

Who or What is “Israel”?

Who Will Receive the Fulfillment of

Old Testament Prophecies about “Israel”?

Someone sent me a paper written by a Clarence H. Wagner, Jr., titled “12 Keys to Understanding Israel in the Bible,” and asked me whether, in view of Scripture and Catholic teaching, his views are correct. After reading his essay, I can safely say that they are not what either Scripture or the Catholic Church has taught regarding Israel. In fact, they are the exact opposite. It appears as if Clarence is among a group of Protestant Dispensationalists who believe that Old Testament passages that speak or allude to a “restoration of Israel” refer to national Israel and the national people of Israel, the Jews. The main reason he and others come to such a conclusion is that they fail to interpret the Old Testament by the commentary given in the New Testament. Long ago, the Jews fell into this same trap, for they refused to use the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament prophecies about the coming Messiah. As a result, they are still looking for the Messiah, having missed him the first time He came. The same is true today among various Protestants (and Catholics who have imbibed Protestant eschatological schemes) who read the prophecies concerning Israel and its “restoration” in the Old Testament. Without using the New Testament to interpret those prophecies, one will end up looking for a physical and literal restoration of national Israel, having missed the fact that the New Testament steers us elsewhere.

The New Testament makes direct quotes from the Old Testament over 200 times. About two-thirds of them are prophecies, with the Psalms and Isaiah taking up the bulk of the predictions. Since there are many possible interpretations to a given text in the Old Testament, (especially in regards to the term “Israel”), there must exist some means of eliminating the interpretations that are not the intention of the Holy Spirit. We can safely conclude that, because the Holy Spirit inspired so many citations in the New Testament concerning Old Testament prophecy about “Israel,” we must conclude that the New Testament is establishing, for all time, the one true interpretation that must be applied, and that all other interpretations must then be erroneous.

In examining the entire New Testament corpus of commentary on Old Testament prophecies about Israel, there is not one passage in the New Testament that interprets an Old Testament prophecy concerning a “restoration of Israel,” or any corresponding prophecy using similar terminology, as referring to a restoration of the physical or literal nation of Israel or the physical or literal national people of Israel, the Jews. Old Testament prophecies concerning a restoration of Israel are invariably interpreted by the New Testament authors as being fulfilled in the Church of the New Covenant. The fulfillment comes either in the present age of the Church on earth, the Church Militant; and if it does not come then, or is only partially fulfilled in the Church Militant, the fulfillment comes or is completed in heaven in the Church Triumphant.

It is granted that, if we did not have the New Testament commentary on Old Testament prophecies, we would be forced to interpret the Old Testament by itself, and, like any non-Christian Jew reading the Old Testament today, we would be forced to concur that the "Israel" of which it speaks refers to national Israel and the Jewish race of people. But since that is not the case, those who refuse to use the New Testament to interpret Old Testament prophecies are doing a great disservice to both Christians and Jews. Until Clarence and his followers begin interpreting Old Testament prophecies by the commentary given to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament, he and many other people will be deceived and confusion will result.

Clarence: As I travel the world speaking on behalf of Bridges for Peace, I often hear many of the same questions over and over again. Whether it is in South Africa or Canada, Australia or Brazil, the UK or the USA, one thing that Christians want to have is a summary of the key Scriptures about Israel and the Jewish people. God has much to say about His Covenant people and His Land, Israel.

The Land of Israel is the only place on earth which God says He owns in terms of property ownership that can be transferred. (Of course, we know the whole world is His, yet this one parcel of land on the earth has a unique relationship to Him.) About Israel, He says, "The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine: for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me" (Leviticus 25:23).

R. Sungenis: This applied only in the Old Covenant, which has since been revoked (Hebrews 7:18; 8:13; 10:9; 2Cor 3:6-14; Col 2:14-16; Eph 2:15). The civil and ceremonial stipulations of the Old Covenant no longer have legal force today, since the Old Covenant itself no longer has legal force. There is nothing in the stipulations of Leviticus that says land, or any other thing in the Old Covenant economy, will be valid until the end of time.

Clarence: Exactly what does the Bible say about God's parcel of land, and who has a right to it?

