



A Publication of C/JF Ministries and Messianic Perspectives Radio Network

Messianic Perspectives®

God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.

ISRAEL, GAZA, "DIVINE RIGHT," AND JOHN PIPER PART 1

BY DR. GARY HEDRICK



I'd like to clarify two things here at the outset. First, I'm not looking to pick a fight with John Piper—despite how the title above may sound (more about the title in just a moment).

I'd be way out of my league in a brawl with Bro. Piper, one of the most respected and revered evangelical figures in America. I know that better than anyone. Nonetheless, when asked to critique someone's published viewpoint on Israel and the Middle East, I'm inclined to oblige, and to offer my simple observations with (I hope) appropriate humility and a spirit of constructive, brotherly dialogue.

The second thing to clarify is that the title of this article is not original with me. I borrowed it from a very informative article Matt Smethurst wrote a couple of years ago for The Gospel Coalition's website.¹

For those who don't know, The Gospel Coalition (TGC) is a large and growing association of Reformed Christian clergy that's directed by a council (currently with 50-plus members) representing a number of conservative, Christian groups and denominations.²

Reformed theology is at the core of TGC's identity, and Piper, a member of the TGC council, undoubtedly represents the views of a large swath of Reformed evangelicalism.³ Therefore, we believe that responding to his views on Israel and the Middle East could be worthwhile and instructive for many of our readers.

This is precisely why biblical hermeneutics (i.e., principles that guide us in interpreting the Bible) is so important. Instead of just randomly putting the pieces of the biblical puzzle together in a way that satisfies our own whims or showcases our cleverness, we apply principles of interpretation that help us put them together in the right way.

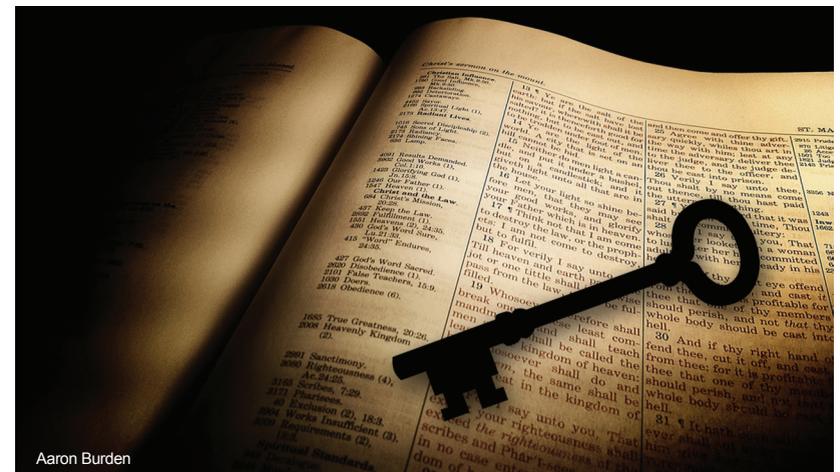
Of course, that's where the analogy between Legos and theology breaks down. There is no right or wrong way to put building blocks together, as long as the pieces fit. It doesn't really matter if you build a house or an airplane. However, when you're interpreting the Bible, that's not the case. In most cases, two differing interpretations of a passage cannot both be correct. One of them is right and the other is wrong. Therefore, we rely on the principles of biblical hermeneutics to help differentiate between the two.⁴



Legos and Theology

Children love Legos—those miniature, multicolored building blocks that stick to each other when you press them firmly together. You can dump out identical heaps of hundreds of little Lego pieces in front of three different children and they'll assemble three different objects. That's because the very same set of tiny pieces can be assembled in a myriad of different ways.

Theology can be like this at times. Three different people can start with exactly the same set of biblical facts and proof texts, and then put them all together in three different ways!



Keys to Interpretation

One guiding principle is that *the Bible should be interpreted in its most natural, literal sense unless there is a compelling reason (indicated in the context) to do otherwise.* This is important because allegorizing the Bible can be a "slippery slope." When allegorization gets out of control, it can be difficult to determine where reality stops and symbols begin!⁵

Another important principle is that *there is perfect continuity between the Old and New Testaments.* Because the same God was working out His purposes in both testaments, just as He is today, those two dispensations of divine activity are in perfect harmony with one another. Any hermeneutic that tends to delegitimize one or the other—or that says one is for the Church but the other is not—is wrong.⁶

And finally, the *Bible should be interpreted in its original Messianic Jewish milieu.* The writers of both testaments (Old and New) were Jewish, the early church was Jewish, the apostles were Jewish, the first missionaries were Jewish, and the New Testament (NT) itself is an ancient set of Jewish documents—so anyone who imposes a non-Jewish cultural grid on the Bible is bound to come up with some wrong ideas!⁷

Messianic Perspectives®

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Messianic Perspectives is published bimonthly by CJF Ministries, P.O. Box 345, San Antonio, Texas 78292-0345, a 501(c)3 Texas nonprofit corporation: Dr. Gary Hedrick, *President*; Brian Nowotny, *Director of Communications*; Erastos Leiloglou, *Designer*. Subscription price: \$10 per year. The publication of articles by other authors does not necessarily imply full agreement with all the views expressed therein. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Visit us online at cjfm.org. Toll-free OrderLine: (800) 926-5397. © 2014 by CJF Ministries. All rights reserved.

John Piper and THE GOSPEL COALITION

John Piper is one of a number of influential, high-profile evangelical preachers and educators who are part of The Gospel Coalition (TGC).

TGC's website says it's "a fellowship of evangelical churches deeply committed to renewing our faith in the gospel of Christ and to reforming our ministry practices to conform fully to the Scriptures. We yearn to work with all who, in addition to embracing our confession and theological vision for ministry, seek the lordship of Christ over the whole of life with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, communities, and cultures" (thegospelcoalition.org/about/council).

It's hard to find anything wrong with that mission statement. The aspirations and ideals it expresses are certainly honorable!

Several members of TGC's council are friends of ours. They're good folks. And we share many of their concerns about contemporary issues (like seeker-sensitive, market-driven "churchianity," eroding doctrinal foundations, and evangelistic excesses, just to name a few).

Nonetheless, one can't help noticing that the preamble on TGC's website quietly inserts the phrase "in the Reformed tradition" in the above statement. It says, "We are a fellowship of evangelical churches *in the Reformed tradition* deeply committed to renewing our faith . . ." (emphasis ours). Now we don't necessarily object to Reformed doctrine per se. Our founder, Charles Halff, often said he was Reformed in the tradition of Baptist Calvinists like Charles Spurgeon, who was careful to balance evangelism with predestination and who was eschatologically premillennial rather than amillennial. Bro. Halff considered the incessant lapsarian debates fatally flawed by their imposition of time limitations on an eternal God—so he didn't take them seriously. And of course, he never had any difficulty distinguishing between Israel and the Church!

And therein is the rub. The specific brand of Reformed doctrine espoused by TGC lacks, at times, the balance that a preacher and exegete like Spurgeon (just to name one notable example from the annals of evangelical history) possessed. Some evangelical scholars have reportedly been excluded from TGC because they could not embrace its neo-Reformed approach with all of its cultural and theological nuances. One wonders if Spurgeon himself (with his strong evangelistic emphasis) would qualify for a seat on TGC's council if he were alive today!

What concerns us even more than hyper-Calvinism, though, is that some leading figures in TGC, like John Piper, hold views about Israel and her place in God's plan that we believe are unbalanced—and that are, in some ways, troublingly unscriptural.



John Piper retired from his pastorate at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2011 after 33 years of faithful service. Today he serves as president of Desiring God Ministries, which takes its name from his bestselling book, Desiring God. He describes himself as a post-Trib premillennialist and says he believes Romans 11:26 foresees a mass ingathering and salvation of ethnic Israel at the Messiah's Second Coming. He serves on TGC's leadership council.



Dr. Michael S. Horton has served as the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California since 1988.¹ Dr. Horton is one of the more well-known Reformed theologians of our day, having authored a number of volumes on topics like systematic theology and discipleship, and serving as the host of a popular radio program, The White Horse Inn.²

Dr. Horton, as a proponent of covenant theology, believes that God's promises to national Israel as given in the Hebrew Bible were fulfilled in Yeshua, and that through faith in Yeshua, both Jews and Gentiles alike have equal access to those promises. Specifically regarding the promises of restoration to the Land as delivered through prophets like Ezekiel and Daniel, Horton contends that these promises were fulfilled during the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah, and that they do not look forward to any event in the future.³

¹<http://wscal.edu/academics/faculty/michael-s-horton>

²<http://www.whitehorseinn.org>

³<http://wscal.edu/resource-center/resource/the-church-and-israel>

How Important Is This—Really?

