these events may be, but are not necessarily, the fulfillment of God's plan. They do believe that when God's plan is fulfilled, something like this will happen. While there are some mild dispensational premillennialists, most of these tend to have a strong belief that the end of the world (and therefore the Lord's Second Coming) is near and that these events are a prelude to it.**

How some religionists view war and violence also is involved in evaluating the Middle East crisis in biblical perspective. When most religionists discuss the Christian stance towards war (apart from reference to any specific war), the emphasis is that Christians should strive for peace and work to avoid war and violence. However, when a specific war context is involved, some religionists modify this and take a strong position that Christians can and should participate actively in a "justified war."

However, a different dimension of the question is reached when a discussion of the Middle East crisis is considered. When the concept of Armageddon (Revelation 16:16) is raised, those who believe in a

* See: Mauro (1978), p. 221; (2) Kearley (1980), 4[1]:17-22; (3) Pieters (1950), p. 142; and (4) Fairbain (1956), pp. 102ff.

** See Hanna (1982), pp. 14-16. See also Jerry Falwell's objection on pages 16-17.

literal war at Armageddon often feel that Christians should work to start this war and should vigorously participate in it. Those who view the present situation as Armageddon believe that Christians should support Israel with vigor and urge our government to take an active part in the conflict in the Middle East.

In light of biblical teaching, what should be the Christian's attitude toward the Middle East crisis? Are these events a part of the prelude to the fulfillment of literal prophecies in the Bible? Is the battle of Armageddon about to take place? Is the Second Coming of Christ near? Will Christ come soon, establish a literal kingdom, and then reign for a thousand years from Jerusalem? What should be the Christian's attitude toward the wars and rumors of wars in the Middle East? Should the Christian be working with all of his might and praying with all of his power that we may avoid war in the Middle East and thus use his influence to work for peace? Or, should the Christian be praying that the war will become Armageddon and urge our government to get deeply involved in this in order to bring on a worldwide war that will fulfill the prophecies concerning Armageddon?

Answers to the above questions divide religionists of seemingly equal devotion and integrity. Serious problems often are posed in efforts to reach out to those of other religions (or of no religion). There are many other problems of serious proportions involved in finding a solution regarding the proper Christian attitude concerning the Middle East crisis by means of a careful, prayerful study of the Bible.

To put the discussion in sharper focus, some, who view the present situation in the Middle East as the fulfillment of prophecy, believe Christians must strongly support Israel and encourage escalation of the conflict. One champion of this view has said:

Should Christians support Israel? They must if they are to fulfill one of God's purposes in the church: to serve as a catalyst to provoke Israel to envy and thus to encourage her to seek God more earnestly in penitence and faith in preparation for the coming of the Messiah (Shank, n.d., pp. 6-7).

This same advocate strongly defends the conduct of Israel and affirms that God is responsible.

Do not condemn Israel for being "too warlike." She is fulfilling God's word and His role for her in these last days of the age. It is God who has made little Israel "a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth" to thresh her adversaries round about her. If you must criticize someone for Israel's military prowess and successes, take the matter up with God, for He is responsible (Shank, n.d., pp. 6-7).

While the above statement may seem strange and extreme to many, it is representative of an increasingly vocal element among some religionists who view the present Middle East crisis as the beginning of a holy war understood to be the battle of Armageddon. They view this holy war as inevitable and victory for Christians as certain, culminating in the establishment of the literal reign of Christ for a millennium in Jerusalem.

The number of religionists espousing this view has been growing steadily for one-and-a-half centuries. The growth has accelerated tremendously during the last decade. One source estimates the present number of members in this movement to be between 30 and 50 million in the United States alone.* In addition, there are many millions in Europe, Canada, Australia, and even in South America. In general, most of them would accept the designation as premillennialists, although the full picture is more complex.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

To understand the present Middle East crisis and its relationship to Christianity, one needs to study thoroughly the history of dispensational premillennialism, Zionism, and the state of Israel over the last one-and-a-half centuries. Sources for such a study are provided in the footnotes, but such a study is impossible here. Hopefully, a brief résumé will be helpful and stimulate more thorough study.**

