

## *Israel, the Church and the Covenant*

### **Lecture 9: Modern Israel**

The history of the modern State of Israel is well known and well documented, and so in this lecture no more than a cursory account of historical events will be attempted. In addition to a rundown of Israel's recent history we shall consider the spiritual aspect of the Jews being back in their ancient land.

#### The Founding of the State of Israel

The history of the modern Israeli State is as amazing as it is brief since it was founded in 1948. Such was the opposition to Israel achieving sovereignty and independence in the land, which for 2,000 years had been known only as Palestine that it took more than sixty years of determined and unremitting effort by Zionist leaders to realise their dream; so much so that many thought it would never happen.

Before the 19th Century few Jews seriously entertained the idea of a modern Jewish State, although the concept had long been an attractive one, not least because of their low social status in Europe from medieval times. Religious persecution was common. The Jews were expelled without just cause from England in 1290, from France in 1391, from Austria in 1421, and from Spain in 1492. This actually fostered a hope among some European Jews that the Messiah would soon come but understandably most gave in to a spirit of defeatism.

Life in Palestine was no easier for the few Jewish communities, which had always remained in the land. The population was mostly Muslim and Christian Arabs. Even so, in the days of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century, the number of Jews grew in some cities, most notably in Jerusalem. Then the first kibbutz (meaning "gathering"), or collective farm, was founded in 1909. Though the kibbutzim have never represented more than a small part of the Israeli population they have played a significant role in helping to shape the nation both economically, with their emphasis on agriculture, and politically, since they have tended to be non-religious and politically left wing, committed to labour Zionism. This has played a part in setting the secular tone for Israel as it is to a large extent today.

Matters should have improved dramatically for the Jews of Palestine in the early 20th Century when, in 1917, the Balfour Declaration was produced. The declaration, named after its creator Arthur Balfour, the then foreign secretary of the British Government, supported Zionist plans for a Jewish "national home" in Palestine. With the support of a number of countries, including the USA, Balfours document was declared to be a mandate for the British to assist the Jews in their desire to create their own national State in Palestine.

At first the British government co-operated in the resettlement scheme in collaboration with the Jewish Agency, a Zionist organisation, which represented the Jewish community in Palestine during the period of the mandate. From 1936 onwards the British facilitated the training, arming, recruitment and funding of a range of security and intelligence forces, but against the backdrop of mounting violent Arab protests they eventually reneged on their role to implement the plan,

even though Jewish immigration to Palestine continued to grow, especially with the rise of Nazi persecution in the 1930s. Arab opposition to the Jews reached its height during WWII in the person of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Amin al-Husayni, who spent the second half of the war in Germany making radio broadcasts exhorting Muslims everywhere to ally with the Nazis by killing Jews “wherever you find them”.

Immediately after the Second World War the British attempted to restrict the return of the Jews to Palestine, even turning away survivors from the Nazi death camps. This led to Jewish clandestine organisations, such as Irgun and the so-called Stern Gang or Lehi, clashing with British troops, and it resulted in a significant loss of life on both sides. In the 1940s Menachem Begin, who would later become prime minister of Israel, led the Irgun struggle against the British authorities. From the British perspective Begin and his compatriots were terrorists, but the Jews saw them as freedom fighters. Begin would undoubtedly have been hanged had the British succeeded in capturing him, as they hanged others, and yet the sad thing is that some of these men had fought on the British side against the Nazis during the war.

The British mandate over Palestine was due to expire on 15th May 1948, and so the United Nations proposed partitioning the land into two States, one Arab and the other Jewish, an idea that the Jews accepted but not the Arabs. The Jewish population in the land continued to grow, augmented by a quarter of a million holocaust survivors. The influx of so many Jews led to more violence breaking out between the two communities. The Jews had nothing to lose. They were determined that they would never again become lambs led to the slaughter in foreign lands. The only answer was to become a self-determining people in their own country, and so when the British withdrew from Palestine on 14th May 1948 they declared the founding of the State of Israel, led by David Ben-Gurion.

