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Restored for Destruction?

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“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.” (Jeremiah 30:7)

A few years ago, I listened to the sermon of a well-known Bible teacher who basically stated: “The Jewish people did not learn the lesson of the Holocaust, so they need to go through more suffering that will make the Holocaust look small in comparison.” A similar thought we frequently hear is: “Two-thirds of the Jews will die in the Great Tribulation.” In other words, the worst chapter in Jewish history is still ahead of us. Or to put it more bluntly, God is returning the Jewish people back to their homeland of Israel in order to kill two-thirds of them in a massive conflagration. These views are usually linked to ominous quotes from the Old Testament prophets which seem to underline their point. One such passage is the above verse from Jeremiah, which speaks about the “the times of Jacob’s trouble”. Other passages used to bolster this teaching are Zechariah 13:8-9 and Ezekiel chapter 5, which both speak about a time when two-thirds of those in the land will be wiped out.

The prophetic context

I personally have strong reservations with subscribing to this kind of interpretation, because I believe that it takes these passages out of context and, even more importantly, they misrepresent the character of God and His present purposes for Israel. At the same time, Scripture indicates that “the time of Jacob’s trouble” and the time when two-thirds of Israel are to be cut off, refer to two different events in Jewish history. Allow me to explain.

A. Jeremiah and Jacob’s trouble

The prophet Jeremiah introduces in chapter 30 a great succession of passages (30-33) that foresee the restoration of Israel, culminating in a “new covenant” of changed hearts and the rule of the “the Righteous Branch”. God makes sure that these prophecies will not be lost for future generations, as He explicitly tells Jeremiah to “write down” the words, because “I will restore the fortunes of My people... and I will bring them back to their land...” (30:2-3)

Then God begins to lay out, from verse 4 onward, the sequence for how He is going to accomplish this redemptive work. He first sees a picture of despair and calamity: “Cries of terror and panic!” Concluding with the call: “Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is the time of Jacob’s trouble...” (30:7). Immediately following these verses, God’s restoration programme starts to play out. The Lord announces that change is coming as He breaks off the yoke of oppression (30:8), until Israel will finally serve God and His Messiah. He continues:

“Therefore, do not fear, O My servant Jacob ... For behold, I will save you from afar, and your seed from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return, have rest and be quiet, and no one shall make him afraid.” (30:10)

A similar sequence of events is found in the following chapter of Jeremiah 31, where the prophet declares: “Thus says the LORD, ‘The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness ...’” (31:2) Israel escaped the sword and God saved them. This declaration again is followed by the promise of return from exile: “Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the ends of the earth, ... A great throng shall return there.” (31:8)

This indicates that the ‘time of Jacob’s trouble’ represents an unprecedented catastrophe (‘none is like it’) at a time when Israel is still exiled. Out of this crisis, God is restoring them back to their land.

This is what we see fulfilled in the modern history of Israel. A nation that barely escaped complete annihilation in the Holocaust, with six million dead, yet they arose from the ashes of that great tragedy and returned to their homeland to re-establish the nation of Israel, just as the prophet Ezekiel foretold:

“Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’” “Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.”” (Ezekiel 37:11–12)

The Holocaust indeed was one of the darkest chapters of Jewish history. It was a time of Jacob’s trouble and all historians agree that it was a singularly unique tragedy in human history. Yet out of this season of devastation and hopelessness, God saved His people and restored them to their land.

B. Ezekiel and the scattered hairs

Ezekiel was the first prophet to foresee the calamity of two-thirds of the people of Israel perishing. (Ezekiel 5:1-4) He prophesied these things during the Babylonian Exile and was asked to carry out a strange act to demonstrate what was coming: to take a razor blade and cut off all the hair on his head and beard! Then “you shall burn with fire one-third in the midst of the city, ... then you shall take one-third and strike it with the sword, and one-third you shall scatter in the wind...” (5:2) “This is Jerusalem,” explains the Lord. A two-thirds majority will be wiped out in famine, judgement and war, while the remaining one-third are not redeemed but scattered around the world, with harsh persecution following them even in exile. (5:2-4)

C. Zechariah and the shepherd

Zechariah lived in the time when Israel was returning from Babylon. Chapters 12-14 speak about the end-time struggle and restoration of Jerusalem, climaxing in the redemption of Israel as the “spirit of grace and supplication” is being poured out upon them. Yet right in the midst of these passages, the prophet inserts a vision about the Messiah...

“Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, against the man who is My Companion,” says the LORD of hosts. “Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones.” (Zechariah 13:7)

Jesus himself quotes this scripture (Mark 14:27), referring to its fulfilment in the Garden of Gethsemane, as his disciples fled leaving him to suffer alone. In a broader sense, it is also a picture of the entire nation of Israel being scattered three decades after Christ, who is the great Shepherd who was “struck” and died. In this context, Zechariah foresees tragic times for all of Israel: “And it shall come to pass in all the land, says the LORD, that two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, but one-third shall be left in it.” (Zechariah 13:8)

The accounts of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius tell us that during the first Jewish uprising, prior to the destruction of the Temple, some 1.1 million Jews lost their lives in the land of Israel. Just a few decades later, during the Bar Kochba revolt, the Roman historian Cassius Dio tallies another 580,000 Jewish casualties, with the surviving remnant being exiled. This would bring the total number of casualties in both revolts to over 1.7 million people.

