



Recent Events & the Rise of Dispensationalism

Of all the factors that have affected the rise of dispensationalism, one of the chief is the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. After years of predicting that this would happen, dispensationalists became euphoric when it did. In the mind of a dispensationalist, the establishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 was proof to the world that dispensational eschatology is correct. Then about twenty years later, when the Israelis were victorious in battle, taking control of Jerusalem and greatly expanding their borders, dispensationalists proclaimed this to be another great victory for dispensationalism. Since dispensationalists take prophetic passages concerning Israel to be references to the modern Israelis, any victory the Israelis obtain is said to be a fulfillment of prophecy, and thus also a vindication for the dispensational view of how to interpret prophesy. Victories for Israelis are viewed as victories for dispensationalists. Thus it is not surprising that the rise of the nation of Israel has contributed to a corresponding rise in the popularity of dispensationalism.

The present-day nation of Israel is not the only nation the dispensationalists find in Scripture. They also claim to find specific references to Iraq, Russia, China, and other nations of the modern-day world. But central to much of dispensational thinking today is the thought that all Christians should be supporting Israel, and that those who are doing so are actually helping to fulfill the prophecies of Scripture.

So as we continue this introductory overview of dispensationalism, let us begin by considering some of the history behind the movement to restore the Jews to the land of Palestine.

Helping the Jews Return to Palestine: An Idea with a Long History

As virtually everyone knows, the Nazi persecution of the Jews became the occasion for multitudes of Jews to move to Palestine. But the idea that the Jews should return to their ancient homeland goes back a lot farther than that. For centuries there have been those who have argued for this restoration, with especially two arguments being used to support it:

1. The Bible says that this is God's will.
2. This would be advantageous from an economic and imperial point of view.¹

Especially since the days of the Puritans, there have been many who have held that the restoration of the Jews to Palestine is something God has promised. Although Reformed theologians since the time of the Protestant Reformation have adhered to the position that there is only one people of God that has been gathered throughout history, many Puritans insisted that God promised the blood descendents of Jacob that they would one day be converted to Christianity, and would return to Palestine to become a glorious nation. Puritans in America, even while viewing America itself to be a kind of "New Jerusalem," zealously maintained that God's promise to gather Israel in the latter days would be fulfilled in a future restoration of the Jews to their ancient land. Increase Mather, one of the leading Puritans of the seventeenth century, taught that the Jews would one day convert to Christ, "be brought into their own land again" and become "the most glorious nation of the whole world."² Many have followed in this belief, arguing for the restoration of Israel from a religious perspective.

Put there has also been a long history of supporting this restoration from an imperial-economic perspective. Of the men who have become heads of state, Napoleon Bonaparte is said to have been the first to have proposed the restoration of the Jews to Palestine.³ Especially since his days, there have been numerous men who have sup-

1. Barbara W. Tuchman sets forth the long history of using these arguments to support the return of the Jews to Palestine. She makes reference to the two arguments in the title of her book, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour*.

2. Quoted in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 183. The quote is from one of the first Puritan works devoted to the subject of the return of the Jews to Palestine, and entitled *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation Explained and Applied* (1669).

3. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York:

ported this idea from economic and imperial motives. Many have concluded that whoever should help the Jews return to Palestine would receive the following reward for their efforts:

1. They would have a close ally in the Middle East, which would provide them a sphere of influence in this vital region and keep open for them the route of trade to the East.
2. They would acquire some very rich and influential friends in the Jews, who could likely be persuaded to part with some of their fortune and to use their worldwide influence for the advantage of the nation that not only helped them return to their ancient homeland, but also protected them once they were there.

This idea that restoring the Jews to Palestine would result in earthly power and riches for the nation that promoted it, and the position that God promised such a restoration to the Jews, have both been around for a long time. That there is a relation between these two, one may well suspect. Many, while lusting for earthly power and dominion, have sought to camouflage their lust by professing that their goal is simply to do the will of God. As to what may have been the goal of this or that individual, whether in the past or in our own day, only the Lord knows. But the love of money, which is the root of all evil, must somehow be at the bottom of much of the false prophesying today concerning the earthly nation of Israel.

Keeping this matter in mind, let us turn now to consider three recent events, and how dispensationalists have capitalized on them to promote their views.