Why take the time to critique Piper’s views on Israel and the Church? Shouldn’t we live and let live?

We’re not just being contentious. It would be wrong to trivialize these issues by being unnecessarily combative and argumentative. However, we can’t stick our heads in the sand like the proverbial ostrich and pretend everything is fine. The truth is that what people believe about Israel and her ongoing relationship with God can have profound implications for all of us today.

Let’s remember that historically, replacement theology has contributed to a number of frightening (and, at times, even deadly) outbreaks of anti-Semitism. The Nazis, for instance, based their “final solution” policy, in part, on the anti-Semitic tirades of the famous Reformer (and replacement theologian) Martin Luther.⁸ These *ominous* words were reportedly posted at the entrance to the Dachau death camp during the Holocaust: “Sie sind hier weil ihr unseren Gott getötet habt” (“You are here because you killed our God”).⁹



On the Jews and Their Lies
by Martin Luther

We’re not suggesting that everyone who adheres to a form of replacement theology is anti-Semitic (or accuses the Jewish people of deicide). In fact, my own experience has been that just the opposite is true—the vast majority of our Reformed friends are not anti-Semitic.

Whether we like it or not, however, the historical connection between replacement theology and anti-Semitism is clear. Moreover, most Reformed theologians subscribe to one form or another of replacement theology (or supersessionism).¹⁰ As I stated previously, the implications can be profound.

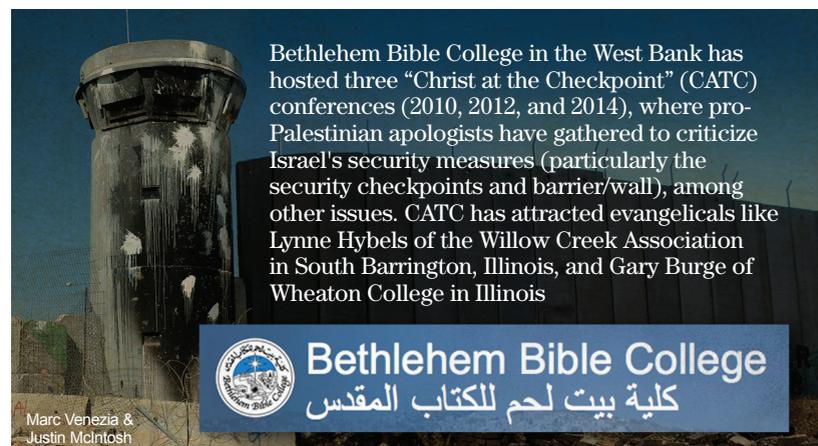
This is not a trivial matter. Jewish people have died at the hands of misguided “Christians” who claimed to have biblical grounds for their anti-Judaic views.¹¹ It’s serious business!

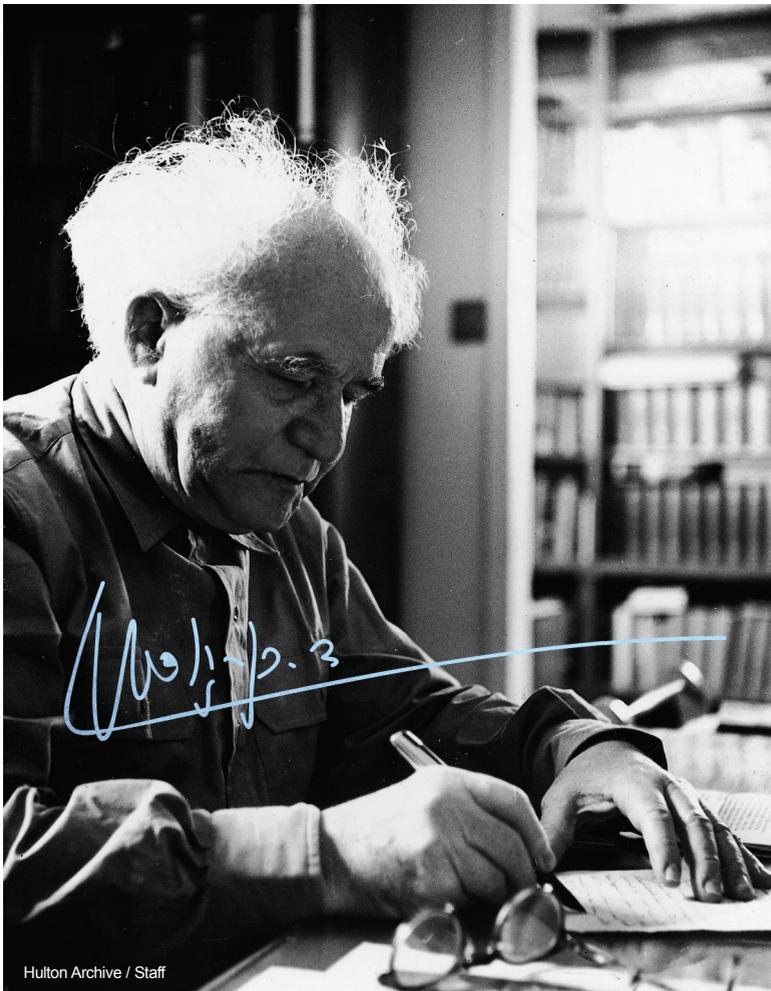


The 2014 Gaza War

Events this past summer in the Gaza Strip brought these issues to the fore once again—and the Middle East isn’t the only place where battle lines have been drawn. Even in evangelicalism, more and more people are characterizing the Israelis as evil aggressors in the ongoing Middle East conflict.

Bethlehem Bible College’s biannual “Christ at the Checkpoint” (CATC) conferences in the West Bank (2010, 2012, and 2014) have provided a platform for pro-Palestinian evangelicals to articulate their opposition to Israeli policies. Evangelical leaders who have participated in past CATC conferences include Lynne Hybels (Willow Creek Community Church), Gary Burge (Wheaton College), John Feinberg (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), Andrew van der Bijl (“Brother Andrew” of Open Doors USA), Tony Campolo (Eastern University), and others.¹²





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David Ben Gurion's Realism

David Ben Gurion, founder of the modern Jewish State and its first prime minister, once said, "In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles." He made that comment tongue in cheek, of course. Nonetheless, Ben Gurion was indeed a realist. He foresaw the near impossibility of a two-state solution—and of living peaceably with the Arab Palestinians. He repeatedly said there was plenty of room in Israel for both Jewish and Arab inhabitants, but knew the Arabs considered the Land theirs and did not recognize the Jews' prior claim.

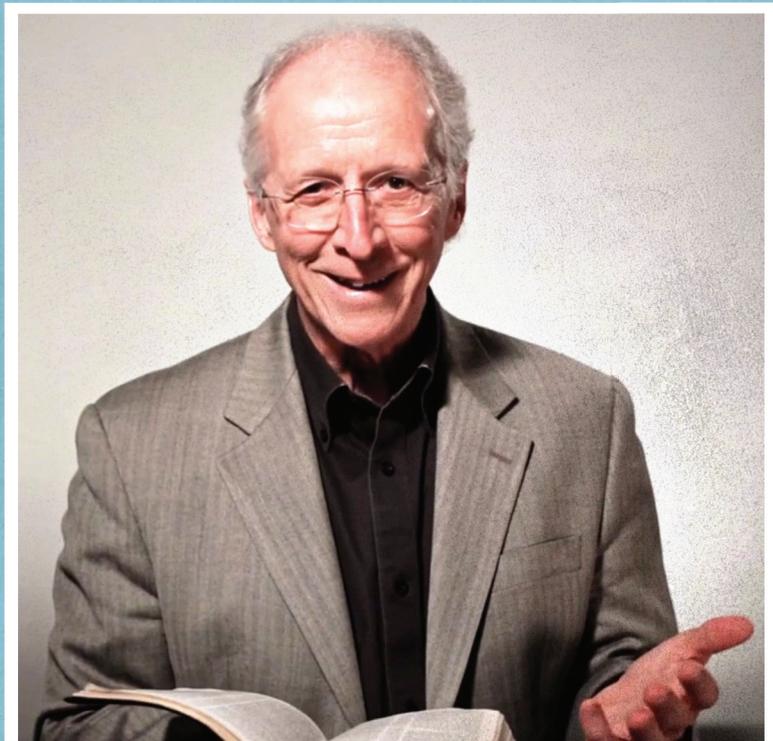
As early as 1919, nearly three decades before Israel became a State, Ben Gurion knew the stage was being set for an epic struggle between Arabs and Jews. He wrote, "Everybody sees a difficulty in the question of relations between Arabs and Jews. But not everybody sees that there is no solution to this question. No solution! There is a gulf, and nothing can fill this gulf We, as a nation, want this country to be ours; the Arabs, as a nation, want this country to be theirs."¹³

If even the founder of the modern State of Israel recognized this impasse, how can anyone hope to solve it today? As believers in Yeshua (Jesus), how should we view the Middle East? Which side should we support?¹⁴ What sort of Mideast policy should we implore our political leaders to pursue? Even more importantly, how should we be praying?

