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*A digest of articles and book reviews selected from
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readership, interpreting the Christian Faith for
contemporary living.*

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What is our responsibility to our fellow Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering for the sake of the Gospel today?

Most nations, except those petty ones which are still struggling to grow past their childhood, are very sensitive to world opinion, especially if the opinion is raised in the Third World. Christians in free societies have the responsibility for gathering correct information of religious persecution that is going on now, and exposing it in forms of protest to government embassies and through public media, and thus encouraging repressive governments to uphold basic human rights as agreed upon by the nations of the world. **p. 61** Every effort ought to be made to maintain the question of religious toleration as a key world issue. Even closed societies of the world today can be evangelized through powerful radio broadcasts and the supply of Christian literature in various forms. One major means of assistance we can give to Christians in the totalitarian system is to supply them with Bibles using all means available.

We should pray and work for the release of those who are in prison in the spirit of Onesiphorus, of whom Paul says, 'He was not ashamed of my chains' ([II Timothy 1:16](#)). It is our duty to bear in our bodies the marks of those who suffer and participate in Christ's suffering, looking to the Lord for wisdom in suffering with all who suffer for Christ's sake in all lands. The Biblical exhortation to us is 'Let brotherly love continue ... remember those who are in prison as though in prison with them' ([Hebrews 13:1-3](#)).

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Prophecy and the Gospel in the Middle East

by COLIN CHAPMAN

Reprinted from Crusade (December 1976) with permission.

'If you want to know where we are in history, look at the Jewish people. They are God's timepiece and people of prophecy. Part of an eternal clock ticking away as an everlasting reminder that although other peoples or nations may come and go, these people will remain forever. Because that's the way God wants it. Promised it. And planned it. Long ago. He made a covenant with Abraham, promising a large portion of the Middle East as an inheritance for him and his descendants ... The covenant is unconditional Just like his love....

As the Jewish people continue to return to their promised land by the thousands, they take part in fulfilling prophecy today. And history tomorrow. Bringing us one step closer to the most important event of all. The return of the Messiah. Because the Jewish people are the people of prophecy, they are the people of the land.

And we, knowing Him who made the promise, totally support the people and land of Israel in their God-given, God-promised, God-ordained right to exist.

Any person or group of nations opposed to this right isn't just fighting Israel. But God and time itself.'

SOME MONTHS ago the above advertisement appeared in the *New York Times* over the name of the American Board of Missions to the Jews, and supported by 48 named churches. Shortly afterwards it was reproduced with an Arabic translation and a full page of comment in a leading Arabic newspaper in Amman, Jordan. It should not be hard to imagine the effect that this kind of claim would have on Arab readers in the Middle East. Christians would be embarrassed to find that fellow-believers in the West are so totally [p. 64](#) committed to the state of Israel; and Muslim readers would see it as one further example of Western prejudice which disqualifies Christianity from having any claim to the allegiance of loyal Arabs.

I believe that this interpretation of prophecy is not only unbalanced, but also unbiblical, and therefore creates needless embarrassment for our Christian brethren in the Arab world, and an unnecessary stumbling block for Muslims.

Biblical prophecy is much more than the prediction of the future. The Old Testament prophets did not hesitate to make moral judgements about what was happening in the world around them. Elijah predicted that there would be drought for an indefinite period until he gave the word ([1 Kings 17:1](#)). But he also had to condemn Ahab for stealing Naboth's vineyard ([1 Kings 21:1-25](#)). Amos sought to interpret what God was doing in events of his time ([Amos 3:7](#)) but he also censured the surrounding nations as well as Judah and Israel for their actions ([Amos 1:1-2:16](#)). Jeremiah frequently predicted the return to the Land after the Exile in Babylon ([Jeremiah 29:10-14](#)). At the same time he recommended particular policies to the exiles in Babylon ([Jeremiah 29:1-9](#)) and to the Jews who remained in Jerusalem ([Jeremiah 42:1-22](#)).

When we turn to many of the modern popular books on prophecy, we find this moral dimension is almost entirely lacking. If there is any trace of it at all, it usually amounts to general approval of the establishment of the State of Israel, together with all its policies and actions. These writers seem more concerned to see how events in the Middle East fit into a great historical scheme, than to evaluate the actions of those who are making history. Whereas the Biblical prophets are caught up in the events about which they speak and are involved in the drama as actors, most writers on prophecy write as if they are spectators watching all the moves in a great game of chess, and addressing what they say to other spectators rather than to those who are making the moves.

