

Modern Israel: Miracles, Myths and God. (Romans 15:14-33)

First half adapted from "Miracles and Myths," by Jill Nelson "World Magazine," April 26, 2018 - Issue Date: May 12, 2018

Each year, millions of pilgrims descend upon Israel with hopes and expectations: for a sign from God, an answered prayer, a spiritual awakening after walking the path Jesus once walked. Or maybe even a World Cup Soccer Championship.

That's what the Argentinean national soccer team is hoping for after its Holy Land trip and friendly match against Israel one week before its first World Cup game in Russia on June 16. Common sense (and the team's manager) would say going to a training camp in Barcelona, Spain, would have been better. But most team members are Catholics who believe they will gain something significant in visiting this sacred place.

"I really want to visit the Holy Land and for Argentina this will be an important professional and spiritual journey, and I'm convinced that coming to Israel before the World Cup will do us good," said team captain Lionel Messi.



Jerusalem's Old City, seen through a door with a hole in the shape of the Star of David. (Oded Balilty / AP)

The Christian love affair with Israel has its roots in Biblical texts, historical realities, and eschatological expectations. If God once kept His eyes and heart focused on the 2,000-year-old Temple in Jerusalem's Old City, many wonder, might He still be more attuned to the prayers of faithful pilgrims who visit there? (1 Kings 9:1-3. But see also 4- 9).

The American connection goes even further: Polls show that around 80% of evangelical Christians believe that God promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people and that the country's rebirth in 1948 is fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. Many also apply God's Abrahamic covenant to the modern nation, believing that God will bless those who bless Israel (Genesis 12:3). And as we have recently learned from Romans 9 -11 Scripture does teach that national Israel still has a role to play in God's salvific plans for the world. But with 4,000 years of conflict over the region, it can be difficult to separate fact from fiction. Israel continues to be a cauldron of competing claims, both political and spiritual.

Some Christians believe "God's chosen" can do no wrong in their messy quest to keep democracy alive in a Jewish state. Liberal Christians often take the opposite stance, accusing Israel of oppressing Palestinians, or worse: running an apartheid state.

Therefore since tomorrow (Monday, May 14th) marks Israel's 70th anniversary of national survival, even success, in the midst of a hostile and unstable region, here are four myths about the people and politics of this place that we Christians ought to get a better understanding of.

Myth #1: Israel is a religious country

Many assume that religion figures predominantly in the lives of Israelis, and in some ways this is true: Jerusalem especially is infested with Jewish, Christian, and Muslim shrines. While holding the record as the most visited city in the world with 3.5 million tourists annually, on the Sabbath, buses still come to a halt and restaurants and malls shut down. Rabbinical courts govern matters of marriage and divorce, and the Jewish Law of Return includes conversion as one way to become an Israeli citizen. **Yet most Israelis are secular.**

Middle East expert Thomas Friedman realized just how secular when he was invited to speak to a group of Israeli army officers preparing to study in the United States. The lecture following his own was titled "How to Behave in a Synagogue." When he asked why Israelis would need this information, he discovered that many officers had never been in a synagogue before.

In America, Jewish life revolves around the synagogue, but in Israel, a large majority are non-observant Jews. Many of Israel's founders were socialists who claimed no religious identity. Zionism was a return to their historical homeland, not a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. **Today, only 30% of Israeli Jews say religion is very important to them (compared with 68% of Muslims and 57% of Christians living in Israel).** So modern Israel is not necessarily the Israel of Biblical prophetic promises.

Myth #2: Israelis are the oppressors; Palestinians are the victims

Like most nations, Israel could do more to improve inequities among minorities. But reports that overemphasize gun-wielding Israeli soldiers beating rock-throwing Palestinians miss the mark. Recent polls show that 77 percent of Israeli Arabs would rather live in Israel than any other country and would not move to a Palestinian state if such were created. The reason: Life in Israel is pretty good. In the name of democracy, Israel absorbed its Arab residents (now 20 percent of the population) giving them citizenship, voting rights, seats in the Knesset, and the right to decline mandatory military service so they don't have to fight against other Arabs. They attend the same universities and go to the same hospitals. Israeli Arabs have a higher life expectancy than their kin in Arab countries, and Arab women have equal rights with men. Israel's democratic structure means corruption is usually punished and excess force is investigated.