The main feature of dispensational premillennialism relative to the Middle East crisis is the doctrine that all the biblical prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel relate to the return of the Jewish people to their homeland prior to the Second Coming of Christ. About 1830, J.N. Darby, one of the founders of the Plymouth Brethren, began teaching what has come to be called dispensational premillennialism. Many have espoused and popularized this doctrine. No one person has been more influential in spreading dispensational teachings than C.I. Scofield. His Bible study courses, preaching, numerous articles, pamphlets, and his *Scofield Reference Bible*, popularized the doctrine throughout the United States and Canada. Though he did not claim originality for his work, he clarified and standardized the work of others (Krauss, 1958, pp. 111,34-35).

* See Mouly (1982), p. 6. Note the statistics on the many groups sharing literal, millennial views, including Zionism.

Scofield, in his scholarly and didactic works, drew heavily on the preaching and practical work of William E. Blackstone, who had laid a solid foundation for modern militant dispensationalism and Zionism. He accomplished this by his popular preachings, his famous work *Jesus is Coming*, and his benevolent activities on behalf of persecuted Jews. Blackstone affirmed: “The title deed to Palestine is recorded, not in the Mohammedan Serai of Jerusalem nor the Serglio of Constantinople, but in hundreds of millions of Bibles now extant in more than 300 languages of the earth” (1898, p. 235).

Blackstone is considered by some to have been “the father of Zionism.” He devoted much time and money to evangelization among Jews and to the advocacy of Zionism. He organized a large conference in Chicago in 1889 to discuss the persecution of Jews in Russia. He and other religionists proclaimed strong support for the immigration of Russian Jews to Palestine. He and others of like persuasion supported the cause of Zionism before large audiences all over the country via their prophecy conferences. A Jewish friend wrote Blackstone expressing his own appreciation and that of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Brandeis, who was at one time president of the Zionist movement in America. The letter stated: “Mr. Brandeis is perfectly infatuated with the work you have done along the lines of Zionism...in fact, he agrees with me that you are the father of Zionism, as your work antedates Herz” (Mouly, 1982, p. 8)

Lord Shaftesbury was another leader whose understanding of biblical prophecy moved him to work hard in England to return the Jews to Palestine. His daily prayers were directed to the Second Coming and a ring he wore on his right hand contained the words, “Oh, pray for the peace of Jerusalem.” He helped to create an atmosphere favorable to Zionism that survived well into the twentieth century when the Jews themselves began to press for a homeland in Palestine (Mouly, 1982, p. 7). One student of Zionism has observed: “Zionism is as old as the Jewish dispersion. The idea certainly did not start eighty years ago—the **organized movement** did” (Pragai, 1978, p. 27). However, both Jewish and Christian historians clearly conclude, based on two convictions, that Jewish Zionism never could have gotten off the ground, much less achieved the actual creation of the state of Israel, apart from encouragement from the religious

** See: (1) *Zionism* (1973); and Rutgers (1930).

community. The first is that the Bible prophesies the return and reestablishment of the nation of Israel in Palestine before the Second Coming of Christ. The other is the compassion and sympathy for the severe persecution suffered by the Jews, especially as these reached the zenith in the holocaust under Hitler (Young, 1978, p. 21).

Many have thought of the Zionist movement as a secular and political movement. While there have been some secular, unbelieving Zionists, basically the underlying conviction and emotional appeal has been based, either consciously or unconsciously, on the religious belief that Palestine belongs to the Jews (as promised by God) and that the Jews must return there. The basic religious nature of the present crisis in the Middle East is seen in the fact that the Zionist movement refused to consider any possible home for the Jews other than Palestine. For example, in 1903 the British government made the Zionist organization a provisional offer of an area of 6,000 square miles in the uninhabited highlands of the East Africa protectorate. This offer was warmly appreciated as a mark of British goodwill, but it gave rise to sharp differences of opinion between a minority of Zionists who urged its acceptance and a much larger body of Zionists who were alarmed at any suggestion of the diversion of Zionists' energies from Palestine.*

Modern Zionists clearly acknowledge the religious basis of their movement and credit the success to God in fulfilling His promises. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, evaluated the reestablishment of Israel as the fulfillment of God's promise: "I will surely assemble, oh Jacob, all of these; I will surely gather the remnant of Israel" (as quoted in Shank, n.d. p. 8). Many other Jewish Zionists could be quoted, both as to their belief that modern Israel is the fulfillment of God's promise to the Jews and to their recognition that denominational Zionists have helped greatly to create the atmosphere that makes modern Israel possible.