The Restoration of Israel in Palestine (1948)

In 1917, some thirty years before Israel was declared to be a nation, the British issued the Balfour Declaration, in which they promised to help bring about “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”⁴ Seeing this move to be advantageous from an economic and imperial point of view, Great Britain set out to make Israel a Jewish commonwealth within the British Empire. Yet many proclaimed this event to be a clear indication that God was about to fulfill some of His promises to Israel—promises which they claimed God had left unfulfilled for centuries.

The Balfour Declaration spoke of the Jews having a home in Palestine, but it did not say anything about their becoming a state. Prior to their being declared a state in 1948, there was debate among dispensationalists as to whether Israel would become a nation before Christ returned or after Christ returned, and as to whether Israel would become a nation while still in unbelief or not until after they had turned to Christ. Once unbelieving Israel actually became a state, the debate of course was over. From then on dispensationalists have commonly agreed that Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones predicted a restoration of Israel to their homeland before the return of Christ—a restoration that Ezekiel supposedly predicted to be a physical restoration in unbelief, with a spiritual restoration to follow.

This physical restoration in 1948, however, was not viewed as being complete. The borders of Israel were far from what God had promised them—they did not yet possess the entire city of Jerusalem, and the Mosque of Omar sat where the temple was supposed to be. Thus there clearly was important work to be done before Christ could descend upon the Mount of Olives and enter the temple in Jerusalem.⁵

Israel Victorious in the Six-Day War (1967)

Later in June of 1967, in what is known as the Six-Day War, Israel fought against the neighboring states of Egypt, Jordan and Syria, and succeeding in taking control of Jerusalem as well as large tracts of Arab land. After this victory, Israel occupied the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, which made the country more than three times its original size.

Dispensationalists responded to this with exuberance. Dr. L. Nelson Bell, a Presbyterian medical missionary to China, executive editor of *Christianity Today*, and father-in-law to Billy Graham, upon whom he is said to

Ballantine Books, 1984), 162-164.

4. Quoted in Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 156.

5. *Ibid.*, 156-179.

have had great influence, had this to say of this Israeli victory:

*That for the first time in more than 2,000 years Jerusalem is now completely in the hands of the Jews gives a student of the Bible a thrill and a renewed faith in the accuracy and validity of the Bible.*⁶

Dallas Seminary's John F. Walvoord, one of the most influential dispensational theologians of the twentieth century, called the conquest of Jerusalem "one of the most remarkable fulfillments of biblical prophesy since the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70."⁷

Dispensationalists took advantage of the Six-Day War to press their idea that the final events of this age were now underway and could not be stopped. In addition, they found in this war at least a partial fulfillment of God's promise that the times of the Gentiles would come to an end:

And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled. (Luke 21:24)

Dispensationalists boasted that this event proved them to be correct, and argued that people should now look to the leading dispensationalists to tell them what was going to happen next. In their mind this victory was clear proof that soon Jerusalem would no longer be trodden down of the Gentiles, and that the events leading up to the second coming of Christ were now quickly going to take place.

It was in 1970, three years after this Israeli victory, that Hal Lindsey published his *The Late Great Planet Earth*. This best-seller, which marked the beginning of a dramatic rise in the sale of dispensational works, cited the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War as a clear proof that the dispensational method of interpreting prophecy was correct. This Israeli victory in Jerusalem, along with the booming sales of dispensational works, made dispensationalists extremely confident that multitudes were now ready to listen to them.⁸

Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait (1990)

During the next two decades, from 1970 to 1990, dispensationalists continued to make adjustments to their positions in response to current events. During the years of the Cold War, dispensationalists repeatedly spoke of the Soviet Union as the number one enemy of Israel in the last days. But as the Soviet Union began to collapse, they switched their emphasis to the New World Order, which they maintained was the promised one-world government that was soon going to form. Furthermore, they began to take more notice of the rise of Islam and the struggle for oil. Partly in response to the oil crisis of 1973, John Walvoord published his best-selling work *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East*.⁹

As one might expect, things really took off for the dispensationalists when the United States got involved in a war in the Middle East. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the United States' response to this, resulted in a sharp rise in the popularity of dispensational eschatology:

*The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 came at just the right time. In one sense, the Persian Gulf War put dispensationalists back in business. Zondervan Publishing Company reported an 83 percent increase in the sales of the venerable *Late Great Planet Earth*, even though the 1970 book reflected a world much different from the one in 1990. According to Bantam Books, its mass-market edition of Grant Jeffrey's *Armageddon—Appointment with Destiny* was its "hottest single religious title" in the fall of 1990. John F. Walvoord's rather stodgy *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* had a surge in sales, as did his updated and reissued *Armageddon, Oil, and the Middle East Crisis*. In fact, after decades of popularity in dispensationalist circles, Walvoord suddenly found himself the center of attention in the secular media. He appeared on CNN, CBN, and CBS and gave interviews on sixty-five radio stations on the prophetic significance of the*

6. Quoted in Timothy P. Weber, 184.

7. Ibid.

8. Weber, 179-186.

9. Ibid., 199-212.

Gulf War. Prophecy teachers preached to full auditoriums about the prophetic significance of the war. Newspapers across the country reported on the growing interest in Bible prophesy, with the *New York Times* concluding in 1991 that it was at “fever pitch.”¹⁰

Since Iraq was the opponent in this Gulf War, the dispensationalists rapidly promoted the idea that the Babylon mentioned in the book of Revelation was actually a reference to modern-day Iraq.

This marked a change in dispensational eschatology. For years dispensationalists had taken Babylon symbolically to mean the antichristian empire and the union of false religions. The following quote is taken from *The New Scofield Reference Bible*:

There are two forms which Babylon is to have in the end-time: political Babylon (Rev. 17:8-17) and ecclesiastical Babylon (Rev. 17:1-7, 18; 18:1-24). Political Babylon is the beast’s confederate empire, the last form of Gentile world dominion. Ecclesiastical Babylon is all apostate Christendom, in which the Papacy will undoubtedly be prominent; it may very well be that this union will embrace all the religions of the world. Although some hold to a literal rebuilding of the city of Babylon... the evidence seems to point to the symbolic use of the name here... Ecclesiastical Babylon is the “great harlot” (Rev. 17:1) and is to be destroyed by political Babylon.¹¹

But when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the dispensationalists decided to adopt a “literal” interpretation. Babylon was now said to be a reference to Iraq, seeing as Iraq was located where Babylon once stood. And for awhile dispensationalists were able to sell books promoting the idea that Saddam Hussein by rebuilding Iraq was going to fulfill prophecy.¹²

Although Saddam’s regime has fallen, the idea that Babylon is a reference to Iraq still remains. Today it is maintained that Iraq will soon become the center of a world religion, and that for a time the coming Antichrist will find it beneficial to make use of this apostate religious body, and will even make Iraq to be the eastern capital of his worldwide empire.¹³

So now dispensationalists have a carnal interpretation of Babylon to go with a carnal interpretation of Israel. Such carnal interpretations are common when one “interprets” Scripture in the light of current events, rather than current events in the light of Scripture.

But take a step back now, and consider where such an interpretation of Scripture would inevitably lead. If the earthly nation of Israel is said to be God’s special people, and if Israeli victories are said to prove the validity of the Bible, then one would naturally conclude that everyone should support the Israeli cause, regardless of what this may mean in terms of a future world war. So what if tensions rise in the Middle East? Who cares about international law and the rights of the Palestinians? If God has promised Israel the whole land, then they have every right to take it, and to use whatever force is necessary to do so. And if this means that World War III breaks out, well that is what God said is going to happen, so it cannot be avoided. And as for believers today, they need not fear this world war, because they will be raptured into heaven before it takes place.

This kind of thinking is very common today, and many are becoming aware of it. When you add to this the dispensational goal of rebuilding the Jewish temple in Jerusalem where an Islamic mosque presently stands, it is easy to understand why dispensational thinking is becoming increasingly feared in the secular world. But more on that subject, Lord willing, next time.

10. Ibid. 208.

11. From the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, quoted in Weber, 209.

12. Weber, 209-212.

13. John F. Walvoord with Mark Hitchcock, *Armageddon, Oil and Terror: What the Bible Says About the Future of America, the Middle East, and the End of Western Civilization* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2007), 135-148.