Compare that with the crippling poverty and failing infrastructure that have made life miserable in Gaza and parts of the West Bank, but the creation of a **border wall**

between Israel and the Palestinian territories has nothing to do with racial segregation. For decades, Palestinian leaders have vowed to wipe Israel off the map, fired rockets from Gaza into Israel, and sent suicide bombers into nightclubs. In the years following the completion of the border wall's crucial sections, suicide attacks, which claimed more than 1,000 Israeli lives between 2000 and 2004, decreased by 84 percent. For similar defensive reasons Egypt has also begun constructing a 6-mile-long steel barrier on its border with Palestinian-governed Gaza Strip.

Myth #3: Israel welcomes Christians

Israel relies heavily on its Christian friends across the Atlantic. American evangelicals have planted trees in Israel and pushed for pro-Israel policies (such as moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem). In turn, Israelis have set aside memories of past persecution in Christian lands and put out the welcome mat.

But Israel hasn't always extended that same courtesy to its Messianic Jewish and Christian Arab population. Israel's Law of Return prevents most Messianic Jews from immigrating to Israel or becoming Israeli citizens.

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups have stirred up trouble at the local level, harassing both Arab Christians and Messianic Jews who live in isolated communities. For example, Christians in the southern town of Arad have weathered decades of harassment. Their chess club and Bible center has been torched and their American guests intimidated (see "Men in black," [World](#): April 5, 2008).

Myth #4: Palestinian demands are simple: land for peace

This may be true for many of the 700,000 Palestinians whose olive groves were lost when Israeli and Arab forces collided in 1948. But Arab and Palestinian leaders have consistently turned down opportunities to exchange land for peace and rarely promoted Israel's right to exist.

Israel's Arab neighbors rejected two early U.N. sponsored partitioning plans, which gave Arabs three times more land than the Jews, Then despite the United Nations' vote in favor of Jewish statehood in 1948, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq launched the region into full-scale war. Arab nations again attacked in 1967 and 1973, the aftermath of which gained Israel control of the West Bank, Gaza strip, and the Golan Heights.

The Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights and Gaza in 2005 didn't bring about peace. Instead, Palestinians in the Gaza Strip voted Hamas into power and fired rockets at Jewish civilians. Israelis are the first to admit they could do more to promote peace, but Palestinian leaders have failed to implement simple demands: to put an end to martyr money payments made to suicide bombers' families, to rewriting textbooks which promote violence, and removing calls for Israel's destruction. Most Israelis would like to end the occupation policies, but few are willing to gamble away Israel's security.

Today, while some neighbors have made peace with Israel (**Egypt, Jordan**, and now **Saudi Arabia**), another **32 U.N. affiliated nations still do not recognize Israel's national rights**; and others such as **Iran** continue to openly call for their complete extermination. **Hezbollah** threatens the northern border, **ISIS** lurks in the southern Sinai, and **anti-Semitism** is again growing in Europe. Meanwhile, the **Argentine National Soccer Team** faces pressure to abandon its Holy Land trip as **Boycott, Divest, and Sanction groups** rally against "Israeli apartheid."

ISRAEL'S extraordinary success against great odds is one reason why it has ample fans, critics, and myths. Out of the ashes of the Holocaust, the Jewish people did the seemingly impossible: survived multiple attacks by Arab forces three times as strong, absorbed millions of immigrants (including nearly 700,000 expelled from Muslim countries), made the desert bloom, and developed a technology industry that according to a 2018 U.S. News & World Report earned it the title of 10th most innovative country in the world (ahead of the United States).

Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir shed some light on these feats. She said, "*The Jews have a secret weapon: we have nowhere else to go.*"

So, the words of Psalm 122:6 are still applicable today: "**Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!**" But how should we Christians pray for those living in the Holy Land?