If our interpretation of prophecy today is to capture the true spirit of prophecy, should it not enable us to make critical judgements about what has been happening in the Middle East? Our preoccupation with the fulfilment of prophecy generally means that we have plenty to say *about* the Jews, but less to say *to* the Jews, and even less to say to the Arabs—particularly the Palestinians who feel that the Christian West still hasn't really grasped that the [p. 65](#) problem of the Palestinians is the heart of the whole Middle East problem.

The key to the Christian understanding of Old Testament prophecies about the Land is to be found in the New Testament. Take this one, from Jeremiah, for example, 'This is the very word of the Lord: The time is coming when I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and bring them back to the land which I gave to their forefathers; and it shall be their possession' ([Jeremiah 30:3](#), NEB). When we look for the fulfilment of prophecies of this kind in the Old Testament we find that one stage of the return is described in the book of Ezra, which begins with a list of all the families which returned 'each to his own city' ([Ezra 1:1-2:70](#)). Some would therefore argue that prophecies of this kind about a return to the land were fulfilled once and for all at the time of the return after the Exile in Babylon in 586 B.C. Others would claim that while *some* of these prophecies were fulfilled at that time, others were *not*, and are therefore still to be fulfilled. Others again would argue that even if the prophecies have been fulfilled once, the

same pattern of exile and restoration has been repeated at other times in history, notably in the 20th century.

Even if we grant that these prophecies could be fulfilled a second time or at several times in history, we still need to ask ourselves: does the New Testament give us any encouragement to believe that this kind of prophecy would be fulfilled again in the future? If we are to be truly Christian in our interpretation of Old Testament prophecy we dare not by-pass the New Testament and argue straight from the former to contemporary events without asking whether the latter gives us any authority for drawing this kind of direct connection.

What we find in the New Testament is virtually a total silence on this particular aspect of Old Testament prophecy. The only verse in the gospels which says anything about the future of the land is the well-known verse in [Luke 21:24](#): 'Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled,' which is frequently interpreted as: 'Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be occupied by non-Jews until the "times of the Gentiles" were fulfilled. In 1967 the Jews regained control of the old City of Jerusalem after nearly 2000 years of exile from the city. This event therefore marks the beginning of a new stage in God's dealings [p. 66](#) with his ancient people, the Jews, and also a significant stage in the unfolding of God's purpose for history.'

But is it really possible to build so much on this single verse? There are good linguistic reasons for saying that the sentence implies nothing at all about what would happen *after* the times of the Gentiles were fulfilled, and simply concentrates on what would happen *up to* the time referred to. Jesus is saying that Jerusalem will be under the domination of Gentiles until that time, but he gives no clear indication of what would happen *after* that.

Elsewhere in the New Testament Peter, writing to the 'exiles of the Dispersion' in Asia Minor, takes the word 'inheritance', which was generally applied in the O.T. to the Promised Land (e.g. [Psalm 105:11](#)) and uses it to speak of the Christian's inheritance which is in heaven. This inheritance (unlike the Promised Land) cannot be destroyed or spoiled or taken from us ([1 Peter 1:3-5](#)).

Paul speaks at length about the future of the Jews in [Romans 9-11](#). The covenant promises are still theirs ('God's choice stands, and they are his friends for the sake of the patriarchs', [Romans 11:28](#) NEB); and God has a glorious future in store for them (the whole of Israel will be saved, [Romans 11:26](#), NEB). But this future is not tied to the *land*.

The writer of Hebrews, addressing Jewish Christians who are probably *not* living in Palestine, makes no apology for using Old Testament teaching about the land to point to the 'rest' that all of us are called on to enter and enjoy in our present experience ([Hebrews 4:1-13](#)).

John takes up several prophecies from the Old Testament and sees them fulfilled in his vision of 'a new heaven and a new earth'. It is perhaps significant that none of the prophecies he mentions are prophecies about a return to the land; and all his visions need to be interpreted with proper regard to his use of style and symbolic language. Thus for example, Ezekiel's vision of the restored Jerusalem ([Ezekiel 40-48](#)) is applied to the 'new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ...' ([Revelation 22:2ff](#)). Similarly Ezekiel's vision of the spring of water flowing from the Temple ([Revelation 22:1-5](#)) is taken up by John and interpreted as (the river of the water of life ... flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the city's street' ([Revelation 21:1-5](#)).