THE BASIS OF PREMILLENNIALISM AND ZIONISM

Many religionists today believe that the premillennial and Zionistic interpretation of the restoration prophecies is an erroneous one. I certainly believe that premillennialism and Zionism is based on an error-filled system of biblical interpretation. This means that the present state of Israel is "of men" and not "of

God.” Furthermore, it is clear that the premillennial and Zionistic understandings of Scripture, and practices resulting from these understandings (misunderstandings?), pose grave dangers to our present civilization.

Premillennialism and Zionism Wrongly Interpret the Bible

1. **The historical context of biblical prophecy must be considered.** Premillennial and Zionistic interpreters read the Bible as if it were written in this present generation. They ignore all of the history of Judaism and Christianity between the prophets and now, as well as and the historical context of the original statements.

For example, one such interpreter referred to Deuteronomy 32 as the prophetic ode of Moses, and viewed this as prophecy instead of seeing it for what it really is—a poetic history written by Moses concerning the experiences of the children of Israel in the wilderness. Clearly Deuteronomy 32:16-17,21 refers back to the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the incident of Baalpeor in Numbers 25 (and other similar instances of idolatry). When Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:21 in Romans 10:19, he is not citing this as prophecy, but rather as history repeating itself. In rejecting Christ, the Jews were acting as they did when they rejected God in the wilderness. If Deuteronomy 32 was a prophecy in any sense, and Paul was using it prophetically, he still was viewing Deuteronomy 32 in relation to events involved at Paul’s time in the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles. It is false and dangerous hermeneutics for a modern, uninspired interpreter to apply Deuteronomy 32 to the situation in the present-day Middle East.

Space does not allow a careful consideration of this passage or many others. Briefly, most of the passages used by premillennialists and Zionists are prophecies of restoration of **physical** Israel to **physical** Palestine from **physical** Babylon. The prophets before, at the point of, or during the Babylonian captivity uttered these prophecies. To the extent that they were fulfilled, they were fulfilled in the restoration proclaimed by Cyrus and led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others between 536 B.C. and the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Passages such as Jeremiah 30-31, Ezekiel 33-48, and others must be studied very carefully in their historical context and in terms of the history that followed between then and now.

* See: (1) “Zionism,” (1957), 23:955; and (2) “Zionism,” (1909), 12:678.

When the passages are studied in context, it will be obvious that God has fulfilled all that He could fulfill in view of the continued sinfulness of the Hebrew people.

2. **The conditional nature of prophecy must be recognized.** In Jeremiah 18:1-12, God clearly revealed the conditional nature of His promises and His threats. Verses 9 and 10 affirm: “At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; if they do that which is evil in my sight, that they obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.” According to verses 7 and 8, the reverse is true concerning His threats. If God’s threats are conditioned upon man’s continued disobedience and may be withdrawn when a man or a nation repents, then the same is true of God’s promise.

The prophet’s basic mission was to warn the Jews to repent and serve God or else God would take them into captivity. Amos 9 serves as an excellent example of the conditional nature of both threats and promises. In Amos 9:1-10, the prophet speaks of the destruction and scattering that was to be done in Israel, particularly in anticipation of the Assyrian captivity of the northern kingdom. In light of the rest of Scripture, and especially the message of the prophets, it is clear that the purpose of such threats was to move the Jews to repent. If the Jews had listened to Amos (and later to Hosea), the northern kingdom would have been spared and would not have gone into captivity. God’s threats were conditional, but the Hebrews did not meet the conditions by repenting so that they could be saved from captivity.