### Conflicts and Peace Agreements

That same night of 14th May 1948 five Arab nations went to war against Israel. The well-equipped armies of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, totalling over 20,000 troops, sought to swamp the tiny fledgling nation and drive the Israelis quite literally into the Mediterranean Sea. The miracle was that Israel's makeshift army was victorious, and the present borders of Israel were established, along with the creation of the Arab-held West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The Arabs called the Jewish victory Al Nakba, “The Catastrophe”, and they became all the more fired up in their desire to expunge the State of Israel from off the map of the Middle East. Even the geographical shape of the country the Arabs pointed out was now something akin to a dagger, which they boasted they would drive into the heart of the Israelis.

A great deal of political propaganda was generated by the Arabs over the creation of more than 700,000 Arab refugees as a result of the 1948 War of Independence, the purpose being to show the Israelis in a bad light before the Western nations. But little mention was made of the fact that an even greater number of Jews was expelled or fled from Arab countries. While many of the Arab refugees from 1948 have remained in camps for the displaced and the homeless right up to the present time, and so have been used in a cynical way as a political pawn with the aim of poisoning western minds against Israel, most of the Jewish refugees were absorbed into Israel. Again, for propaganda purposes, the Arabs portrayed these new arrivals not as the homeless refugees they were but as illegal migrants.

Down the years the Arabs have been very successful in the campaign to convince the West that they are the hard-done-by underdogs, even though that was the position, which the minority Jewish population had been in for decades before WWII in Palestine. Sadly, the BBC and the other UK media have been consistently hostile against Israel with their persistent pro-Arab reporting, and unfortunately many in the UK, including many in the churches, have swallowed the

media hype. No doubt one reason for siding with the Arabs has been because they have got the West stretched over an oil barrel.

Much of the decade of the 1950s as far as Israel was concerned was to do with internal affairs, but the one major crisis in the region was the seizure of the Suez Canal in 1956 by the Egyptians under the leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser. In response France and the UK, with major shareholdings in the canal, regained swift military control of it with Israeli assistance, but then had to withdraw from the region because of American disapproval.

The next conflict on Israeli soil was the Six-Day War of June 1967. Like the first war in 1948 this one also ended in an Israeli victory that was near miraculous. The Israelis neutralised the air forces of Egypt, Jordan and Syria all in one day, and it was not long before the ground troops of those nations were completely routed and had to withdraw from Israel. The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) overrun the Egyptian territory of the Sinai Peninsula to the south, the Egyptian controlled Gaza Strip in the west, the Syrian Golan Heights in the north, and the Jordanian West Bank to the east. The Six-Day War led into the so-called War of Attrition with Egypt two years later in the region of the Suez Canal. This prolonged struggle failed to produce a definite outcome for either side.

Then came the Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) War in 1973. This was when the Syrian and the Egyptian armies launched a combined attack, deliberately choosing the holiest day in the Jewish religious calendar. The IDF was totally unprepared, and yet they gained the upper hand within a couple of days, and after three weeks it was all over. Pressure was put on Israel by the United Nations (UN) to draw back from the territories they had captured. Eventually the Sinai Peninsula was given back to Egypt, but not without strong protests from Israelis who had settled there.

As at other times after the cessation of war the United Nations peacekeeping force endeavoured to create calm. But the UN has consistently favoured the Arabs in the region over the years. This revealed itself in 1975 when the scandalous "Zionism is Racism" resolution was passed. It took until 1991 before the General Assembly finally rescinded the resolution.

A remarkable event happened in 1977 when the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat cut across 30 years of hostility by visiting Jerusalem at the invitation of the Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. He even spoke at the Israeli parliament, the Knesset. With Sadat's recognition of Israel's right to exist peace at least seemed possible. The Camp David peace treaty quickly followed with meetings over the next two years in the USA, encouraged by the American president Jimmy Carter. But the Arab League registered its protest to the peace process by moving its headquarters from Cairo to Tunis, and later Sadat was assassinated.

The Lebanese border was (and remains) a constant problem for the Israelis from the 1970s onwards because of militant Arab groups harassing northern Israel from the Lebanese side. In the end Israel was forced into invading southern Lebanon – another propaganda opportunity for the Arabs to use against the 'war-mongering' of Israel. Incursions into Lebanese territory have never been popular with the Israelis either, especially when their soldiers began to sustain heavy losses.