If the New Testament writers had nothing to say about the future of the land as such, what are we to conclude? That they took it for [p. 67](#) granted that if ever the Jews were in exile in the future, the prophecies about a return to the land would be fulfilled again and that prophecies which had not been fulfilled would still be fulfilled in the future? Surely

the most obvious way to interpret this silence in the New Testament is to say that its writers had ceased to think in these terms.

How could such a radical change of mind have come about? I believe that the answer is to be found in the crucial passage in [Acts 1:6–8](#). The disciples put to Jesus a question about the status of the Jews in relation to their own land and to the occupying powers: ‘Lord is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?’ They were still longing for the day when the Jews would have their own independent kingdom in the Promised Land.

And how did Jesus answer? ‘It is not for you to know about dates or times, which the Father has set within his own control ...’ I take this to mean that Jesus wanted his disciples to banish once and for all any concern they had for the sovereignty of the Jewish State—or if they were still concerned about it, to separate it entirely from their thinking about the Kingdom which he was seeking to establish. His Kingdom was to be spiritual, not territorial; international and not national. The primary task of the disciples was to bear witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. If Jesus did not want his disciples *then* to know about these dates and times, is there any reason why we as his disciples *now* in the 20th century should expect to know the answer?

Christian interest in the fulfilment of prophecy has certainly strengthened the support for a Christian ministry among the Jews, but it does not seem to have led to any concern for Christian witness among Muslims in the Arab world. I cannot help feeling that much of our interest in the fulfilment of prophecy in contemporary events in the Middle East represents a reversion to the old attitude of the disciples, and therefore stands in need of the same firm but loving correction from the words of Jesus.

The original promise given to Abraham spoke about the land, about his descendants and the nation, and about blessing for all the families of the earth ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). Each element of this original promise was repeated and reaffirmed on several occasions in the book of Genesis and at other stages in the Old Testament. But how did the New Testament writers think about the fulfilment [p. 68](#) of these promises? The clearest indication is to be found in these two sayings of Paul: ‘If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise’ ([Galatians 3:29](#)); ‘All the promises of God find their Yes in him (Jesus)’ ([II Corinthians 1:20](#)).

The New Testament writers believed that every strand of Old Testament prophecy pointed to the person of Jesus Christ. Great significance is usually attached to the promise that the land would be given to Abraham and his descendants ‘for ever as *an everlasting possession*’ ([Genesis 17:8](#) RSV). But this promise is in principle no different from the promise that God would establish the throne of David ‘*for ever*’ ([II Samuel 7:12–13](#)). If the New Testament writers saw no difficulty in seeing this prophecy fulfilled in the person of Jesus ([Luke 1:32–33](#)), then there is no reason why there should be any difficulty in referring promises about the *land* to the *person* of Jesus in exactly the same way.

If the promises given to Abraham have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus, it follows that believers in Jesus inherit all the privileges of the people of God. Jesus therefore speaks of the apostles as being the twelve patriarchs of the new Israel, when he says, ‘And now I vest in you the kingship which my Father vested in me; and you shall eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel’ ([Luke 22:29–30](#)).

Peter is therefore able to apply to Gentile Christians titles which originally belonged only to the Chosen People: ‘You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. You are now the people of God, who once

were not his people: outside his mercy once, you have now received his mercy' ([1 Peter 2:8-10](#) NEB).

If all the promises find their fulfilment in the person of Jesus, do we have any reason for saying that the promises about the land are in a completely different category from all the others?

We observe as a historical fact that in this century there has been a great flow of Jews returning to the land of Palestine. But I find nothing in the New Testament which enables me to say without hesitation that this event is a direct fulfilment of particular prophecies. Peter had no difficulty on the day of Pentecost in saying '*This ...is that* which was said by the prophet ...' I can see no reason why we should be so certain that *this* which we observe today is a fulfilment of *that* ... [p. 69](#)

I have often puzzled over the story of the person who asked Jesus to take sides in a family quarrel: A man in the crowd said to him, 'Master, tell my brother to divide the family property with me.' He replied, 'My good man, who set me over you to judge or arbitrate?' Then he said to the people, 'Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind ...' ([Luke 12:13ff](#)).