When we come to the modern-day Israel-Palestine issue, people often ask the question, "Just what right do Israel and the Jewish people have to this land?" Arguments are continually brought forth concerning the rights of the Palestinians and the rights of the Israelis that seem logical to the people who present them. But a basic question still remains in my mind as I listen to the many conflicting viewpoints concerning this parcel of land: "Who has the ultimate authority to determine rights concerning this special piece of real estate?"

The biblical answer to that question is that God alone determines the "rights" that any of us have. Something is right or wrong because of Divine decree, not human feeling or human reason. The existence of God previous to the creation of the universe and mankind gives Him the right to determine our "rights."

Morality exists because God exists. Authority exists because God exists. And, Almighty God has already determined the rights of Israel and the Jewish people to the land God owns and has deeded over to them.

R. Sungenis: God certainly has the authority to designate any land to any people He desires, but the question is: who is the interpreter of what God has decreed? Clarence Wagner has certainly not been vested with any divine authority to speak for God on this issue. Clarence Wagner has his own private interpretations of Scripture, and thus he is no better than the people from whom he hears all these “arguments.”

Clarence: Let's look together at what He has to say about the Land of Israel, the people He chose to possess it, and why:

Key #1: The Land of Canaan, renamed Israel by the Lord, was given by God to Abraham and his descendants as an everlasting possession.

In Genesis 12:7a, we read: "The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'"

In Genesis 13:15, He repeated His promise when He said, "for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever." He said the same thing in Genesis 15:18, "To your descendants I have given this land."

R. Sungenis: The problem is that the word “forever” is not the exclusive meaning of the Hebrew word עולם (OLAM). OLAM can mean anything from a “long time,” “an indefinite age” to “forever,” and we don’t know its intended meaning unless we have other information with which to collaborate. In this case, there is plenty of information in Scripture which shows us that the land given to Israel in Genesis 13:15 was not going to be “forever.” In other words, God could take away Israel’s possession of Palestine as easily as he could give it to him, since the word OLAM does not bind him to allowing Israel to have it forever, without end.

Clarence: Key #2: The gift of this Land to Abraham and his descendants was based on an unconditional covenant from God Himself.

Genesis 17:7-8 states: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

The sign of that covenant for Abraham and his descendants was circumcision. Twice in this passage, God mentions the everlasting nature of this covenant. There are some today who say that this covenant was conditional, that it was based on Israel's faithfulness to God. The Bible teaches otherwise.

In Psalm 89:30-37, we read: "If his sons forsake My law, and do not walk in My judgments, if they violate My statutes, and do not keep My commandments, then I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. But I will not break off My loving kindness from him, nor deal falsely in My faithfulness. My covenant I will not violate, nor will I alter the utterance of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David. His descendants shall endure forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is faithful."

Jeremiah 31:35-36 declares: "This is what the Lord says, 'He who appoints the sun to shine by day, Who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar -- the Lord Almighty is His Name; Only if these ordinances vanish from My sight,' declares the Lord, 'will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before Me.'"

We agree that God promised to judge His people if they disobeyed Him. That is true for all of us. However, we do not agree with those who say that Israel's disobedience would forfeit their gift of the land and their national status as a people. Deuteronomy 28 shows that God's pronouncement of blessing and cursing only affected the quality of life of the Israelites, which was conditional upon their faithfulness. However, the promise of the land was not based upon Israel's performance, but upon God's oath and character -- He will not lie.

Deuteronomy 30 shows that before they even entered the Promised Land, He knew they would violate His statutes and be evicted in a future day. Yet it also declares that He would bring them back into the land He had given their forefathers (see #8).

R. Sungenis: This is the type of exegesis that has plagued American Protestantism ever since the days of the first Scofield Reference Bible in 1909. First, if the covenant of Genesis 17 was "everlasting," then why was circumcision halted in the New Testament (Acts 15:1-28; Col 2:14-16; Gal 5:1-4; 6:13-16)? This is simply another case of misreading the meaning of the word "everlasting," which is again the Hebrew word OLAM.

Moreover, it certainly was the case that Israel's possession of the land was conditioned on their obedience. That is precisely why God took it away from them during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities, and took it away for the final time in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Clarence's citing of Psalm 89:30-37 has nothing to do with Israel's allotment of land, for we don't read anything in Psalm 89 about land. It is speaking about God's covenant of salvation through David, who was the progenitor of Christ (Mt 1:1). Clarence makes the mistake common among his circles of thinking -- a failure to distinguish between God's spiritual covenant and God's physical covenant.