Another considerable difficulty for Israel was the first Palestinian Intifada (Uprising) in 1987, due to the continuing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Though Israel responded vigorously to the violence, which included the advent of Arab suicide bombers, the first Intifada did not end until 1991. A second Intifada occurred in the year 2000 when Ariel Sharon visited the temple mount. Even though Arab assurances had been given that this would be an acceptable visit Arab violence followed with Jewish shrines being destroyed. This second Intifada has not yet been brought to a complete end.

Ten years before the second Uprising, in 1990, the First Gulf War took place and Iraq took the opportunity to attack Israel with scud missiles. The Israelis kept out of the fighting because of American pressure. At that time Israel provided gas masks to the Palestinian population as well as to their own people.

The defeat of Iraq in the Gulf War seemed open up new possibilities for peace in the region. Meetings were held in Madrid and in Washington. The leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) were at least talking with each other. A plethora of agreements followed. Things improved when a peace treaty was signed with Jordan, and hopes were raised even more when yet another agreement was signed, this time between Yasser Arafat of the PLO and the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin at the West Bank. But Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing Jewish radical in 1995.

The Israelis questioned where all these peace negotiations were leading. Arab opposition to the Jewish State was unrelenting and intensified in the 1990s, when several hundred thousand Soviet Jews were allowed by the Soviet government to go home to Israel, as well as the return of the Ethiopians and others. And yet the peace efforts continued, accompanied by a lot of good will on Israel's part by drawing the IDF out of southern Lebanon in 2000 and from Gaza in 2004/5. A similar disengagement of Israeli soldiers from the West Bank took place soon after. Yet the conflict continues, and will go on, because of the many militant Arabs who adamantly refuse to be appeased or to accept Israel's right to exist.

The latest conflict in Southern Lebanon in 2006 was against the Hezbollah, the "Party of God", a phrase found in the Koran. The Israelis finally ran out of patience with the Syrian- and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah constantly firing katyusha rockets and mortars at Israel's border villages and IDF positions within Israel. It proved too much when two Israeli soldiers were kidnapped and three others killed. Attempts to rescue the abducted soldiers led to more soldiers dying, and so Israel finally responded with massive air strikes and artillery bombardments on selected targets in Lebanon, which unfortunately led to many Lebanese civilians being killed and many hundreds of thousands losing their homes. Guerrilla warfare followed between the IDF and Hezbollah until a cease-fire was brokered with the help of the UN Security Council. Under pressure the UN agreed that Hezbollah should be disarmed but that has not happened, and so the tension and potential for further conflict remains high.

## Zionism

So far we have said little about Zionism. To define Zionism in its simplest terms, it is an international political movement, which supports a homeland for the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel. The Hebrew word "Zion" is used as one of the names for Jerusalem. It was originally the mountain on which David's city stood.

Several very early Zionist movements came into being in Palestine over the centuries, which led to the revival of particular Jewish communities, such as the medieval community of Safed, the population of which was strengthened by Jews fleeing Christian persecution. The Zionist movement proper, however, was organised on a formal basis in the late 19th Century. In 1897 Theodor Herzl, who is regarded as the father of the Jewish State, summoned the First Zionist Congress, at which it was proclaimed that the Jewish people had the right to a national rebirth in their own country. Though at the turn of the 20th Century there were proposals that the Jews should be settled in Argentina or Uganda (modern Kenya) they were short-lived and unsatisfactory ideas. Instead the Zionist movement was eventually successful in achieving the founding of the State of Israel in their own ancestral land. The major aim of Zionism all along had been to provide security and self-determination for the Jewish people against rampant anti-Semitism, especially in western and Eastern Europe, such as the pogroms which regularly took place in Russia and

Poland between the 1880s and 1940s.

A key event which strengthened Herzl's resolve to campaign for a Jewish homeland was the Dreyfus Affair, as it became known. This scandal divided France in the 1890s and early 1900s. Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew, was a promising young French artillery officer, and yet, without any real evidence, the French were quick to accuse him of passing military secrets to the German Embassy in Paris. He was promptly imprisoned for his supposed treason on Devil's Island in French Guyana in 1894. Though he was later re-instated and rose to the rank of brigadier-general as an officer of the Legion of Honour after serving in the First World War, the episode left many Jews feeling that Zionism was the only answer to their vulnerability.