Further, in support of the above point concerning the conditional nature of God’s threats, the case of Micah and his preaching should be studied. Micah strongly condemned the sins of Judah and warned of the serious consequences of destruction and captivity that would come to Judah and Jerusalem. In Micah 3:12 he warned that Zion would be plowed as a field and that Jerusalem would become heaps. In Jeremiah 26:16-19, we are provided with an inspired interpretation of this, and learn that Micah’s prophecy was an unfulfilled prophecy. Jerusalem was not plowed as a field, nor did it become heaps. Yet Micah and God were quite happy that the prophecy was not fulfilled—due to the fact that Hezekiah, king of Judah, and the people of Judah listened to Micah and were moved by him to repent and to entreat the favor of the Lord. The Lord then “repented of the evil” that He had pronounced against them and did not

bring Micah's prophecy to fulfillment. In this event, Micah stands in exact parallel to Jonah and his prophecy concerning the destruction of Nineveh. Micah did not express a specific condition, and neither did Jonah. Yet it is clear from the inspired interpretation of both Micah's and Jonah's prophecies that the threats were conditional.

Amos 9:11-15 speaks of God's promise to bring back His people and to rebuild the wasted cities. God's promises to bless Israel in this passage are no more binding upon Him than His promises to the generation He delivered from Egypt and promised to take to Canaan. God did not keep His promises to the generation twenty years of age and older that He brought out of Egypt. However, it was not His fault, but the sinful Israelites' fault because they disbelieved God and died in their disbelief, as Hebrews chapters 3 and 4 clearly present. Had the Jews who went into Assyrian captivity repented and served God, and had the Jews who went into Babylonian captivity done likewise, then God would have blessed them and fulfilled all of His promises to them concerning a renewed kingdom and prosperous land. However, it is clear from Haggai, Ezra, Nehemiah, and the New Testament that the Jews, both during and after captivity, were no more faithful to God than those before. They simply sinned in different matters and directions. While they may have been cured from idolatry, they moved to self-righteous nationalism and the Phariseism of binding the traditions of the elders above the will of God. They shifted from the liberalism of disregarding God's law to the legalism of making laws where God had made none.

Proponents of premillennialism strongly insist that God's promise to give the land to Abraham and his descendants constitutes an everlasting covenant that never can be broken and that ultimately must be fulfilled by the restoration of Israel to the land. However, this assertion is refuted by the many passages which clearly affirm that the people's continuation in the land was dependent upon their righteousness. If they were righteous and obedient, they could stay in the land, but if they were disobedient and rebellious, they would be scattered and punished. Harold Monser has provided an extensive list of passages which affirm that the possession of the land by the descendants of Abraham was conditioned upon obedience to God and their refraining from idolatry (1960, p. 129). Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are entire chapters devoted to this concept. Deuteronomy 4:25-31 is a very explicit passage concerning the Hebrews'

limitations and possession of the land. God warned that if they committed idolatry they would “soon utterly perish from off the land whereunto you go over the Jordan to possess it; you shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall utterly be destroyed” (Kearley, 1980, pp. 17-22).

3. The actual fulfillment of God’s prophecies must be recognized in history. God did fulfill His prophecies and promises to bring the Hebrews back from captivity, to restore them to the physical land of Palestine, to rebuild the temple, to reconstitute worship in the temple, and to bless them in the land. It is clear from both sacred and profane history that Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return. Many of them chose to return, the temple was rebuilt, and numerous blessings came to them. The rebuilt temple stood and was in use from 515 B.C. to A.D. 70. The promises of God did not come to full fruition after the Babylonian captivity—not because God failed, but because of the Jews’ sins. When the Jews continued in their sins and rebellion (and ultimately when they rejected God’s Son), God abolished all obligation concerning His promises about a physical nation and announced through His Son, “your house is left unto you desolate” (Matthew 23:38).

Jesus then proceeded to prophesy the utter destruction of the city of Jerusalem and of the temple. Ezekiel 40-48 (concerning the rebuilding of the temple) was uttered sometime prior to 560 B.C. That temple was rebuilt as Ezekiel prophesied, and his prophecy was fulfilled. Christ Himself decreed the destruction of the temple that Ezekiel had prophesied, and it was destroyed in A.D. 70. There is no reason whatsoever, and no sensible approach to the interpretation of Scripture at all, that could lead one to look for yet another fulfillment of Ezekiel 40-48. His prophecy already has been fulfilled. The Jews sinned again and brought utter destruction upon the second temple. There is no prophecy of a third temple and no reason that anyone ever should expect at any time in the future that a third Jewish temple should be built. Ezekiel prophesied of one rebuilt temple, not two. Christ, in Matthew 24, announced the destruction of that temple and the abrogation of any further obligation of God concerning a physical temple and a physical homeland for the Jews.