John Piper offers his answers to some of these questions in his "seven principles concerning the ever-contentious issue of 'the Land.'"¹⁵ We will analyze them one at a time.

JOHN PIPER'S SEVEN MIDEAST PRINCIPLES

1. God chose Israel from all the peoples of the world to be his own possession.
2. The Land was part of the inheritance he promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.
3. The promises made to Abraham, including the promise of the Land, will be inherited as an everlasting gift only by true, spiritual Israel, not disobedient, unbelieving Israel.
4. Jesus Christ came into the world as the Jewish Messiah, and his own people rejected him and broke covenant with their God.
5. Therefore, the secular state of Israel today may not claim a present divine right to the Land, but they and we should seek a peaceful settlement not based on present divine rights, but on international principles of justice, mercy, and practical feasibility.
6. By faith in Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, Gentiles become heirs of the promise of Abraham, including the promise of the Land.
7. Finally, this inheritance of Christ's people will happen at the Second Coming of Christ to establish his kingdom, not before; and till then, we Christians must not take up arms to claim our inheritance; but rather lay down our lives to share our inheritance with as many as we can.



—Adapted from "Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East," a sermon preached by Pastor John Piper at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, MN, on March 7, 2004. ©2014 Desiring God Foundation (desiringGod.org).

Piper's Seven Mideast Principles

Principle #1

God chose Israel from all the peoples of the world to be his own possession.

So far, so good! This is precisely what the Bible teaches. The LORD God told ancient Israel: *“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth”* (Deut. 14:2; see also Deut. 7:6).

He also declared, *“The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt”* (Deut. 7:7-8).

However, this divine calling wasn't random. It had a definite purpose. He wanted Israel to demonstrate her love for Him by helping and blessing the rest of the world. If Moses had convened a council of elders to come up with a mission statement for the fledgling nation, it could have read, *“We exist to love our God and to serve Him by being a blessing to the world.”*¹⁶ He told Abram, *“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen. 12:3b). God set His love on Israel and made her His special treasure so He could use her to bless the nations.

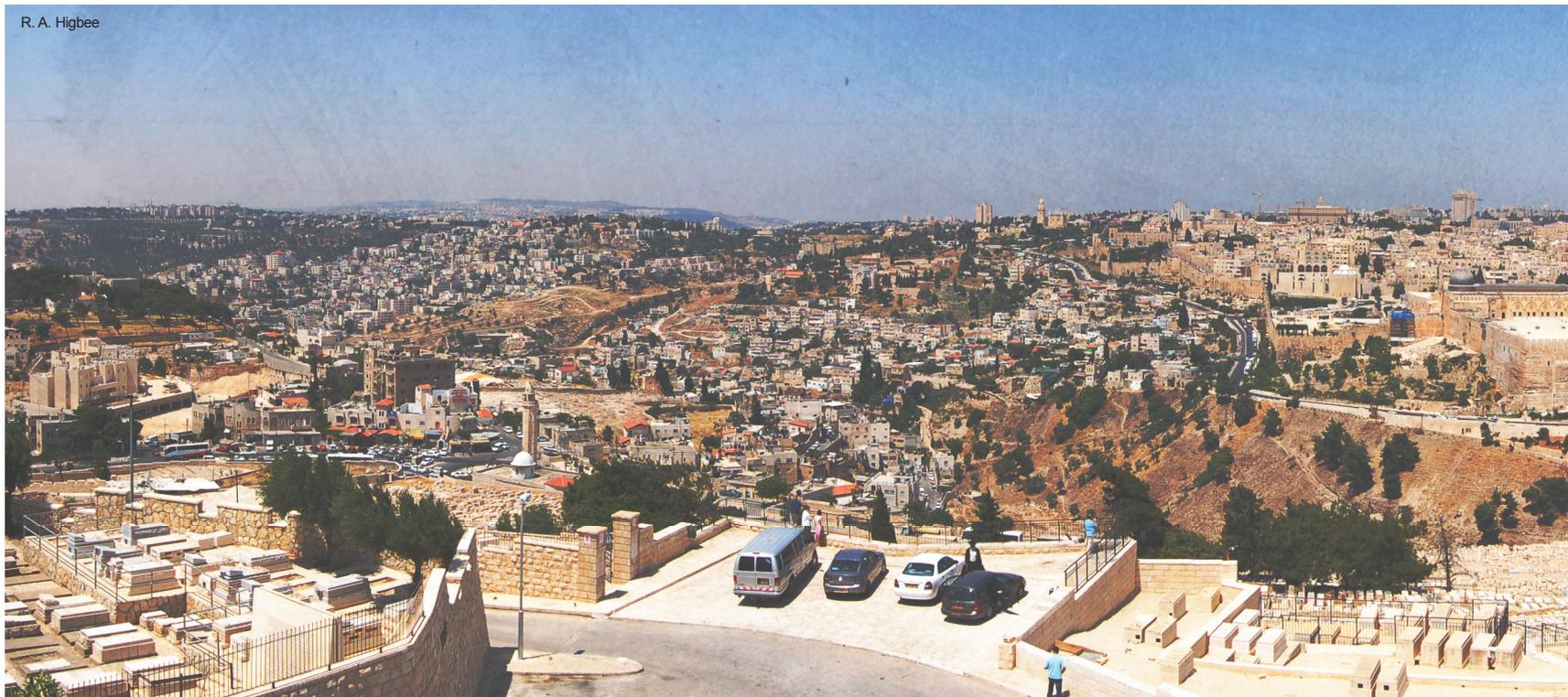
Principle #2

The Land was part of the inheritance God promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.

Again, this sounds good. On its face, the statement is indisputably true. Nonetheless, we need to make sure we both mean the same thing when we use these terms. Not long ago, I heard someone say, *“I don't understand what all the hoopla is about in Israel and the Middle East. It's just real estate—dirt, rocks, and sand. What's the big deal?”*



R. A. Higbee



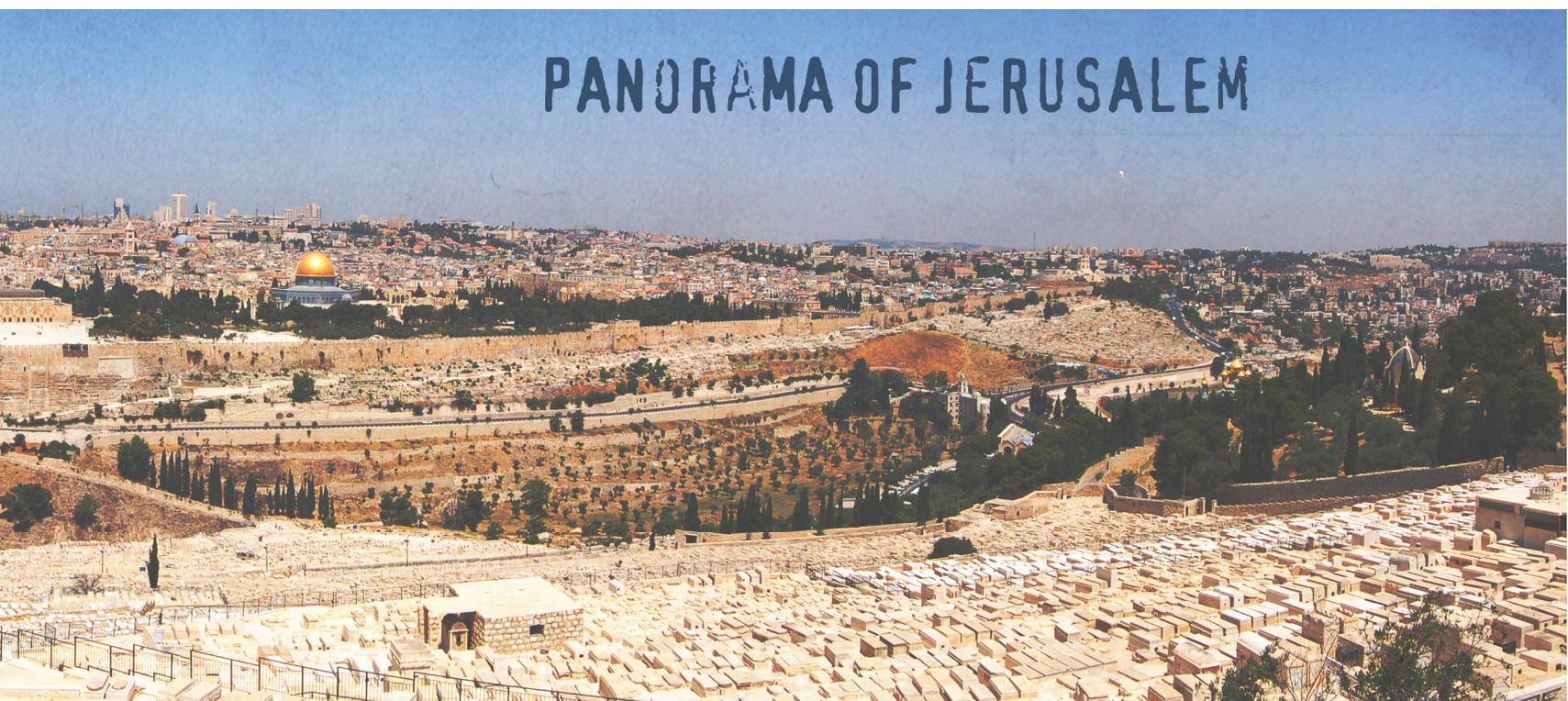
The big deal isn't the Land itself, but rather what it represents. God promised the Land to Abraham and his descendants through the line of Isaac and Jacob—that is, the Jewish people. Therefore, the Land of Israel represents God's promise-keeping power. It represents His love and faithfulness. It also represents His mercy and long-suffering grace, because after 4,000 years, He has miraculously started to bring Israel back home *physically* (to Eretz Yisrael) and will (possibly soon) also bring her back home *spiritually* (to Himself).