If this was a simple case of injustice, with a man refusing to give his brother his legitimate share of the family property, we might expect Jesus to take sides immediately and to support the man in his demand for justice. Luke's account is remarkably brief, and we are left wondering if this is all that Jesus said. Did he, for example, go on to discuss the issue in greater detail and investigate the case? Or did he refuse to get involved in any way?

We don't know, because Luke doesn't tell us. But what is clear from this account is that Jesus did not immediately take sides—not because he wasn't concerned about justice, but because he wanted to tackle the deeper issues that lie beneath the surface. So he spoke about covetousness. But who was doing the coveting? Was it the other brother who was holding on to the whole of the property? Or was it this brother who, even though he had a legitimate right to the property, was motivated primarily by selfishness and greed? Again we don't know. It could have been either, or it could have been both.

A modern version of the same incident might read like this: 'An Israeli in the crowd said to him, "Master, tell my Arab neighbours to let me live in peace in the land of my fathers ..."' Or it might begin: 'An Arab in the crowd said to him, "Master, tell the Israelis to give us back the land which they have taken from us ..."' It is hard to imagine that Jesus is not concerned about the rights and wrongs of every human situation—not least in the Middle East today. But I believe that if he were approached in this way today, he would see clearly the rights and wrongs on both sides. I doubt if he would immediately take sides with one against the other; he would probably go to the underlying issues, and have something to say to *both* the Israeli *and* the Arab.

Those of us who are personally involved with the people of the Middle East long for a word which is truly prophetic, with all the dimensions of true Biblical prophecy. It therefore needs to be addressed to *us* more than to those who look on as observers. It needs to see clearly the rights and wrongs of *all* the parties that have [p. 70](#) had a share in the conflict and be able to point to 'the things that make for peace' ([Luke 19:42](#)). It needs to enable us to read the Old Testament through the eyes of the Jewish and Gentile writers of the New Testament. It needs to point us all—Christian, Jew and Muslim—to the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of all the gracious promises of God to man. He alone is our peace.

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Christianity on Trial, by COLIN CHAPMAN. (Lion Publishing, 29–33 Lower Kings Road, Berkhamsted, Herts, U.K.)

This is a presentation in three books of the evidence for Christian belief today. The approach is positive and committed. It is also open. The reader is left to make up his own mind to answer the question, “How can we know if Christianity is true?” The books are attractively laid out and profusely illustrated. [p. 71](#)

Discerning God’s Hand in Islam Today

by VIVIENNE STACEY

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CHRISTIAN STRATEGY is to discern the will of God and to do it. This applies to individuals, as well as to Churches and fellowships; it applies to today as well as to tomorrow. Nothing of itself is strategic—neither the towns nor the villages, neither the students nor the newly literate, neither leadership training nor radio evangelism.

Strategy can be considered in abstract. But Christian strategy essentially concerns something happening—now ... somewhere ... to people. Christ was the first strategist of the Way. He was born at a particular place, at a particular time, and he influenced particular people. Herod recognized something of the national strategic significance of Christ’s birth and tried to liquidate him. Pilate, years later, failed to realize the universal strategic significance of Christ’s life and washed his hands and tried to maintain neutrality.

We read in [1 Chronicles 12:32](#) that the children of Issachar were men who ‘had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do’. This implies an effort to discover what God is doing in this world. Clearly, God has a time programme. In the fulness of time, Christ was born ([Galatians 4:4](#)); in due time he died for the ungodly ([Romans 5:6](#)); and in the dispensation of the fulness of times he will gather together in one all things in Christ ([Ephesians 1:10](#)).

There seems never to have been an adequate Christian answer to Islam. According to figures given at the International Congress on Worldwide Evangelization (Lausanne, July 1974) and also according to Mr. Farouk Kaddoumi at the Muslim Foreign Ministers Conference (Jeddah, July 1975) there are over 600 million Muslims in the world today. (Mr. Kaddoumi was the representative [p. 72](#) of ‘Palestine’.) Apart from a movement into the church in Spain in the 13th century and large movements in Indonesia in our time there have been no large responses to the Christian message in the Muslim world. It would