Another aim of Zionism was to create a Jewish culture, which would be free from Gentile influences. Part of this strategy was the revival of Hebrew as a living language among the Jews in the 19th Century spoke Yiddish, a language based on medieval German, but from the 1880s, Ben Yehuda and his supporters began to promote the use and teaching of a modernised form of biblical Hebrew. Herzl wanted German to be the official language of the Zionist movement, but Hebrew was adopted, and from the 1920s it helped to create a new national identity.

Since the founding of the State of Israel, the term "Zionism" has generally been used to mean support for Israel as a Jewish nation, though there is a variety of different and competing forms of Zionism designated by such terms as "Religious", "Revisionist" and "Labour", depending on the ideology of the particular group. The word "Zionism", however, is used by Arabs as an abusive term to justify attacks on Jews. It is also a pejorative term, which Gentiles in general like to use who support anti-Semitism.

### The Present-Day Aliyah

The return to the land of Israel has ever remained a cherished hope among generations of Jews scattered among the nations, particularly at the time of Passover and Yom Kippur, when traditionally these feasts end with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem", these words also being part of the daily "Standing Prayer". Most versions of the 613 commandments, which Judaism considers to be binding, contain the conviction that Aliyah is a praiseworthy desire.

"Aliyah is a Hebrew word which means "Going up". It has reference to the fact that when you go to Jerusalem you have to go up to it, because it is situated in the Judean Hills at an elevation of 2,440 feet, or 745 meters. The ascent to Jerusalem has always been a feature of pilgrimage going back to Old Testament times. In the Book of Psalms the Songs of Ascent (Ps. 120-134) were sung by worshippers as they made their way up to the city for the annual feasts, though some say the Ascent refers more particularly to the steps which led up on to the temple mount on the south side of the temple.

Today Aliyah refers to Jews returning to the land of Israel generally and not just to Jerusalem. It has led to the expression "making Aliyah", or achieving residency in the land. More than one million Jews were gathered back to Israel in the decade beginning in 1991. This has been helped in a very significant way by evangelical Christians through organisations like Ebenezer Emergency Fund (EEF) and its initiative known as Operation Exodus. The EEF was founded in 1991 in England by Gustav and Elsa Scheller. Their vision was to provide humanitarian aid to the Jews widely scattered in the Soviet Union, and to assist their return to Israel. This was rightly regarded as the fulfilment of prophecy that the Gentiles would one day assist the Jews to return to their homeland.

Isa. 49:22

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says:  
“See, I will beckon to the Gentiles,  
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;  
They will bring your sons in their arms  
And carry your daughters on their shoulders.”

The return of the Jews to the Promised Land has been the heart of God for his people ever since their first banishment from the land in the 8th and 6th Centuries B.C., through the instrumentality of the Assyrians and Babylonians respectively; and again when they were scattered by the Romans in the 1st Century A.D.

Jer. 16:14-15

“However, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when men will no longer say ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ but they will say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers.”

Those who deny the legitimacy of the modern State of Israel, and the present-day return of the Jews, insist that such Scriptures refer only to the first return in the 5th Century B.C., when the Persians, who were the super-power of the day, permitted the Jewish exiles to go home. This, however, is to commit the fundamental mistake of forgetting, or not taking seriously, the Lord’s covenant with Abraham, that his not taking seriously, the Lord’s covenant with Abraham, that his descendants would possess the whole land of Canaan, as it was called then, “as an everlasting possession” – Gen. 17:8. Words mean what they mean, especially when God says them. The land of Israel was and remains the focus of the covenant. The Gentile habit of glossing over key words and phrases in Scripture leads to basic errors and misunderstandings.

We should also mention the principle of double prophecy, which is a well-recognised feature of Bible interpretation, especially concerning some texts, which relate to the promised Messiah. The fulfilment of this kind of prophecy had an application in the historical setting of the day, and yet has an ultimate Messianic meaning. To quote just one well-known example, the prophet Isaiah tells king Ahaz of Jerusalem that the birth of a particular baby boy would be a sign to him that the Lord would soon remove from Jerusalem the present threat of capture by the kings Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel (Isa. 7:14-16). Without going into the complexities of these verses as to who the child was that was born in the days of Ahaz, and who his young mother was, Matthew sees the promise given to the king for his immediate salvation from his enemies as a promise of salvation for the whole world by the birth of Jesus through His virgin mother, Mary (Mt 1:22-23)

The prophecies relating to the return of the Jews to their land are no exception to this principle of multiple applications, in that they also have the possibility of more than one fulfilment.