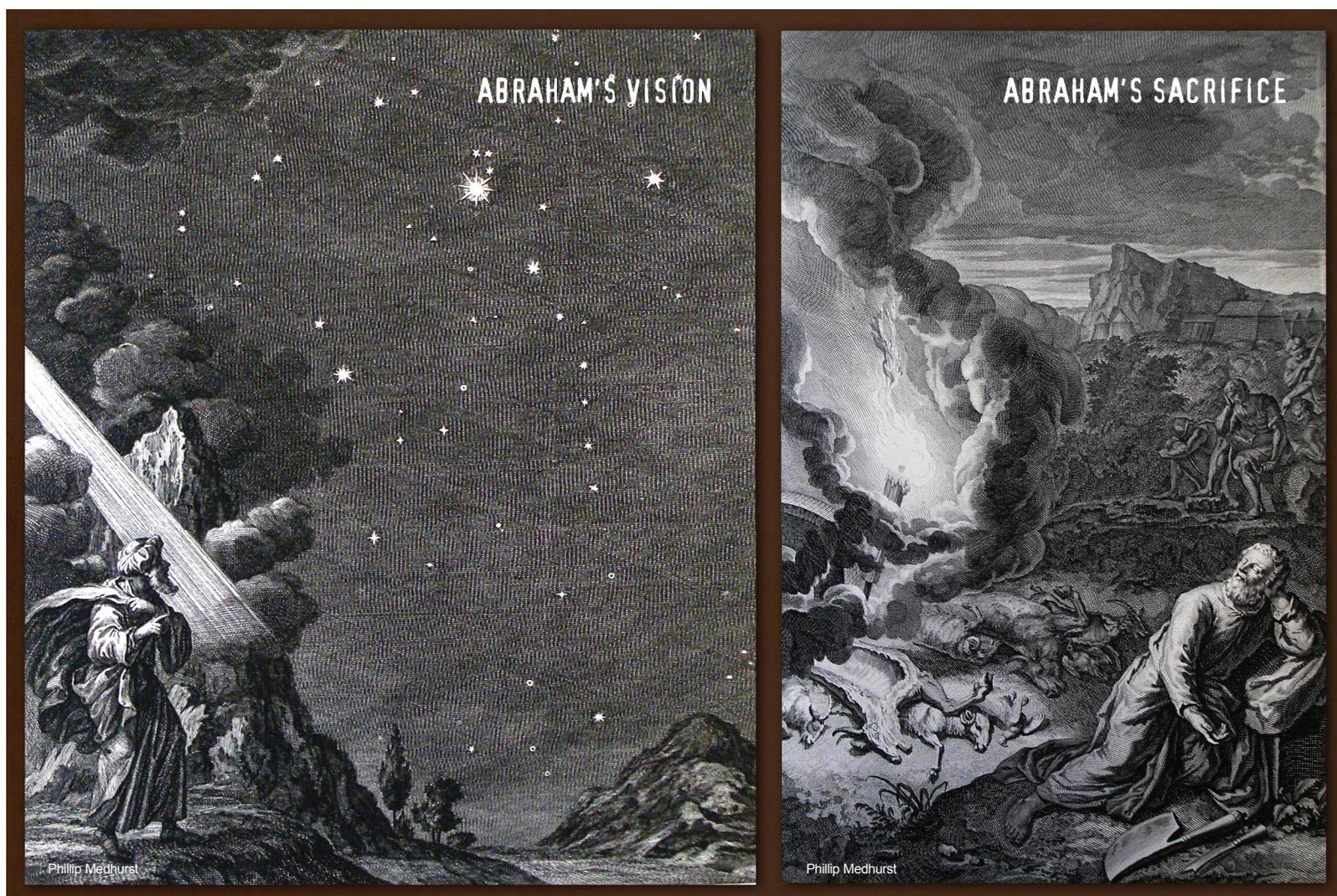
Paul talked about this miraculous end-time resurrection of national Israel: *For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?* (Rom. 11:15).¹⁷

But here's where things start to get weird. In Piper's scheme of things, there's no restoration per se, because Israel forfeited her inheritance when she broke her covenant with God in the first century. According to supersessionists, God has handed down His sentence: national Israel will never be restored.¹⁸ They believe that the Church is now New Israel and, as such, has inherited Israel's Old Testament (OT) promises. One of those promises is that the nation will be restored someday. We saw above that Paul says this future restoration will be like "life from the dead"!

So here's the puzzle: If the Church is now "Israel," how can Christians today (the Church) be restored to a right relationship with God, as Paul says? Israel had a prior connection with God (in the old dispensation) and was set aside for a while because of her unbelief. Someday that connection will be restored. So it's not hard to see how this sequence fits Israel: connection → alienation → restoration.

But how could it possibly fit the Church? The alienation part is no problem, of course (Col. 1:21). But when was the Church connected to God prior to that? When I became a believer in 1966, I wasn't restored. I couldn't be restored to something I never had! To be restored, I would have had to have a previous relationship with God. But that wasn't the case.





The concept of restoration, then, is most naturally and logically applied to Israel—not to the Church (Eph. 2:11-13).

Piper evidently recognizes another problem here. To his credit, he sees that any restoration of Israel (or in his thinking, New Israel) should also include a restoration to her covenant Land in the Middle East. This is a detail that many amillennialists conveniently overlook, or simply spiritualize, because of its problematic nature.¹⁹ But Piper doesn't shrink from the difficulty. Kudos to him for consistency! If the Church is indeed New Israel, then she is the holder of the title deed to the Land of Israel.

More about this later when we come to Principle #6.

Principle #3

The promises God made to Abraham, including the promise of the Land, will be inherited as an everlasting gift only by true, spiritual Israel, not disobedient, unbelieving Israel.

Piper's argument here relies on a common fallacy—a false dichotomy.²⁰ Given a choice between the “true” and something else, most people will instinctively choose the “true”—even without knowing the facts!²¹

Even aside from the logical fallacy, one can't help noticing a certain air of Christian superiority here. The obedient, believing Christians are better than those disobedient, unbelieving Jews! No wonder Paul issued a stern warning for non-Jewish believers who thought they were somehow superior to their unbelieving Jewish counterparts, as if they were putting their hands on their hips and their

noses in the air, saying, “Just admit it—we're better than you. We were receptive and enlightened enough to recognize and receive the Messiah; but you weren't!”

Paul warned against this type of arrogance when he declared, *Well said. Because of unbelief they [the Israelites] were broken off [from the olive tree], and you [non-Jewish believers in Yeshua the Messiah] stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches [Israel], He may not spare you [non-Jewish believers] either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell [Israel], severity; but toward you [the Church], goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off [just as Israel was]. And they also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again* (Rom. 11:20-23).

Paul packs a lot of truth into those four short verses, so let's take a closer look. Romans 11 describes two distinct entities. One (Israel) has fallen from favor (temporarily) due to unbelief. The other (the early Messianic church, consisting of both Jewish and Gentile believers) has experienced the amazing grace of God and come to faith in the Jewish Messiah. Nevertheless, Paul warns the second entity not to become proud due to the first entity's fall because the second entity could also stumble and fall! He furthermore points out that the fall of the first entity is only temporary because she will someday be restored.