Moreover, the Jewish historian Salo Wittmayer Baron estimated the population of Israel at 2.3 million at the time of the Roman emperor Claudius (41-54 AD). Two-thirds of this number would represent some 1.5 million people. So, there is amazing accord between these secular histories and the words of the Hebrew prophets foretold some 500 years earlier. Both the history books and the

prophetic context of the 'stricken shepherd' compel us to place these events in the past and not in the future.

Jesus himself foresaw this calamity over Israel when he wept over Jerusalem. "And they will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led away captive into all nations." (Luke 21:24) Zechariah likewise foresees an extended period of judgement for Israel, with two-thirds perishing while the one-third remnant is placed through the "fire" of exile, followed by their eventual redemption.

Thus, there is a common thread that can be followed throughout these prophetic writings in Jeremiah 30-33, Ezekiel 5 and Zechariah 13. The process of Israel's redemption starts with the rejection and striking of the Shepherd. This is followed by a huge upheaval in the land of Israel where two-thirds are "cut off" with the remaining one-third scattered to all the nations. This exile is accompanied by the refining fire of ongoing persecution and culminates in a final calamity outside the land known as "Jacob's trouble". Finally, it ends with a national restoration of Israel that ultimately gives way to her spiritual restoration as well.

This very same sequence also can be found in the great chapters of Ezekiel 36-37, while Psalm 102 also foresees a Holocaust-type ordeal after which God declares that "the time to favour Zion has come!"

The new paradigm of favouring Zion

The prophets indicate that once God's restoration purposes with Israel set in, nothing can stop or interrupt it anymore. Zechariah tells us that Jerusalem will become a "cup of drunkenness" for the world and that the nations will eventually gather against Jerusalem. Although, the same prophet also declares that it is the nations who will be judged, while Israel is delivered and comes out victorious.

The restoration of Israel represents a paradigm shift in how God is dealing with the Jewish people. The prophet Isaiah starts his restoration-chapters (40-48) with the call to "Comfort My people" and to cry out to her, "that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." (Isaiah 40:1-2) This expression "her iniquity is pardoned" could be better translated from the Hebrew as "her debt has been settled", or "she has paid for her sin". Rather than pardon or forgiveness, it reflects the idea that God has completed His season of judgment with Israel and He is no longer dealing with her anymore according to her sins. God is telling the world to cry out to Israel saying that her warfare and time of judgement has ended, and a new season of restoration lies ahead of her!

Likewise, Zechariah declares: "But now I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,' says the LORD of hosts... 'Just as I determined to punish you when your fathers provoked Me to wrath,' says the LORD of hosts, 'And I would not relent, so again in these days I am determined to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. Do not fear.'" (Zechariah 8:11-15) This means that God has started an unwavering restoration process representing a radical shift in how He deals with Israel. This does not mean He will never again correct Israel, like a loving father would his son, but it will be done "with measure". (Jeremiah 30:11)

The way to redemption

Finally, the teaching that Israel will only receive her Messiah through yet another period of great judgement misrepresents the character of God and even mankind. In general, great human catastrophe does not lead to repentance but rather to the contrary. Pharaoh, after the severest plagues, only hardened his heart even further. The book of Revelation parallels this by describing humanity as hopelessly in rebellion against God, even after His great wrath unfolds in the last days: "And they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and did not repent of their deeds." (Revelation 16:11)

Catastrophic judgments like that which occurred to Israel in 70 AD were not God's way to call His people back to Him; rather, they expressed His sense that their measure of sin was full and demanded divine justice. Jesus declared "your house is left to you desolate..." (Matthew 23:38)

Similarly, the great tragedy of the Holocaust left most Jews not seeking God but rather asking "Where was God?", and many even lost their faith in Him. As one Holocaust survivor once told me: "For me, God died in Auschwitz." The Apostle Paul, on the other hand, declares that "the goodness of God leads you to repentance". (Romans 2:4)

God's way of redeeming His people is a story of His covenant faithfulness and eternal love restoring them. (Jeremiah 31:2) In contrast, the message of God to the nations in our day is not that more judgement is waiting for Israel, but: "Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, 'He who scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him as a shepherd does his flock.'" (Jeremiah 31:10) This can surely include measured discipline by the corrective staff of the good shepherd, yet it will lead to green pastures.

This is the call we are committed to at the Christian Embassy: declaring God's mercy and faithfulness to Israel and to the nations. We are declaring that a new season of restoration has started, and we are challenging the Church to join God in this great restoration work with Israel. Our call is to "Comfort My people" and to declare to Israel that a new chapter has started which will lead not to further judgement but to all of Israel being saved!

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