The prophets had prophesied of one return and restoration to the homeland. That took place from 536 B.C. to A.D. 70. The Jews had their opportunity, but forfeited it. There is no reason to look for any further

physical fulfillment of those physical restoration prophecies. One restoration was prophesied, not two. Christ decreed an end of that restoration and announced the beginning of a new dispersion. If Christ and His apostles had expected a second restoration they would have so announced. The New Testament maintains dead silence concerning any further restoration of the Hebrew people to the physical land of Palestine after A.D. 70.

4. The principles of typological prophecy and the further meaning of prophecy, recognized and used by the New Testament authors, must be followed in interpreting Old Testament prophecy. The apostle Peter affirmed that “No prophecy of Scripture is of private interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20). This principle is illustrated clearly in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. The eunuch, reading from Isaiah 53, was asked by Philip, “Do you understand what you read?” The eunuch answered correctly for himself and for all others when he said, “How can I except someone shall guide me?” Philip, beginning in Isaiah 53, preached unto him Christ and explained the way in which Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the suffering servant was to be understood in Christ.

This same principle is true of all of the prophecy of the Old Testament. Apart from an inspired interpreter such as Philip, or an inspired interpretation such as is found in the New Testament, one is on dangerous ground when he begins making his own private interpretations of Old Testament prophecies. While we may think a particular Old Testament passage might contain in it some reference to fulfillment in Christ or in the church, we must avoid dogmatism with such interpretations, avoid binding such interpretations on others, and not divide the body of Christ over them.

The apostle Paul, in Ephesians 3:1-8, made it clear that neither he nor any of the other apostles or New Testament writers could understand God’s eternal purpose, or God’s promises and prophecies with respect to Christ and the church, until they were revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. Paul, Peter, John, Matthew, and the other New Testament writers, after receiving inspired interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies, wrote their meaning so that we today can understand. As Paul said: “I wrote before in few words, whereby, when you read, you can perceive my understanding and the mystery of Christ.” Thus, the first basic New Testament principle concerning the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is

that an inspired interpreter—that is a New Testament writer—is necessary in order for us to understand Old Testament prophecy.

Another clear New Testament principle in the use and interpretation of Old Testament prophecy is that certain Old Testament events or institutions, and in some cases poetry and prose expressions, were types or prefigurements concerning Christ and His church. Hebrews 9 clearly understood the tabernacle and some of its services to have had a literal Old Testament function, and yet in addition to have symbolized or typified the spiritual things about Christ and the church. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 10, understood the passing through the Red Sea to typify or prefigure baptism for Christians. Matthew likewise indicated that Israel's going into, and being called out of, Egypt was typical or symbolic of Christ being carried into Egypt and then being called out. When Matthew cited Hosea 11:1, he was using Hosea and the exodus experience as a type or figure. Studied in context, Hosea 1:11 is not a prophecy, per se, of Christ, but a historical reference back to the exodus.

The New Testament also clearly presents the principle that Old Testament prophetic expressions had at least a dual and perhaps a multiple meaning. Matthew 2:17-18 cites Jeremiah 31:15 as being fulfilled in the weeping at Bethlehem associated with the slaughter of the innocent children. When Jeremiah 31:15 is studied in context, it is clear that the original audience of Jeremiah would have understood this to refer to the figurative weeping of Rachel as the symbolic mother of the Hebrew people because the Hebrew people were suffering so much in the destruction of Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit, as He inspired Jeremiah, certainly must have had a more extensive and a more long-range meaning in consideration. Thus a partial meaning was fulfilled in the Babylonian captivity, but the full meaning was accomplished or fulfilled in the weeping at Bethlehem for the slain children.

According to 1 Peter 1:10-12, the prophets (by inspiration) may have had some consciousness that their messages had a meaning greater and more extensive than the one for their immediate audience. However, they apparently did not have a clear understanding as to the long-range meaning of their own message.