Again, the first entity is Israel and the second entity is the Church. This is the most logical and consistent way to interpret Romans 11:20-23. It's difficult to imagine how Paul could have made himself any clearer in this passage.

Principle #4

Jesus Christ has come into the world as the Jewish Messiah, and his own people rejected him and broke covenant with their God.

Yes, Yeshua of Nazareth came into the world as the Jewish Messiah. And yes, His own people rejected Him (John 1:11). But the covenant Israel broke was the conditional Sinai Covenant (Jer. 31:32; cp. Ex. 24:1-18), not the unilateral Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 15:5-21, 17:4-8, 18:18-19, 22:17-18).

Israel had broken the Sinai Covenant long before she rejected Yeshua as her Messiah in the first century. That's why, when the NT narrative began, the nation was under the boot of Roman bondage. God's judgment had already come down on them! Yet did that hinder Him from fulfilling His promise to send the Messiah through them? Yeshua was still born in Bethlehem, right on schedule, in the fullness of time, was He not? He came through the royal Davidic lineage. He fulfilled the prophecies. The Abrahamic Covenant was unilateral; so God kept His promise to Abraham even though Israel hadn't kept the promise she made at Sinai.²²

In Genesis 15, Abram was actually asleep when God finalized the covenant with him and his descendants. How could he have been more uninvolved than that? I've witnessed many

awards and recognition ceremonies in my time. You've seen them, too—where they hand out awards for achievement in sports, in politics, in the entertainment industry, and in the military, among others. However, do you recall anyone ever receiving an award for something he did while he was asleep? I don't! Yet, that's what happened here. While Abraham was in a deep sleep, the divine presence moved mysteriously in the midst of the sacrificial animals to seal the covenant (v. 17). Abraham was wholly uninvolved. Please note that the text says the LORD made this covenant with Abram—not vice versa.²³

In the next installment, we will cover Piper's last three points dealing with issues of Land ownership, divine right, and views on the fulfillment of Bible prophecy before Messiah's Second Coming.



*Dr. Gary Hedrick
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CJF Ministries.*

ENDNOTES

¹ See "Israel, Gaza, 'Divine Right,' and John Piper" (Nov. 22, 2012) by Matt Smethurst at thegospelcoalition.org. Matt serves as The Gospel Coalition's associate editor.

² The term "Reformed," as it relates to theology, refers to a belief system that is traceable to the 16th century Reformers (e.g., Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox) during the Protestant Reformation. Today, we think of Reformed doctrine primarily as being Calvinistic (rather than Arminian). However, the Reformed movement is not homogeneous—especially with respect to eschatology. Some Reformed theologians, for example, are premillennial (like Spurgeon was), even though a decided majority today is amillennial.

³ TGC's "confessional statement" only mentions Israel once (declaring that Jesus was "the promised Messiah of Israel"), thereby allowing some latitude in what its members believe about today's nation of Israel. We are not implying that everyone in TGC subscribes to Piper's views on every point.

⁴ The Apostle Paul wrote forcefully about the importance of interpreting the Bible correctly. For instance, he encouraged his young protégé Timothy to "be diligent" in "rightly dividing [lit., 'cutting straight'] the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The implication, of course, is that if we fail to do our due diligence, we may wrongly interpret God's Word. This is something we must endeavor to avoid.

⁵ Looking at the Bible through a literalist grid does not mean we don't recognize legitimate symbols and figures of speech when they occur.

⁶ The last prophet of the old dispensation, John the Baptist (Heb., *Yochanan haMatbil*), helped usher in the new dispensation (Matt. 21:26, Mark 11:32, Luke 7:28, 20:6), and thus reinforced a sense of continuity from the old to the new.

⁷ Sadly, much of modern Christendom has turned this principle on its head. Mainstream clerics, for instance, often condemn premillennialism (or millenarianism in general) for being based on ancient, misguided Jewish notions about the Messiah and His coming Kingdom. For instance, Philip Schaff, the famous church historian, declares, "The Jewish chiliasm [i.e., historical premillennialism] rested on a carnal misapprehension of the Messianic kingdom, a literal interpretation of prophetic figures, and an overestimate of the importance of the Jewish people and the holy city as the centre of that kingdom" (*History of the Christian Church* [Vol. 2] by Philip & David Schley Schaff [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910], 614).

⁸ Martin Luther, in his tome "On the Jews and Their Lies" (1543) told his followers: "First, to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians."

⁹ *Matthew 27:25: "His Blood Be on Us"—Are the Jewish People Racially Condemned For The Death of Christ?* by Dr. Todd D. Baker (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2008), np.

¹⁰ In *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), Michael Vlach distinguishes between punitive, structural, and economic varieties of supersessionism (12). The book is adapted from the Vlach's Ph.D. dissertation at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. More and more, supersessionists are objecting to the term "replacement theology" because of its negative tone. Some of them call it "fulfillment" theology (that is, Israel finds its fulfillment in the Church). No matter what name you give it, though, the meaning is still the same.

¹¹ See *Our Hands Are Stained with Blood: The Tragic Story of the "Church" and the Jewish People* by Michael L. Brown (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 1992) for a detailed recounting of the long, sad history of "Christian" anti-Semitism.

¹² See the CATC website at www.christatthecheckpoint.com.

¹³ Quoted by Neil Caplan in *Palestine Jewry and the Arab Question: 1917-1925* (Abingdon, Oxon [Great Britain]: Frank Cass & Company Limited, 1978), 42.

¹⁴ Some evangelical Zionists would say that the best way to support both sides (i.e., Jewish and Palestinian) is to defend and undergird the State of Israel. A secure and prosperous Israel could be a blessing and an economic windfall for the Palestinians—if they were willing to take advantage of it. The economist George Gilder, in fact, suggests this approach in *The Israel Test: Why the World's Most Besieged State is a Beacon of Freedom and Hope for the World Economy* (New York City: Encounter Books, 2012).

¹⁵ Smethurst, *Ibid*.

¹⁶ See "Israel and the Nations (Isaiah 61)" in the May-June 2014 issue of *Messianic Perspectives*. Ultimately, the nations (haGoyim) benefited from Abram's divine calling just as much as Israel did. Furthermore, the children of Israel have borne the burden of the divine mission in a way that has placed them in the crosshairs of God's enemies for thousands of years. No wonder Tevye (in *Fiddler on the Roof*) asks God, "But, once in awhile, can't you choose someone else?"

¹⁷ Paul is making the observation here that the temporary setting aside of Israel (following her rejection of the Messiah in the first century) has made it possible for the Good News to go to all the nations during the past 2,000 years (a parenthetical period between Messiah's two comings that we sometimes refer to as the Church Age). But one day, the people of Israel will be "grafted [back] into their own olive tree" (Rom. 11:24). When this happens, it will be a miracle—like "life from the dead" (v. 15).

¹⁸ Supersessionists say that even though Israel as a nation is finished (as far as God is concerned), individual Jewish people can still enter into a relationship with God by becoming Christians.

¹⁹ Many amillennialists say that the OT land promises will be fulfilled when New Israel (the church) inherits "the new heaven and new earth." The late Anthony Hoekema, a distinguished and respected Dutch Reformed theologian, stated: "We see . . . a promise of the new earth as the everlasting possession of all the people of God, not just the physical descendants of Abraham" ("Amillennialism: A Brief Sketch of Amillennial Eschatology" from *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977], 185).

²⁰ A false dichotomy (also known as a "false dilemma" or an "either-or fallacy") means that someone is making an argument by presenting only two alternatives when, in fact, there are other possibilities. In this instance, the possibility that's overlooked is that unbelieving national Israel will be restored and become believing national Israel at some point in the future.

²¹ One reason Piper's argument is fallacious is that it assumes national Israel will remain in her current state of unbelief indefinitely. Romans 11 (along with numerous other passages) shows us that's not the case. Israel will someday come to faith in Yeshua as her Messiah and Savior. When that happens, the dichotomy between the believing Church and unbelieving Israel crumbles. In the meantime, we have yet another category—"the Israel of God," that is, the remnant of Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah (Gal. 6:16). This believing remnant is a subset of Israel, just as it was in the first century. It's where Israel and the New Covenant community (or Church) overlap.

²² The terms of the Sinai Covenant were quite extensive. Moses followed God's instructions and compiled the ordinances and stipulations in a book (Heb., *sepher*). At Sinai, the people of Israel listened intently while Moses read the book. When he was finished, they answered and said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient" (Ex. 24:7).