As for Jeremiah 31:35-36, if God intended to convey the idea that Israel would never cease to be a nation, then why did Israel cease to be a nation in the Assyrian captivity, wherein the ten tribes never returned to Israel as a nation? Why did God take away Nehemiah's restored nation 500 years later under the Roman emperor Titus in 70 AD? Evidently, God did not mean that Israel would NEVER cease to be a political nation. Jeremiah 31 gives two phases to the covenant. One in verse 36 promising that the nation of Israel would be nation for כל־הימים

(KAL HAYAMIM), which means “all the days,” not “forever,” in which the city would be rebuilt “from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.” This, of course, was fulfilled in the time of Nehemiah (*cf.* Neh 3:1; 12:39). Hence, “all the days” that Israel remained faithful to God, they would continue to be a “nation” and have their cities rebuilt. But this occupation ended, of course, when Christ came and the Jews rejected him.

The second phase of the covenant is the spiritual covenant of salvation, a covenant that was fulfilled in Christ. This is why Hebrews 8:7-13 tells us that already in the time of Jeremiah the Old Covenant was “passing away,” awaiting the establishment of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. It is to this spiritual covenant that the Jews can place their hope (Heb 11:10-16, 39-40), not a covenant giving them physical land on this sin-cursed earth. So God has fulfilled his promises to Israel, but it is not as Clarence envisions them.

Clarence: Key #3: The Land was given to Abraham and his descendants as part of God's redemptive blessing to the world.

In Genesis 12:1-3, we read, "The Lord has said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'"

Israel was located in the center of the ancient world, and all transportation and communication between the continents had to pass through this territory to reach the other. In doing so, the travelers, merchants and traders, and even the armies encountered the Children of Israel.

They were chosen for three purposes: to worship God in this land and show the world the blessing of serving the one true God of the Universe; to receive, record and transmit the Word of God (through them we have our Bible); and finally, to be the human channel for the Messiah from whom we have our salvation. In order for God to protect His purposes for the Children of Israel in the Land of Israel, He promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and his descendants and curse him who cursed them.

R. Sungenis: The promise to Abraham about “blessing those who blessed him” was given to him when he was a Gentile, not a Jew. Abraham didn’t become a Jew until 25 years later when he was circumcised (Genesis 17). Hence, if Genesis 12:3 still applies, then it applies to Abraham as a Gentile, or at the most, to Abraham as a Gentile and a Jew, but it certainly does not apply exclusively to the Jewish race. It was precisely Jesus and Paul who separated the Jews from any dependence based on their physical relationship with Abraham (Jn 8:39; Rm 4:9-11; Gal 3:6-29).

Clarence: Key #4: This land was not given to the descendants of Ishmael (one ancestor of the Arab peoples), but rather to the descendants of Isaac.

I have no bitterness toward the descendants of Ishmael, nor do I wish to be unkind to our Arab friends. However, I must be faithful to what I know the Bible teaches. Abraham himself considered Ishmael as a possible descendant to whom God would give this land. In Genesis 17:18, Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee." But God's answer was, and is, very clear. In Genesis 17:19, God answered Abraham, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."

God promised to bless Ishmael and to make him a great nation: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation" (Genesis 17:20). However, the bloodline of the covenant promise concerning the Land would go through Isaac, not Ishmael: "...In Isaac your descendants shall be called" (Hebrews 11:18).

R. Sungenis: The distinction between Isaac and Ishmael in regards to land was only true in the Old Covenant, and thus it has no bearing on who has rights to the land of Palestine today. Today, in the New Covenant, Palestine belongs to the world, not the Jews, unless the world decide to give it to the Jews, which they did in 1948 in a small portion of land the Jews could call their own. Unfortunately, Israel today wants to expand her borders beyond the UN boundaries, and wants to do so by excising the Arab Palestinians who are now living there. This is wrong, since Israel no longer has divine rights to the land, and thus has no rights to excise anyone.

Clarence: Key #5: This Land was not given to the other sons of Abraham, but only to Isaac.