This same principle is true in some of the early preaching of the apostles. On Pentecost Peter said: “To you is the promise, and to your children, and to all who are afar off” (Acts 2:39). He certainly did not understand this to mean the Gentiles, yet it becomes clear from Acts 10 that the Gentiles were included in the promise. If Acts 2:39 could have a multiple (or partial) meaning to Peter and his audience on that day, and then a fuller meaning after the events of Acts 10, the principle certainly can apply to Old Testament prophets and some of their messages.

This multiple or fuller meaning concept is involved in James’ use of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:15-16. As noted earlier, Amos 9:11-15 would have been understood by Amos and his immediate audience to be a promise from God to the Hebrews of the northern kingdom. Israel had rejected the Davidic dynasty when she followed Jereboam in the rebellion against Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Amos was telling the Israelites that after they went into Assyrian captivity and the northern kingdom was destroyed, if the individual Hebrews would repent and turn to God, He would bring them again under the dynasty of David. He would bring them back from captivity, rebuild their wasted cities, and give them peace and security in the land. The words of Amos had a literal meaning to him and his audience. However, they had a fuller meaning to God and the Holy Spirit. This fuller meaning was made known by the revelation of James, which he revealed to other Christians at the conference in Jerusalem (just as Philip revealed the fuller meaning of Isaiah 53 to the eunuch). Even though the Jews had continued to sin against God, and thus had not received the fulfillment of the literal promise, the fuller and spiritual aspects of the promise were fulfilled in Christ and in the church.

Philip Mauro was at one time a premillennialist. Through careful study of the Bible he led himself out of that doctrine and wrote an exhaustive refutation of it. After extensive study of the arguments in support of premillennialism, and a response to each, he summarized the basic refutation of premillennialism. His response concurred with and underscored the four principles that have been stated above.

But some will ask: How about all those promises to and concerning the people of Israel, especially the promises of the repossession by them of the land God gave to their fathers?

The answer can be given in a few words:

(1) That most of those promises (if not all) were spoken before the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, and many of them, including all such as were to have a literal accomplishment, were fulfilled in that event;

(2) That the promises concerning the possession of the land of Canaan were conditional upon faithfulness and obedience on the part of the people of Israel, who were repeatedly warned that if their hearts turned away from the Lord they should be plucked from off the land (Deuteronomy 4:26; 8:19-20; 30:17-18; Joshua 23:13,16).

(3) Such of the promises of that sort as were unconditional are the heritage of the true Israel, the spiritual children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7,29); and they have their fulfillment in the true land of promise, which the fathers of Israel had in view; for they were desiring—not the land of Canaan, or any other earthly territory, but—a better country, that is an heavenly (Hebrews 11:16) [1978, p. 221].

5. Figurative language must be accurately and consistently distinguished. Many premillennialists are inconsistent in their interpretation of language. They mix literal language and figurative language extensively in the same passage. For example, they interpret Ezekiel 38 as a literal battle rather than as a figurative battle of spiritual forces of good and evil struggling for supremacy. Thus, they interpret the passage literally so far as war is concerned, but they interpret the elements involved in the war figuratively. Instead of literal horses and horsemen, they now have planes and missiles. Instead of swords, they now have automatic rifles and advanced weaponry.

The same problem is involved in their inconsistency in the interpretation of Revelation. For example, Revelation 16:10 and 19:21 generally are interpreted by premillennialists to refer to the great battle of Armageddon. They understand this to be a literal war between literal physical nations at the literal mount Megiddo in Palestine. Yet, they want to understand Babylon in this section to be figurative of the modern opponents of Israel. They interpret the horses, horsemen, swords, and other aspects of the battle figuratively since they believe that modern weapons will be used in the forthcoming Middle East war. Such inconsistency invalidates their approach to the interpretation of prophecy.

PREMILLENNIALISM AND ZIONISM CREATE GRAVE MORAL AND DOCTRINAL CONSEQUENCES

If premillennialism and religious Zionism are based on a false interpretation of Scripture—and they are—these false doctrines and interpretations may well lead to disastrous results of both a moral and a doctrinal nature. It is urgent that one consider the consequences of a doctrine. If the consequences are not in harmony with the principles of Christ, one should recoil in abhorrence from the doctrine.