²³ "For the first time in the history of religions, God becomes the contracting party, promising a national territory to a people yet unborn. This pledge constitutes the main historic title of the Jewish people to its land, a title that is unconditional and irrevocable, secured by a divine covenant whose validity transcends space and time" (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* by Nahum M. Sarna [Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 115).

PSALM 110:1-7 “THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD” PART 3

BY GIDEON LEVYTAM



Peter Paul Rubens

Why is this man Melchizedek so unique? Why is he such an important biblical figure? Let's look at how he is unique: (1) He was both the king and a priest; (2) He was the king of *Shalem*, Jerusalem; (3) His name, "Melchizedek," means "king of righteousness;" (4) We never read of his ancestors; (5) We read neither of his birth nor of his death. This incredible person, Melchizedek, serves as a type and a picture of Yeshua the Messiah, David's *Adon*, who is the eternal Son of God who did not have a beginning in His divine nature but was willing to enter humanity through the virgin birth and become the God-Man. As a man, He lived a perfect, sinless life, then died on a cross as a substitute for our sin and the sins of the world. He arose from among the dead and then was exalted by God to God's very own right hand, to minister as an eternal priest on behalf of God's people. This is exactly what the Hebrew apostle wanted to impress upon the hearts of his brethren when he wrote them the letter to the Hebrews. In three chapters of the Book of Hebrews, the apostle points to the superiority of the priesthood of Yeshua the Messiah over the Levitical priesthood of Aaron, saying that our Lord Jesus is an eternal priest of the order of Melchizedek. Notice what we read of Him in Hebrews 5:5-6, where we are told that Yeshua who, like Aaron, was called by God to priestly service. He did not glorify Himself. Note: *So also [Messiah] did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You."* As He also says in another place: *"You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek."*

God chose the man Yeshua saying, *"Sit at My right hand . . ."* (Psalm 110:1a). Thus, He is an eternal priest. In Hebrews

5:9-10 we read that He, Yeshua, through His own sufferings, is able to help, and save, and deliver His own who experience sufferings: *And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek."* In Melchizedek we have a picture of our Lord Yeshua, not only as the sacrifice who died for sin but also as a priest that entered into the Holy of Holies, and is now with *YHWH* in Heaven to represent believers before God. We read in Hebrews 6:19-20: *This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*

Hebrews 7 points to Yeshua's superior and eternal priesthood as recorded in Genesis 14, where Melchizedek blessed Abraham and Abraham gave him a tithe. We read in Verses 2 and 3 of Hebrews 7, the following account: *to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace," without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.* What does that mean—"made like the Son of God"? There are various views about the expression. Some believe Melchizedek was the Son of God, the Messiah himself in one of His preincarnate appearances, much as He appeared in the past as "the Angel of the LORD." But others look at Melchizedek as a man in history who served to be LIKE the Son of God, as we read in Verse 3—not "the Son of God" but "like" unto Him.

It is important to point out that in all that we read of Melchizedek, we see a clear picture of David's Lord, our Messiah. Notice the similarity to Yeshua when we read of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was king of righteousness; Yeshua was and is a righteous king (Luke 23:47). Melchizedek was king of Salem, which is "king of peace"; Yeshua brings *shalom*, peace with God, to those who trust in Him (Isa. 9:6; Col. 1:20).

As Melchizedek was without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life (Heb. 7:3), our Lord Jesus the Messiah existed before His incarnation. He is the eternal Son of God, without beginning and without end (John 1:1-2). Because God's Son, the Messiah, is eternal, His priesthood is a perfect one—greater than Aaron's Levitical, imperfect priesthood. Messiah's priesthood is not after fleshly commandment but after the power of an endless life (Heb. 7:16). *YHWH* said to David's Lord, "You are a priest forever." How long is forever? Forever is forever; it is eternal. Messiah's priesthood is everlasting, while Aaron's was not—and neither was the priesthood of his soul. Aaron died and his sons also died, as we read in Verse 23. *Also there were many priests [Levites, priests], because they were prevented by death from continuing.*

The climax of Hebrews 7, which deals with Yeshua's priesthood, is the last portion of that chapter. Reading those verses should fill the heart of all of us who belong to Him with much joy. "Why?" one may ask. Because in this portion of Scripture we read again that Yeshua's priesthood is eternal. As our eternal priest, He is able to aid us, to assist us, and fully meet every need and challenge we face in this sinful world. In love for His own people and in obedience to His God, Yeshua sits at *YHWH's* right hand, lifting up His holy hands, making intercession for us—for the weakness and needs of His people. No high priest of the tribe of Levi from among our people Israel could ever provide such intercession. Every priest under the Law needed first of all to deal with his own sins. These priests needed to offer up daily sacrifices—first for themselves, and then for our people Israel. But our Lord Yeshua offered Himself up to God "once for all." He died for the sin (and sins) of the whole world on the Cross once—as our substitute—never to die again. Now, He lives to make intercession for us. Whatever need we have in life we can bring to our Messiah Yeshua through prayer. We read in Hebrews 7:24-26: *But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens.*

As we continue reviewing the last portion of Psalm 110, Verses 5-7, we are confronted with some very interesting exclamations. Those verses speak of the future days of judgment in which *Adonai*, David's *Adon*, the Messiah, will be the One to judge this world in righteousness. The same One who was judged by a holy God for the sin of the world is now the One who will be the Judge of all those who rejected God's offer of forgiveness. Note what we read in Verses 5-7: *The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath. He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies, He shall execute the heads of many countries. He shall drink of the brook by the wayside; Therefore He shall lift up the head.* Observe some specific words in these verses: wrath and judgment, dead bodies and executing. These

verses point to the *last* days, called the days of the Great Tribulation. It is important to take note once again that the Spirit of God directs us to David's Lord. He is called in Verse 5 *Adonai*—not *Adonee*, but *Adonai*. In reality, *Adonai* is the plural of the word *Adon*—just as the Hebrew word for God is *Elohim*, the plural of the singular word *El*. This *Adonai* of whom we read in Verse 5 is the same person of whom we read in Verse 1, whom David called *Adonee*, my Lord, my Master. In Verse 5, David exclaims: "The Lord *Adonai* is at Your right hand"; in Hebrew, *Adonai Al-Yemincha*. Again, this word *Adonai* can only be used as referring to a divine person, not to a mere man.

Earlier, when we looked at Verse 1, we read that *YHWH* said unto David's *Adon*, or Master: "Sit down at my right hand." In Verse 5, we read that David's Lord (who is now called *Adonai*), is at *YHWH's* right hand, and He is presented to us by the word *Adonai*—in His divinity, God himself. Throughout the Scriptures, this word *Adonai* is never applied to man; it is only spoken of God. For example, in Genesis 15:2 we read of Abraham speaking to *YHWH*, using by divine inspiration this very word *Adonai*: *But Abram said, "Lord GOD [Adonai YHWH], what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"* Again note: This word *Adonai* in Hebrew is the plural of the word *Adon*, and is used only to speak of the God of Israel. The Prophet Isaiah, in Chapter 6:1, used that word *Adonai* when he saw that great sight of God's glory: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple.* Notice that, even though the English word Lord in Verse 5 of Psalm 110 is capital L and lowercase o-r-d, it is in actuality the Hebrew word *Adonai*, spoken of (and referring to) the God of Israel and not man. See also Genesis 15:8, 18:3, 27, 30-32, and more. In the English translation, it is not altogether clear—but it is very clear in our Hebrew language. This Person of Verse 5 is a divine person, since the word *Adonai* is only spoken of *God himself*.