After Sarah died, Abraham had six more sons by Keturah, as well as others by his concubines, who are ancestors of many of the Arab peoples today. However, the covenant of the Land was not for them: "Now Abraham gave all he had to Isaac; but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east" (Genesis 25:5-6). Note that Abraham even sent these sons away from the Land of Canaan.

R. Sungenis: Clarence's argument is superfluous, since the legal possession of the land of Israel was only true in the Old Covenant, which has now been superseded by the New Covenant.

Clarence: Key #6: This Land and covenant were given only to Isaac's son, Jacob, and his descendants, not Esau and his descendants.

Jacob received the birthright from his father, Isaac. In Genesis 28:4, Isaac said to Jacob: "May He (God) also give you the blessing of Abraham, to you and to your descendants with you: that you may possess the land of your sojourning, which God gave to Abraham."

But it wasn't simply the words of his father Isaac that guided the future of Jacob. It was a direct revelation from God Himself that convinced Jacob of his destiny. The Lord God revealed to Jacob His message about this land. In Genesis 28:13-15, we read:

"I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. Your descendants shall also be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

According to Genesis 36:6-9, Esau took his descendants and all his possessions and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. Esau lived in the hill country of Seir. The Bible tells us that Esau is Edom. It specifically tells us that the descendants of Esau are the Edomites, and Israel was not their land. The book of Obadiah is a proclamation of doom upon the sons of Esau (Edom) for their constant persecution of the descendants of Jacob (Israel): "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob, you will be covered with shame; you will be destroyed forever" (Obadiah 1:10).

R. Sungenis: Again, this is superfluous, since the legal possession of the land of Israel was only true in the Old Covenant, which has now been superseded by the New Covenant.

Clarence: Key #7: God told Israel to conquer the Land which He had given to them.

In Deuteronomy 1:8, we read: "See, I have placed the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to them and their descendants after them." On the east side of the Jordan River as the Israelites were about to enter into the Promised land, the Lord said to Joshua: "Moses My servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan river into the land I am about to give to them -- to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert and from Lebanon to the great river, the Euphrates - all the Hittite country -- and to the Great Sea on the west. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them" (Joshua 1:2-4,6).

Joshua then told his people with these words: "This is how you will know that the living God is among you, and that He will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites"(Joshua 3:10). He then told them how the Lord would part the flood waters of the Jordan River so they could cross over to the other side. This is what happened and then the people knew that God was with them, and they conquered the land, region by region, starting with Jericho.

The reality of conflict over the land of Israel is nothing new and in no way indicates that God is not with the Jewish people concerning the land issue today. I have heard Christians say that

Israel today could not be part of God's plan, because there is so much war and strife that it can't be of God. However, since when has it been any different? All through the Older Testament, nations rose up to fight against the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, in the Land of Israel. From the moment Joshua brought the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, it was a fight to possess the Land. King David was seemingly at constant war with his neighbors, the Philistines. Why should it be surprising that conflict is still happening today? The enemies of God have always fought against His plans.

The prophet Zechariah makes it quite clear that at the end of days, God Himself will make Jerusalem a stumbling block for the nations and will judge them by whether or not they understand and support God's plans for Jerusalem and Israel. If they do, they will be blessed; if they don't, they will be destroyed: "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling. Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. On that day, I will set out to destroy all the nations that attack Jerusalem" (Zechariah 12:1-2,9).

R. Sungenis: For what it's worth, Israel found it difficult to secure their land from the attacks of the Philistines and other nations because Israel was disobedient to God during those times. Whenever Israel disobeyed God, he would allow the Philistines to overrun and rule them. All one need do to discover this is read the books of Joshua and Judges. But this has little relevance to our present day, since Joshua and the Judges were in the Old Covenant, which has since been revoked. Hence, any comparison of modern day Israel to Joshua is a blatant disregard for Scripture. Unfortunately, it was precisely the mentality that Clarence brings to this issue that was in the minds of Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon in 1948 when they served as generals for the Israeli army. Thinking they were destined to imitate Joshua (which is verified by their own words on the subject) they believed they were under a divine mandate to go into the former lands of Israel and wipe out the Arab Palestinians from the land, believing them to be descendants of the "Amalekites" of Old Testament times that were to be exterminated under divine order. This is what a failure to separate the Old Covenant from the New Covenant will do. It is the most insidious error of biblical interpretation ever foisted on mankind. This erroneous reading of Old Testament texts will only cause streams of blood to flow on both sides, and nothing will be accomplished by it.