1. **Militant premillennialism and Zionism must bear the moral responsibility for recent bloodshed in the Middle East and for more extensive bloodshed in World War III, if it comes as predicted by militant premillennialists.** If the present and forthcoming conflict in the Middle East were truly the great battle of Armageddon based upon the proper interpretation of Revelation and other prophecies, then militant premillennialists could feel vindicated. However, this is not the proper interpretation.

Had the state of Israel not been established in 1947, the history of the Middle East for the last 35 years would be entirely different. We cannot, of course, know what that history would have been. We can know, however, that bloodshed during the last 35 years has been caused by premillennial and Zionistic agitation that resulted in the creation of the state of Israel. As established earlier, without premillennial preaching in the western world, the atmosphere never would have been created to make Zionism, whether political or religious, successful. Further, if militant premillennialists and religious Zionists persist in viewing the Middle East conflict as a holy war and in pressing for the repossession of all territories formerly possessed by Israel, the rebuilding of the temple, and other such matters, World War III certainly could result. Millions then would be killed and their blood would be upon the heads of people like Jerry Falwell and so many others who, for a century-and-a-half, have pressed for this so-called “Holy War” (which actually will be a most **unholy** war).

One militant premillennialist has stated that Russia soon will conquer both the Middle East and Israel, and that this “will ignite World War III, whereupon God will destroy all the nations that came against Jerusalem.” Since he believes this is an inspired description of what must happen, he believes Christians must support Israel if they are to fulfill one of God’s purposes for the church (Shank, 1982, p. 4).

The question concerning Christians’ support for Israel is a two-pronged one. It is one thing to recognize that the present state exists and try to come to some practical, and moral, political, and economic solution to work for peace. It is quite another thing to view the present Middle East conflict as a holy war and then work to further escalate it rather than diffuse it (Shank, 1982, pp. 6-7).

If it indeed turns out in history to be that this present conflict is of men and not of God, then militant premillennialists and Zionists must bear tremendous moral responsibility for the slaughter and maiming of millions. What a terrible burden for the conscience, and what a terrible burden to carry—unrepented of—as one stands before God’s judgment. Proper interpretation of the Scriptures reveals that the present conflict is of men and not of God; consequently, Christians should attach no “holy war” significance to it. When God wants to bring judgment, He will bring it in His own time and His own manner. He has given us no inspired instructions other than to live a Christian life day-by-day.

2. When time and history make clear that militant premillennialism and Zionism is a false system of men and not of God, this will result in the disillusionment of millions who have been attracted to groups preaching this doctrine. If space allowed, past historical occasions could be cited when limited movements were started, based on the alleged forthcoming fulfillment of prophecy and a working for the return of the Jews to Palestine. Each time these movements failed, many became disillusioned, fell away themselves, and caused many others to be disillusioned in the possibility of understanding either prophecy or the Bible. Since the present situation is by far more pervasive, and involves millions of people, the damage that will be done by these false systems of biblical interpretation is incalculable.

3. Militant premillennialism, by the aggressive presentation of its theory, creates religious division that is unnecessary and destructive. This division eventually weakens and undermines the individual’s effectiveness. Theoretical interpretations of prophecies never should be pushed with the force of dogma and never should be the occasion of division among the people of God. If one wants to hold a theory individually and discuss it academically, fine. However, to push a theory to the point that it involves nations (and maybe even the world) in war is utterly insane.

4. The erroneous interpretations of premillennialism will result in producing unbelief in many present religionists and strengthen the unbelief concerning the Bible and Christianity among the irreligious, as well as among those who are believers in other religions. Unbelievers, and those of other religions, will use the obviously false interpretations as evidence that the Bible is erroneous or that it

is impossible to understand. Already, the ultra pro-Israel stance of militant premillennialism “has driven countless Arabs, Muslims, and other ‘third world’ people from the Savior” (Hanna, 1982, p. 15). The doctrines and practices of militant premillennialism result in harsh, unmerciful, unloving attitudes and actions toward the Arabs and other enemies of Israel. There is a clear tendency to practice respect of persons instead of recognizing that “in every nation, he who fears God and works righteousness is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:35).