In those last three verses of Psalm 110, we read six times the word *He*, referring to David's Lord who is called *Adonai*, and He is Yeshua our Messiah. There are six things *He*, our Messiah, will do in the coming future in His return to earth at the Second Coming: "*He shall execute,*" "*He shall judge,*" "*He shall fill,*" "*He shall execute (again),*" "*He shall drink,*" "*He shall lift up the head.*" *YHWH*, God the Father, is now directing us to the Person of His Son *Adonai*. *YHWH* is now fulfilling His promise, which he made to Him. What was that promise that *YHWH* made to the Messiah? Well, we read earlier in Verse 1: *The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."* He promised that all His enemies would be made His footstool. So the time has come that *Adonai*, God's Son, our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, will take His God-given place as a judge, placing all His enemies under His feet. *YHWH* pointed to the future judgment that will come upon men. Yeshua said in John 5:22: "*For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son,*" and so we read in those last verses of this Psalm 110 of Messiah's future doings:

Verse 5b = *He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.*

Verse 6a = *He shall judge among the nations.*

Verse 6b = *He shall fill the places with dead bodies.*

Verse 6c = *He shall execute the heads of many countries.*

Verse 7a = *He shall drink of the brook by the wayside.*

Verse 7b = *Therefore He shall lift up the head.*

We emphasize that Verse 5 points to the person of our Lord Yeshua, Jesus the Messiah, *Adonai*, who is God the Son, now seated at YHWH's right hand waiting for the day in which He will take His place as a judge. He is at YHWH's right hand, the place of honor and glory. In this fifth verse the Spirit of God points to a terrible time called "the day of His wrath." Jeremiah, in Chapter 30:7, calls it a time of "Jacob's trouble": *Alas! For that day is great, So that none is like it; And it is the time of Jacob's trouble, But he shall be saved out of it.* This will be a day in which this very *Adonai*, the God-Man, the Messiah, will pour out His wrath upon this sinful world, as we read in Psalm 110:5: *The Lord is at Your right hand; He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.*

At the end of that period of time called Jacob's trouble (Jer. 30:7), which is the seven years of tribulation, it is mentioned in Daniel 9:27: *Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week.* This is spoken by Yeshua before His death. Note Matthew 24:29-30: *"Immediately after the tribulation of those days . . ."* Jesus, Yeshua the Messiah, will come out from God's right hand. He will come directly from Heaven to earth to judge and make war against this unregenerate world. We read of this in Revelation 19:11-16: *Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war* (v. 11). It is this very *Adonai* who is at YHWH's right hand who will be the very One who will execute and strike kings—those kings, rulers, and the people of this world who rejected Him at His first coming, when He came as God's Lamb. They who rejected Him will now experience His wrath. David prophesied in Psalm 2:1-3, asking: *Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us."* Now He will come to execute judgment upon them.

First, Verse 6 of Psalm 110 points to the Tribulation—when the nations of the world will finally be placed completely under Messiah's feet. Here, we read, *He shall judge among the nations, . . .* In Hebrew, this very word for "judge" is *Yadeen*. It means that the Messiah Yeshua will bring those nations of the world to His own court where He, as a judge, will *Yadeen*—will pronounce and execute the punishment that those nations deserve to

receive. Our Lord Jesus, *Adonai*, is the only One who is able to execute the honest, fair, and just punishment that the nations of the world deserve. Why? Simply because He knows the heart of each person in every nation. There is nothing that is hidden from Him. He is that Holy One of whom we read in Hebrews 7:26b: who is *holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens.* He is the Judge who will judge His enemies swiftly and immediately at His Second Coming by making a war against the nations. *In righteousness He judges and makes war* (Rev. 19:11).

Second, in Revelation 19:15, we read of His sharp sword with which He will strike down the nations: *Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.* Then our Lord Yeshua will sit on His throne, from where He will judge the nations who rejected Him and cast them into eternal separation from God. We read of this in Matthew 25:31-32: *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.* In Psalm 110:6, we read: *He shall fill the places with dead bodies.* Just imagine what a sad sight that will be. Our Hebrew prophets spoke of this concerning that which will happen when the Messiah will come to judge the nations. We read in Isaiah 63:3 of *Adonai* the Messiah who, in His righteous indignation against a sinful world, will judge the enemies of Israel as one who treads upon the grapes in the winepress. *"I have trodden the winepress alone, And from the peoples no one was with Me. For I have trodden them in My anger, And trampled them in My fury; Their blood is sprinkled upon My garments, And I have stained all My robes."*

The bodies of Messiah's enemies will fill the land in which He will defeat the armies of the counterfeit Messiah, the Antichrist, who will seek to destroy the preserved remnant of God's people Israel. This points us to the final war, which is often called the Battle of Armageddon (see Revelation 16:13-16). At that last war, all the nations will gather together against God's people Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In addition, John receives more information about the final days of tribulation (see Revelation 19:17-21), where we read of the deadly end of *Adonai's* enemies. They will



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suffer death, their bodies will remain on the ground, and the birds of the air will be called by God's angel to come and eat the flesh off the dead bodies left on the ground. *Then I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the birds that fly in the midst of heaven, "Come and gather together for the supper of the great God, that you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, both small and great"* (vv. 17-18).

Third, we read in Psalm 110:6: *He shall execute the heads of many countries.* The Hebrew word for "heads" in this portion is not a plural word but a singular one: the word *Rosh*. In Hebrew, it is head, one single head, not heads as of many. We may look at this promise that *YHWH* made to David's Lord in two ways. First, we learn that Yeshua the Messiah will execute judgment upon all the leaders of the world; and second, we learn that our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, the One who once was bruised unto death for the sins of the world, is now seen as the One who will bruise (in Hebrew *machats*—crush) that one single head of the world leader who will rise to power and be controlled by Satan's power. He is that one of whom we read in Revelation 13:1-10. He is that false messiah, the Antichrist. God promised Satan long ago in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15) that the Messiah, the seed of the woman, will bruise the head of Satan's seed: *And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.* What an amazing victory our Lord Jesus the Messiah will have at the end of days!

In Verse 7, the last verse of Psalm 110, God's Holy Spirit presents us with the climax of Messiah's victory. This victory will surely come to pass at His return. We read: *He shall drink of the brook by the wayside; . . .* What does that mean? Well, on that day Yeshua is seen as a conqueror. As the Man of war who presses on against His foes, He will refresh Himself by drinking from the water of the brook; yet, He will be looking on, ready to move forward. He will be as steadfast as Gideon's 300 men who did not kneel when they drank of the water of the brook, but lapped with their tongues as dogs, looking forward to their goal. We read in Judges 7:5: . . . *"Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; . . ."* Yeshua, as a man of war, will continue to destroy His enemies. When our nation Israel was delivered out of bondage,

they sang unto the LORD. Note Exodus 15:3: *The LORD is a man of war; The LORD is His name.* When Messiah returns in power, He will go forth, empowered by the Spirit, defeating His enemies even unto the end. As we read in Zechariah 14:3: *Then the LORD will go forth And fight against those nations, As He fights in the day of battle.*

Once Messiah's enemies are defeated, all *YHWH's* promises to *Adonai*, David's Lord, will come to fruition. David's Lord will lift up His head as we read again in Psalm 110:7b: *He shall lift up the head.* As a victorious conquering king, He will be honored. We also read of Him in Psalm 24:9: *Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in.* What joy we have in our hearts when we dwell upon the wonder of our Messiah's future glory! Yeshua, who once was dishonored, in the near future will be *honored*. Yeshua, who once suffered, *now suffers no more*. Yeshua, who, as a servant, once hung on a cross, in coming days *will reign as king over all*. Yeshua, who once "bowed His head" saying, "It is finished" as recorded in John 19:30, *will soon take His place of honor*.

Again, note Verse 7b of Psalm 110: *He shall lift up the head.* Dear readers, Jewish or not, my question to you is this: Do you know Him? Do you know that David's Lord is our promised Messiah? All you need to do is to ask our God through prayer—ask Him to show you clearly from our Hebrew Scriptures: who is David's Lord? In reality, there is no one who can fit the description of David's Lord but *Yeshua Ben-David*, who is also David's Lord. Knowing Him as our Messiah and Lord is the most important decision one will ever make. It is a matter of life and death, for believing in Him gives us everlasting life. Rejecting Him, on the other hand, is to choose everlasting destruction. May you choose life—may you choose Yeshua! 🕊



Gideon Levytam is director of International Ministries for CJF Ministries.

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Fruit from the Harvest

by Violette Berger



God's Servicemen

Peter Parkas, CJFM Northeast Representative (New Jersey), recently needed the water filtration system in his home serviced. After the serviceman, "John," finished the job, Peter engaged him in conversation. He learned that John had served three military tours in Iraq and was now suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Recognizing John's challenges, Peter asked him a diagnostic question: "If you were to die tonight, do you have the assurance that you would go to heaven?" John responded, "I don't know!" Peter then proceeded to share the Gospel message with him. At its conclusion, John eagerly prayed with Peter to receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior, understanding that he is now filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter described another type of service to John—spiritual service—as he read and explained Romans 12:1-2. Please pray for John, and wisdom for Peter as he disciples him.

Seeds Planted

Barry Berger, CJFM Director of Missions Emeritus (Phoenix) was blessed during his continuing recovery to have had numerous opportunities to share the Gospel message. Reared with no spiritual upbringing, Dorothy was so excited when Barry presented her with a Bible and instructions to begin reading the book of John. She had never owned or even held a Bible! Barry also had an opportunity to share the Gospel over a breakfast meeting with "M," an Orthodox Jewish man, who was stunned to hear these things for the first time from a fellow kinsman. He is interested in continuing their discussions. Please pray for the salvation of Dorothy and "M."