As for the prophecy of Zechariah 12, the key verse that would have told Clarence the precise timing of the "restoration" was the very verse he neglected to cite, verse 10, ("And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him"). This is the very verse that John quotes in John 19:37 ("And again another scripture says, "They shall look on him whom they have pierced") regarding the Jews looking upon Jesus hanging on the cross. Hence, Zechariah 12 has nothing to do with restoring the Jews to the land of Israel in the future, but has every thing to do with taking their ancient land away from them, since that is what happened when Jesus died on the cross – the Jews lost their inheritance and their nation. The restored "Jerusalem" that Zechariah has in view is the Church of the New

Covenant, as Acts 15:16-18 assures us: "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up, that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who has made these things known from of old." The Church is the New Israel and the New Jerusalem, for the old Israel and the Old Jerusalem have passed.

Clarence: Key #8: Israel's sin and subsequent exile from the Land did not change their divine right to this Land given to them by the Lord in covenant.

Many people have said that God's promise to give Israel this land was based upon Israel's faithfulness to God's laws, and that when they were disobedient and sent into captivity, this nullified God's promise. The Bible teaches otherwise. In Leviticus 26:40-45, we read that God would punish Israel for its disobedience and send them into captivity. But, according to verses 44-45, God will bring them back:

"Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the Lord." In Deuteronomy 30:3-5, God promises: "Then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. And the Lord; your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers."

Amos 9:14-15 thunders forth these remarkable words: "'Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,' says the Lord your God."

Some opponents to Israel's right to the land say that these verses were fulfilled when the Jewish people returned from the Babylonian captivity. However, we know that there were other exiles and in-gatherings, as well. Yet, Amos speaks of a return to their ancient homeland, Israel, once and for all, when he says, "' and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,' says the Lord your God" (Amos 9:15). That has never happened in history and many believe that this return to Israel is that final return that will culminate in the coming of Messiah.

R. Sungenis: Once again, Clarence misses the most important verse of the passage. If Clarence had paid attention to when the New Testament says that Amos 9 was fulfilled, he would discover in Acts 15:16-18 that Amos was referring to the New Testament Church, not the physical nation of Israel or the Jewish race. But since the tendency of people in Clarence's circle

is to separate the Old Testament from the New Testament, they will invariably interpret the Old Testament as a separate document with its own fulfillment and disregard the spiritual fulfillment provided in the New Testament commentary. It is this constant wish to read every reference to "Israel" as referring to the physical land of Israel instead of the spiritual land of the Christian Church that is the main cause for all the confusion. Below, you will see another example of this erroneous view of Scripture in Clarence's interpretation of Ezekiel 37.

Clarence: Key #9: The name of this Land is not Palestine, but Israel.

Twenty-five hundred years ago, the prophet Ezekiel spoke of the restoration of Israel to its land in the last days. Ezekiel spoke of dry bones coming to life. Never before in history has a nation been destroyed and scattered all over the world, and then been brought back to life. It is a miracle and a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. We read in Ezekiel 37:11-12:

"Then He said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, 'thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of ISRAEL.'"

Notice that the name of that land is ISRAEL, the land that so often is called the "land of Canaan" in the Bible. God says that in the last days it will be called ISRAEL.

The name, Palestine, was a regional name that was imposed on the area by the Roman Emperor, Hadrian, who suppressed the Second Jewish Revolt in AD 135. He was so angry with the Jews that he wanted to humiliate them and emphasize that the Jewish nation had lost its right to a homeland under Roman rule. The name Palaestina was originally an adjective derived from Philistia, the arch-enemies of the Israelites 1000 years earlier. Hadrian also changed the name of Jerusalem to Aelia Capitolina after his own family name, Aelia. He also forbade Jews from entering the city, except on the 9th of the Hebrew month, Av, to mourn its destruction. Since he was considered a god in the Roman Empire, this was his attempt to break God's covenant between the Jewish people and their land. This effectively declared his pagan authority over Jerusalem, which had been the place of the presence of the God of Israel. To this day, the name Palestine flies in the face of Israel and the entire issue can be boiled down to a religious (spiritual) battle over a land whose fate will be decided by the God of the Bible, since it is His land (Leviticus 25:23).