Christians should be working to bring about peace between both sides, and to evangelize, in an attempt to persuade both sides to accept Christ as Redeemer. If militant premillennialists are successful in involving the United States in a war on the side of Israel against the Arab world, the Russians, and China (as Hal Lindsey is working to accomplish), the mission efforts of Christians will be hampered for generations, if not centuries, to come. Of course, premillennialists do not believe there will be centuries left, but rather merely decades (or less). However, since they are wrong, their doctrine is doing, and will continue to do, untold damage in the efforts to reach others with the true Gospel.

5. The premillennialists’ preoccupation and obsession with matters of eschatology leads to the neglect of emphasis on practical matters of Christian living and evangelization of the world, as noted in the section above. Many in these groups are not practicing Christian attitudes toward those in Arab countries. Their approach in doctrine hinders evangelization.

6. Premillennialists err in their approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. They do not make a proper practice of exegesis and hermeneutics. This erroneous approach not only leads them to wrong conclusions concerning eschatology, but also leads to erroneous doctrines concerning redemption, election, apostasy, and other important matters concerning the church and Christianity in the here and now.

7. The premillennial interpretation results in denying the doctrine of the free moral agency of man. If the Jews had free moral agency at the time when Christ first came, and God could not guarantee or force them to accept Christ, how can one believe that God will force Israel to accept Christ at His Second Coming? The very point of Romans 11 is that the Jews were cut off from the olive tree because of

unbelief. They could have, and can, come back into the olive tree at any time they believe in Christ. However, this is a matter with each individual Jew. God never will force them to believe.

8. The premillennial doctrine concerning the rebuilding of the temple, the reconstitution of the Levitical priesthood, and the reinstatement of animal sacrifices, contradicts plain New Testament teachings that Christ is the final and ultimate sacrifice. The book of Hebrews, especially chapters 7-10, argues plainly that the law of Moses and its institutions never were fully effective and no longer are in effect. Christ has replaced the Levitical priesthood and is a better priest. His sacrifice is sufficient, whereas those sacrifices were insufficient. His sacrifice has been made once for all, and there is no need for any further sacrifice. There is absolutely no place in the Christian age, or in the heavenly age to come when Christ returns again, for a temple with a Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices. The prophecy concerning the second temple in Ezekiel was fulfilled in the temple built by Zerubbabel in 521-516 B.C. When Christ decreed the destruction of that temple, neither He nor His apostles made provisions for building another temple, for another priesthood, or for any other sacrifices. This doctrine is in total contradiction to the entire purpose for which Christ came to Earth.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, I would like to present the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. It is a serious and dangerous thing for a man or movement to stir up nations to war at any time. Already hundreds of thousands have died and suffered extensively due to the Middle East crisis. Unless concerted efforts are made by all to end the Middle East crisis in peace, millions more likely will die and suffer.

2. One should study carefully and prayerfully, and examine his conscience thoroughly before accepting a doctrine or becoming part of a movement whose major goal is to create World War III and to cause the deaths of millions of people. One needs to be absolutely certain that the doctrine he is following is “of God” and not “of men” before he advocates a doctrine that will put the blood of other men on his hands.

3. It is one thing to espouse a cause or follow a theory that might result in persecution or even death to oneself. It is a totally different thing to become a part of a movement and to advocate a doctrine that possibly could bring death to thousands of others.

4. The difference between premillennialists and non-millennialists is far more than an academic discussion. To a great extent, it involves nothing less than world peace. It therefore is important that Christians study and properly interpret biblical prophecy. First, one should study that he may know and practice the truth. Second, he should study that he may teach in order those in the church, and his own children, the truth that they may not be led astray by false doctrine. Third, one must study and teach in order to be able to turn those who are in the error of premillennialism from that error, which is a powerful contributing force to the past (and possibly forthcoming) wars in the Middle East.

5. Christians must pray for peace in the Middle East. However, this is the most tragic consequence of the theory of premillennialism. Premillennialists must pray and work for World War III so that Armageddon will come. They cannot pray for peace.

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