There are many prophecies along this line too numerous to quote, but some of the references worth looking up are: Isa. 11:12; 14:1-2; 43:5-6; 49:6; 62:3-5; Jer. 32:37-41; 50:4-5, Ezek. 36:8-12, 24, 33-36; 39:25-29. The charge that these prophecies are lifted out of their proper context of being addressed to the Assyrian and Babylonian captives is unfounded. Many of the prophecies about the exiles going home undoubtedly relate in the first instance to the return which took place in the 5th Century, but, owing to the irrevocable promise given to Abraham that his descendants would possess the land forever, they must also apply to any return of the Jews at any point in history.

In addition, the Scriptures point to the Lord setting up an everlasting earthly kingdom. This in itself requires the existence of modern-day Israel with the majority of Jews in the very last days

recognising Jesus as their Messiah. Jesus must have a land, a people and a kingdom to inherit when He returns, and the kernel of that kingdom will be a spiritually regenerated Israel. The king returning from a distant land to inherit his kingdom is taught in some of the most important parables, which Jesus told. When He returns He will also have as His own people all those resurrected believers He will bring with Him, taken from all the nations; and so “all Israel” will be saved. The kingdom is a subject, which we must address, in the last lecture.

For nearly 2000 years the land of the Jews has been trampled under the feet of the nations: Romans, Muslims, Tartars, Mongols, Mameluks (a powerful military caste of converts to Islam), Ottoman, Turks and finally the British. The time has now come, and has been with us especially over the last century or more, for the Jews to repossess the land. This does not necessarily entail driving out the Palestinians but co-existing with them in peace – not in a partitioned two-state land, but in the State of Israel, where the Palestinians, if they will give peace a chance, will experience prosperity on an equal status with the Jews.

## The Spiritual Condition of Modern Israel

### Secularism

Before the Second World War support for political Zionism was not a mainstream position in the Jewish communities scattered around the world. The secular, socialist language used by many pioneer Zionists was contrary to the outlook of most religious Jewish communities. Many religious organisations opposed the Zionist secular movement, while most Orthodox groups objected that only the Messiah could bring about the Jewish state at his appearance. But the Second World War holocaust changed the minds of many Jews of all persuasions concerning the need for a Jewish State.

Though Israel today is by and large a secular society, in line with western nations, it is wrong for Christians to conclude that the Jewish State cannot be of God. We need to bear in mind what the apostle Paul says about the future resurrection of believers. While living in this present world our “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”, but when the dead are raised “we will all be changed” (1 Cor. 15:50-54). In the same way the present-day, materially-oriented State of Israel will also be changed by conversion to the Messiah, when “the natural branches” are “grafted (back) into their own olive tree” Rom. 11:24.

### Rom. 11:2-32

“As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they to have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

### Judaism

It is a mistake for Christians to write off Israel as though it is totally devoid of spirituality. Quite apart from indigenous believers in Christ in Israel, both among Israelis and Arabs, a lot may be said for the spiritual fervour and content of Judaism. The many Jewish feasts and holy days, from which we Christians derive such spiritual insight, especially with regard to the three major feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacle (not to mention the Day of Atonement) are kept with great diligence and joy by observant families. Of course, we might want to discount certain types of synagogue, such as the Humanists, who seem to want to get along without God; the Liberals, who

prefer to reject the traditional interpretation of the Scriptures in favour of modern 'scholarship'; and the Reconstructionists, who like to update everything in the light of scientific knowledge and the modern lifestyle. But don't we have similar element within the Christian church?

Outside of these deviant forms of Judaism there is still great diversity in the synagogues, and this signified real spiritual life. There are the synagogues of the Orthodox, with the Ultra Orthodox emphasis on the study of Torah (the Law), and the observance of Halacha (rules for living), including dietary laws. The commonly held view that Orthodoxy has long been in a fossilised state is not true. Modern Orthodoxy in particular is very vibrant and is the largest group of synagogue-goers in Western countries. Though Orthodox synagogues require the separation of men and women in their meetings, it is a fact that their institutions of learning, unlike many Christian colleges, are bursting at the seams with young men and women. There are also Reformist synagogues, with complete equality for women even to the point of having female rabbis. In the UK Rabbi Lionel Blue is a prominent member of Reform Judaism, and has been well known to the British public for years through his contributions to the BBC's "Thought for the Day" broadcasts.