Yeshua (Jesus), in describing the signs of the end of the age, said: "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:24b). From the time of Hadrian until 1967, Jerusalem was controlled by Gentiles. It is now back in the hands of the Jewish people, which is one sign that Messiah is soon to come to Zion.

R. Sungenis: Clarence's definitions of "Palestine" and "Israel" has no bearing on this subject. Moreover, "the times of the Gentiles being fulfilled" refers to the end of the world, since the very next verses (which Clarence fails to cite) speak about the return of Christ: (Luke 21:25-27:

“...until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. 25 "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and upon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory”). There is nothing in the text of Luke 21 that says there will be a restoration of the Jews to the land of Israel that will occur between the fullness of the Gentiles and the return of Christ. In fact, there is not one single verse in the New Testament that says that the Jews would be restored to Israel prior to the Second Coming or anytime near the Second Coming. We must also add that, if the return of the Jewish race to Israel were such an important piece of the puzzle for knowing the return of Christ, we would expect to read about it in the New Testament’s eschatological passages. But the only thing we read as a sign of the return of Christ is the general apostasy of the world, nothing about Israel. Clarence’s appeal to 1967 for both the return of the control of Jerusalem to the Jews and the beginning of the “fullness of the Gentiles,” is not only unsupported by the New Testament, the fact is that Israel did not control Jerusalem in 1967 and it does not control it today. The Jews, at most, are co-existing with Arabs and other religions in Jerusalem, as they have co-existed with Gentiles throughout the world for the last two millennia.

Moreover, if the “fullness of the Gentiles” occurred in 1967 and God was fulfilling prophecy by renewing the Jews to the faith, then why is there as much disbelief in Christ and Christianity today as prior to 1967? Statistics show that, as of 1967 to the present, the number of Jews in Israel who have embraced the Messiah of Christianity is no more than what occurred in the time of Elijah when he complained to God that out of a nation of millions of people only 7000 had not bowed the knee to Baal (Romans 11:4-8). Today in Israel, after the so-called “return of Israel,” there are less than 6000 Jews out of a nation of 6,000,000 that have converted to the Christian faith.

Contrary to Clarence’s assertion, Ezekiel 37, especially verses 24-28 which mention “David” as their king, is not speaking about national Israel and national Judah, but about the same fulfillment that Amos 9:7 prophesied about “David,” and which, according to Luke 1:68-79 and Acts 15:16-18, was fulfilled in the New Testament Church. The problem, of course, is that Clarence interprets the Old Testament without the benefit of the New Testament, just like an unbelieving Jew still does today. As long as they do so, they will misinterpret the Old Testament.

Clarence: Key #10: The stranger (those outside the Covenant) will live among you and be treated with respect.

"They (God's covenant people) will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated: they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. The stranger will shepherd your flock; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards" (Isaiah 61:4,5). "If you (Israel) really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this

place and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your forefathers for ever and ever" (Jeremiah 7:5-7).

The "alien" or "foreigner" in these verses would include the Palestinian Arabs and other non-Jewish people who live in the land. They would receive a blessing by living and working in the Land of Israel, not the Land of Palestine. On the one hand, Israel should treat them with respect. On the other hand, they have the responsibility to live at peace, abiding by the laws of the Land, recognizing under whose sovereignty it belongs.

This is what Moses taught: "The community (of Israel) is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the Lord; the same laws and regulations will apply to you and to the alien living among you"(Numbers 15:15,16).

When this relationship is broken, as has happened today, then crisis ensues. Scripture has much more to say about the Land in prophecy, including the fact that Israel will go through many more trials before Messiah comes to fully restore Israel as the head of all nations.

R. Sungenis: The Jews are no longer "God's covenant people" because they have no exclusive covenant with God. Their exclusive covenant with God was established with Moses, but that has been superseded by the New Covenant in Christ (Heb 7:18; 10:9). The New Covenant is for both Jew and Gentile, and therefore it is not an exclusive covenant for Jews and it has nothing to do with fulfilling land promises to the Jews in Israel today. All the land promises to the Jews have been fulfilled (Neh 9:7-8); and any future promises to "David" or "Israel" have been fulfilled by the Church (Acts 15:16-18; Heb 10:16-18); and those that have not been completely fulfilled will be fulfilled in the New Heaven and New Earth (Heb 10:39-40; 2Peter 3:10-13), not in a piece of real estate in the Middle East.