Knowing the Creator

Eric Chabot, CJFM Representative (Columbus, OH), leads a fruitful ministry on the campus of Ohio State University (OSU). Recently, Eric spoke with "William," a student searching for spiritual answers. After listening to William's background during their one-on-one discussion, Eric asked William about his relationship with God. Following Eric's clear presentation of the Gospel message, William realized and admitted that he really didn't know God. Eric adds, "He said he now believed it was true—that Jesus is the Son of God who could reconcile him back to his Creator. William came to faith in the Messiah that day. I had prayed for divine appointments that morning, and God answered my prayer!"

Knowing Spiritual Freedom

CJFM National Ministry Representative John Kanter (Dallas) completed the second of his quarterly visits this year to Buster Cole State Jail in Bonham, TX. This has proved to be a rich time of ministry for John, who was accompanied by a good friend he has been mentoring, each focusing on sermon preparation and delivery. They each spoke for 20 minutes and were blessed as John relates: "When I gave an invitation, the Spirit of God, in conjunction with the Word of God, prompted 10 incarcerated men to trust the Son of God for spiritual freedom!"

Plus Five

CJFM Area Director Michael Campo (Chicago) had the privilege of proclaiming the Gospel as a guest speaker in a church recently. At the end of the service, Mike asked if anyone had a desire to respond in repentance and faith to the Gospel message. Five people came forward. After speaking with them, Mike wrote: "I was greatly blessed to see how the Holy Spirit took the message and placed it right in their hearts—the very way Paul, in Romans 10:5-10, says it ought to happen! They confessed with their mouths after hearing with their hearts, resulting in five more souls in heaven!"



Sandy and Michael Campo

A Blessed Family Affair

Richard Hill, CJFM Representative (Las Vegas) and pastor of Beth Yeshua Messianic Congregation, and his family had the honor to participate in a patriotic program at the Air Force base on Independence Day with their 4-H Club. In addition, they had the opportunity to pass out "Million Dollar" tracts and share the Gospel with seven veterans and their families. Pray that "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" (Matt. 11:15).

Pray for Israel

In view of the situation in the Middle East, CJFM worker in Israel, Pastor Yossi, reports the following: "There is another side to this fighting that we would like to share with you. A meeting of Arab and Jewish Christian/Messianic leaders took place in Galilee in order to pray and plan the annual joint meeting for all of the congregations in Galilee—both Jewish and Arab. Our Messiah broke the wall of separation and only in Him can we truly find peace—one that would be lasting and true. We would simply encourage you to pray for God to glorify His name, protect His people, and draw all sides nearer to Him during this war."

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: may they prosper who love you" (Psalm 122:6).



Bible Questions AND Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

BIBLE

HOLY

Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at garyh@cjfm.org, or mail it to 611 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78215.

You may see your question addressed in a future issue of *Messianic Perspectives*.

QUESTION: *I was listening to your podcast on “The Second Coming of Elijah,” where you suggest that the two Tribulation witnesses in Revelation 11 might be Enoch and Elijah. One of your lines of reasoning is that these two prophets were the only people in the Bible who were taken up to heaven without experiencing physical death. Since the Bible says, “And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27), you conclude that Enoch and Elijah must return someday and die, too. But is this really a good argument? If Hebrews 9:27 is a hard and fast rule, as you seem to suggest, what do we do with 1 Thessalonians 4:17, which says that someday an entire generation of Christians will be “caught up” to be with God forever without ever experiencing death? How can it be a hard and fast rule in the first instance but not in the second?*

ANSWER: Good question! As you say, we should strive for consistency when we’re interpreting the Bible. If a principle is meant to be absolute (that is, there are no exceptions), it should be applicable in the same way throughout the entire corpus of Scripture.

Let’s not forget, though, that some principles in the Bible are general rather than absolute. That is, they allow for exceptions. So when a biblical principle can be shown to have exceptions, it’s perfectly reasonable to assume that it’s meant in a general sense rather than in an absolute sense.

Bearing that in mind, then, we believe Hebrews 9:27 is an example of a general principle. What the writer is saying is that all descendants of Adam are ultimately destined to die (cp. Gen. 2:16-17) and after that, to stand before God in judgment. It’s very important for every one of us to understand that we are accountable to the One who gave us life—and that we will meet Him in person someday.

The general rule, then, is that we will someday pass through the doorway of death and stand before the Lord. But there are exceptions. For example, we know that the terminal generation (believers who are alive when the Second Coming occurs) will not experience physical death. As you pointed out, the Apostle Paul very clearly says, *Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord* (1 Thess. 4:17).

There are other examples in the Bible of general principles that have obvious exceptions, particularly when we compare those passages with other, corresponding Scriptures. For instance, Ezekiel says the soul that sins will die (18:4, 20). It’s a general principle—and it’s surely and demonstrably true. The NT says

essentially the same thing when it declares that everyone has sinned and come under the sentence of death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Sin results in death. Yet we understand that not every soul that sins will suffer eternal death, do we not? Those of us who have trusted Yeshua as Savior have had our sins forgiven by His grace and we are no longer condemned for those sins (because He paid for them when He died on Calvary). That’s the wondrous, glorious exception to the rule! Yes, we have sinned; but because of His mercy and grace, we will *not* die! Does the exception then somehow invalidate the rule? On the contrary, the exception (that believers’ sins are forgiven by grace and through faith) *proves* the rule (that unforgiven sin results in a sentence of death and condemnation).¹

So the exception of 1 Thessalonians 4:17 actually validates the general rule of Hebrews 9:27. Believers who are alive when Yeshua returns will never die! Interestingly, this may have been the meaning of what Yeshua said in John 11:24-26: *Martha said to Him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”*

Note the context in this section of John 11. It’s a prophetic passage where the Lord is talking about His dear friend Lazarus, who has just died, and the end-time resurrections and judgments (v. 24). The meaning of verse 26, then, might well be, “He who is alive [at the last day, when I return] and is believing [present, continual action] in Me shall never die.”²

Yes, we believe there’s a general rule in Scripture that every member of the human race has an appointment with death. Since Elijah and Enoch never died, why couldn’t they be destined to return somehow to keep their respective appointments in Revelation 11? Is it merely coincidental that only two people in human history didn’t die and that both of them just happened to be OT prophets? And that two just happens to be the precise number of unnamed prophets who show up in the Book of Revelation and suffer martyrdom in the streets of Jerusalem?

If you were interviewing applicants for the job of end-time Tribulation prophet, could you think of any two people more eminently and uniquely qualified than Elijah and Enoch?

By the way, our teaching on “The Second Coming of Elijah” appeared in the March-April 2012 issue of *Messianic Perspectives*, our bimonthly paper. Archives are available online at cjfm.org/resources/messianic-perspectives-archive.html. 

ENDNOTES

¹When there’s a specific exception, it serves to bear out the validity of the general rule. One of my favorite restaurants, for example, has a sign prominently displayed that says, “Closed on Sundays.” Although it’s unstated, that sign tells everyone that the restaurant is open Monday through Saturday. The exception (closed on Sunday) proves the rule (open Monday through Saturday).

²This interpretation of John 11:26 is overlooked by all the major commentaries (even the good ones). Most of them say Yeshua is speaking here about *spiritual* life and death—not *physical* life and death. But we believe our suggested interpretation above parallels Paul’s teaching in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (where virtually all evangelicals agree that he’s talking about *physical* resurrection) quite nicely.

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CJF Ministries®

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NOTE

From the Director of Communications:

I apologize for the delay in the publication of our July-August issue of *Messianic Perspectives*. A key member of our editorial staff became seriously ill and has been out for the past few months. Our team is working hard to get back on schedule and your September-October issue should be arriving within the next couple of weeks.

Again, we apologize for the delay and thank you for understanding. Your prayers and faithful support of CJF Ministries are deeply appreciated.

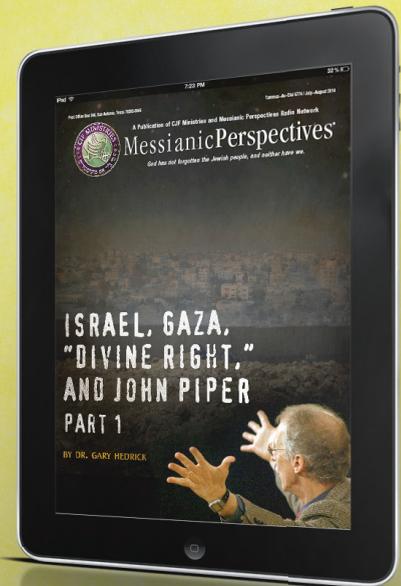
Sincerely,

Brian Nowotny
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