Perhaps Paul's closing remarks to his Roman readers, combined with his earlier teachings in this letter, can shed some light on how Christians should now respond to Israel.

On his third missionary journey, Paul had learned of a famine back home in the land of Palestine. Knowing that the Christian Communities would be doubly hurt both from continued persecution by the local authorities and now a shortage of food, he gathered a "love offering" from his Gentile congregations to carry back home to believers in Israel. About this Gentile offering to Jews, Paul wrote

They were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. ... For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.
Romans 15:25-27 (NIV)

Which brings up a foundational truth about Christian/Jewish relations which Paul carefully explained in chapter 11 of his letter: The Church has never replaced Israel as "God's holy nation." Instead Christians were grafted together with those whom Paul identified as "*true Israel*" onto the roots of Hebrew saints and prophets who continue to

support our singular faith in salvation provided for us by God's Messiah – Jesus the Christ (Romans 9:6-7). We are of one faith regardless of how different our practices may seem.

We know of Paul's deep love for his own people, as he wrote to the Romans,

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit— I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. Romans 9:1-3

He naturally wanted all his Hebrew brethren to come to faith in Jesus, God's promised Messiah. But he also knew of their long history of rebellion against God as all of us human beings have had. Thus we are all saved the same way:

So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy.
Romans 9:16

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by God's grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
Romans 3:23-24

As the Apostle John would later write

Whoever has the Son has life;
whoever does not have the Son of God
does not have life.
1 John 5.12

Paul knew this that truth applied to his fellow Jews as well as all Gentiles; and just as there were many Gentiles who thought his "proclamation of Christ" was foolishness, so also there were many Jews who stumbled over his message of forgiveness for all (1 Corinthians 1:18-23). Wearing the distinction of being born Jewish no more guarantees one's salvation, as claiming the name "Christian" indicates that one truly is.

So Paul wrote this painful admission while still holding out hope for a few of his kin:

... not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,
and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants ...
it is **not the children of the flesh who are the children of God,**
but the children of the promise are counted as descendants.
Romans 9:6-8

So too at the present time **there is a REMNANT, chosen by grace...** Israel [nationally] failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,
Romans 11:5-7

There is a remnant, chosen by grace to be saved by faith; as was true in Paul's Day it is still true in ours: neither by nationality, nor birthright, nor lifestyle, nor claimed title such as "Christian" makes one so; only those – from all nations who come to God in faith can be called "children of God," or in Israel's case "true descendants of Abraham."

Many nations have been used by God to advance His salvation plan for the world; some who have acknowledged God's sovereignty, others who never did. But only the nation of Israel has ever entered into a covenantal relationship with God: specifically to bring His Messiah – who would bless all nations – into our world. And for this reason I truly believe that Satan has historically singled them out for intense hatred, prejudice, and persecution, whenever God lifted His protection from them. No one can explain the Crusades, the Pogroms, the Holocaust, even today's current anti-Semitism as anything other than demonically inspired.

So how should the modern day Christian now respond to Israel?

- Admire them for their national and social accomplishments and criticize them for their failures.
- Certainly join Paul in praying that they all might be saved; for that is what God desires both for Israel and the rest of our world (1 Timothy 2:3-6).
- And remember that in some mysterious way, national Israel still has a part to play in God's plans for our world (Romans 11:25-33).
- But also remember that God can continue to keep His promises to Abraham through a chosen and protected remnant of Abraham's children; those who now call themselves "**Messianic Jews**;" our brothers and sisters in faith whom we will one day with stand side-by-side in God's Kingdom.
- And certainly, if you ever get the chance, visit the Holy Land, tour the shrines, and walk in the footsteps of Jesus, but also talk to the people - of all faiths – and clearly see the land as Jesus weepingly saw it: as one more nation needing to recognize its messiah visit and return home to its reliance on God the Father.
- And by all means continue to pray and work for the peace of Jerusalem, as you should also be doing for our nation and everywhere else.

Let's pray about this right now.