Clarence's appeal to Israel having to go through various trials before the Messiah fully restores them is just wishful thinking that doesn't have any support from the New Testament. Isaiah 61:1-5 is not speaking about national Israel, but about the first coming of Christ, since Isaiah 61 is quoted by Jesus himself in Luke 4:18-19 as Isaiah 61's express fulfillment. Jesus himself tells the Jews so in Luke 4:21: "And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

Clarence: Key #11: The return of the Jewish people at the end of days will be initiated by God, and their return will signal the restoration of a barren and broken land.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of God's plan to bring His people back to Israel, saying: "He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel, He will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth" (Isaiah 11:12).

When the Jews began to return from the nations of the world at the end of the last century, the land was barren and sparsely inhabited. In the 1860s, the author, Mark Twain, traveled in what

was then a backward region of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, called Palestine and described the land, thusly: "Nowhere in all the waste around was there a foot of shade." He called the land a "blistering, naked, treeless land." Of the Galilee, he said, "There is no dew, nor flowers, nor birds, nor trees. There is a plain and an unshaded lake, and beyond them some barren mountains." His summary of Palestine: "Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. It is a hopeless, dreary, heartbroken land."

This description matches the Ezekiel's prophecy of the "barren mountains of Israel" in Ezekiel 36:1-7. However, Ezekiel goes on to say, "But you, O mountains of Israel, will produce branches and fruit for My people Israel, for they will soon come home. I am concerned for you and will look on you with favor; you will be plowed and sown, and I will multiply the number of people upon you, even the whole house of Israel. The towns will be inhabited and the ruins rebuilt. I will increase the number of men and animals upon you, and they will be fruitful and become numerous. I will settle people on you as in the past and will make you prosper more than before. Then, you will know that I am the Lord. I will cause people, My people Israel, to walk upon you. They will possess you, and you will be their inheritance; you will never again deprive them of their children" (Ezekiel 36: 8-12).

Truly, the return of the Jews from over 100 nations of the world is a modern-day miracle. Large waves of immigrants began to come in the 1880s. Since those early days, the deserts have been reforested, the rocky fields made fertile, the swamps drained and planted, the ancient terraces rebuilt, and the ruined cities of old re-established. Israel is now a nation of over six million people that is a food exporting nation that boasts high levels of literacy, health, education and welfare, high technology and agricultural development.

R. Sungenis: Again, this is a case of Clarence trying to interpret the Old Testament without the benefit of the New Testament. Isaiah 11:10-12, as well as Deut 32:43 and Psalm 117:1, are quoted in Romans 15:10-12 as being fulfilled in the New Testament Church, with special emphasis on the Gentiles, the same Gentiles that Isaiah mentions in Isaiah 11:11-16. In other words, Isaiah's prophecy and Ezekiel's prophecy have a SPIRITUAL fulfillment in the Church, not a physical fulfillment in national Israel or the Jewish race of people. It is only those who insist on interpreting the Old Testament divorced from the New Testament who come to an opposite conclusion.

Clarence: Key #12: The nations will be part of the return of the people and the restoration of the land.

The prophet Isaiah of Israel said: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the Lord your God. Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations. For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined" (Isaiah 60:1,9-12).

R. Sungenis: Isaiah 60 is fulfilled in the New Testament Church. Ephesians 5:14 quotes Isaiah 60:1 as being the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Accordingly, Ephesians 2:11-22 is one of the most pertinent passages explaining that the Gentiles have become the rightful heirs of the covenant promise, and converted Jews can now join them in the New Covenant Church. Isaiah 60 has nothing to do with the reestablishment of national Israel in the Middle East, but everything to do with the Gospel of Salvation going out to Jews and Gentiles who seek to join the New Covenant in the New Jerusalem of heaven, not earth. The whole book of Hebrews was written precisely to show the Jews that the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies would occur in Christ and the Church, not with a restored national Israel.

Clarence: In Romans 11:11-14, Paul teaches us Christians that we are grafted into the olive tree, which are the covenants, promises and hopes of Israel. We do not hold up the tree, but it holds us up, so we should not boast against His people, Israel. In verse 28, he tells us that they are beloved for the sake of the patriarchs. Without the faithfulness of the Jewish people in Israel, we would not have our example, our Bible, our Yeshua or our salvation. Therefore, he concludes that "by our mercy, they will receive [God's] mercy." (Romans 11:31).

R. Sungenis: St. Paul does not say that the "olive tree" is the "covenant, promises and hopes of Israel." Paul does not define what he means by the olive tree, because it is a metaphor for people coming into the Church, whether they be Jew or Gentile. The Church was founded by Christ, not Israel. When we are ingrafted, we are not ingrafted into Israel but into Christ. Likewise, when Jews become saved, they are not ingrafted into Israel but into Christ. This is a distinction that must be maintained, since St. Paul goes to great lengths to emphasize it (Rom 9:6; Gal 3:29; 6:16).

Further, Clarence's interpretation of Rom 11:31 is askew. It does not say that the Jews WILL receive mercy, as if the mercy of God was unconditional to the Jews, but that the Jews MAY receive mercy, based on whether the Jew will accept Christ as the savior. This conditional stipulation in the Greek subjunctive case of Rom 11:31 is precisely why St. Paul also gives the same conditional statement in Romans 11:23: "IF they do not continue in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again." The whole weal or woe of the Jews depends on whether they will discard their unbelief and come to Christ in faith. If they don't, they will be as cursed as any other people. Further, there is no guarantee that they will turn to Christ, for no Scriptural passage teaches such a guarantee.

Clarence: Paul teaches us Christians that we have a debt to pay to the Jewish people, by blessing them in tangible ways.

Romans 15:27 clearly states: "For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." How much more direct can God be regarding our Christian relationship to Israel and the Jewish people.

R. Sungenis: Christians are to give to all people. St. Paul is merely telling the Romans that they cannot exclude the Jews. His admonition has nothing to do with the Jews having some special

promises or treatment from God above Gentiles. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, for all are one in Christ (Gal 3:28).

Clarence: What Does This Mean To Us?

The day of Israel's full restoration is near. Messiah will make it possible and we shall all live in peace. Until He comes, we, who believe the Bible to be God's Word and that every promise of God will come to pass, must stand and support Israel's right to its land. It is a Divine right. We are patient with those who do not believe the Bible, nor accept Israel's right to the land. Yet, with love for all, we must strongly support Israel's right. We cannot do otherwise and have clear consciences. We cannot say on the one hand that we believe there is a God Who has revealed His perfect will in His Holy Scriptures, and on the other hand, deny Israel its right to the land God promised to her.

Our commitment to Israel was penned by the Psalmist so long ago in Psalm 102:13: "You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favor to her; the appointed time has come." This is that day.

Again the Psalmist exhorts us: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; may they prosper who love you. May peace be within your walls, and prosperity within your palaces. For the sake of my brothers and my friends, I will now say, 'May peace be within you.' For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good" (Psalm 122; 6-9)

R. Sungenis: Our "commitment" is to Christ, not to Israel. Yes, the Messiah will restore peace to the world, but it will not be on this sin-cursed earth. Like Abraham, we do not look for a country made by man, but one made by God, a heavenly city (Hebrews 11:10, 16). Abraham will receive his promised land of peace, and we will be there with him, when God raises him from the dead and takes him and us to the New Heaven and New Earth, in eternity (Heb 11:39-40). Those who are looking for lasting peace on this earth, especially in the Middle East, are going to be woefully disappointed.

The problem starts, of course, when people of Clarence's persuasion read the Old Testament without the commentary of the New Testament. Granted, if we did not have the New Testament making direct quotes from the prophetic passages of the Old Testament, I would agree with Clarence that the Israel to which the Old Testament speaks must refer to national Israel, for there would be no other Israel to fulfill the prophecies. But since the New Testament stops those kinds of interpretations in their tracks and tells us that the "Israel" it has in mind is the spiritual Israel of the New Covenant, then the ballgame is over. Hence, those who still insist on interpreting the Old Testament passages concerning Israel as referring to a physical and national Israel are, in essence, repudiating inspired Scripture rather than abiding by it. The Bible is one cohesive whole. Anyone who tries to separate one passage from another, especially those who seek to interpret the Old without the New, are going down the primrose path of error, and will open themselves up to be deceived by those who are seeking to control them for their own gain.

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