## Culture

One aspect of Judaism, which wins hands down over the Christian church generally, is that it is more than synagogue going on Saturday. It pervades the home. It is the culture of the Jewish people, and it is centred around the importance of the family. With children receiving their due share of attention from male circumcision on the eighth day, and baby blessing ceremonies, through to coming of age spiritually, for boys at the bar-mitzvah (son of the commandment) ceremony at the age of thirteen and girls a year earlier at bat-mitzvah. From that age children are regarded as full members of the Jewish community. Children also play an essential part in the celebration of the Jewish feasts, such as Passover, Tabernacles and Purim. Much more is made of marriage in observant families than in Christian Gentile weddings. The rituals with Jewish weddings begin as soon as the couple are engaged, and especially in the week leading up to the big day. On the day itself the wedding ceremony is full of spiritual and moral symbolism. The Jews particularly like parties when they are centred around family events! They know how to celebrate in an enthusiastic but dignified way, much more than is customary with Gentiles. They are natural charismatics!

## Messianic Judaism

There are said to be over 400 Messianic synagogues worldwide. Messianic Jews believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Depending on the group they associate with they practice their faith to a greater or lesser extent in line with Jewish culture and observance of the Torah, the Law of Moses. Though they are orientated towards Judaism they are not considered part of Judaism by the Jewish denominations and most Christians.

Whatever anyone else might think, Messianic Jews regard themselves as even more Jewish than before they believed in Jesus, in that Messiah Jesus has brought to fulfilment the covenant promises made to Abraham. The State of Israel, however, considers them to be Christians, not Jewish, as far as the Law of Return is concerned, even though they may have been born of a Jewish mother. This issue was brought to a head in 1989, when the Supreme Court of Israel set a legal precedent by denying the right of return to Gary and Shirley Beresford, Messianic Jews from South Africa. The Court quoted the judgment of the Jewish people over the last 2000 years of regarding Messianic Jews as not belonging to the Jewish nation.

This decision of the Supreme Court ignored the fact that teachings of Messianic Jews are unaware of the fact that several observant rabbis in the past have taught with conviction about Jesus in their synagogues, while a small number of Orthodox Messianic Jews today, who observe all, or

almost all, of the requirements of the Law and Halacha, insist that the teaching of Jesus does not contradict the tenets of Judaism.

The problem lies in part with the title “Messianic Jews”. It tends to be associated in Jewish minds with the Christian organisation “Jews for Jesus”. Even some Messianic Jews regard this organisation as unhelpful. Its members’ intentions are clearly honourable in seeking to win Jews for Christ, but their converts are expected to become traditional, evangelical, Sunday Christians, who may or may not keep kosher, celebrate Jewish holidays, or keep the Sabbath on Saturday in addition to Sunday observance. Even organisations whose practices are more in line with Judaism, like the “Hebrew-Christian” movement, which has existed since the late 19th Century, and “American Messianic Judaism” originating in the 1960’s, are not viewed by Jews any differently. These initiatives, and others like them, are judged by most Jews to be recent, misguided and definitely not Jewish. Therefore most Jews believe that the very name Messianic Judaism is deceptive.

In contrast there are a few Jews, well known in their communities, who adopt a conciliatory tone. The reform Rabbi Dan Chohn-Sherbok, for example, states in his popular book “Voices of the Messianic Judaism” that Messianic Judaism is a legitimate form of the Jewish Faith. And the Reconstructurist Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro has asserted that in her view Messianic Judaism is a form of Judaism while at the same time a form of Christianity. The world leader of Karaite Judaism, Nehemia Gordon, has also voiced his opinion that, while the New Testament should not be regarded as authoritative for Jews, Jesus was quintessentially Jewish and a devout Torah teacher. “Karaite”, a title which comes from the Hebrew word for “Readers (of Scripture)”, highlights a scholarly devotion to the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures but rejects the Oral Law of Rabbinic Judaism.

The State of Israel is not nearly so spiritually defunct as many western Christians would suppose, and certainly no more than is the case in the UK. The influence of European- and Orthodox-based Christianity is dwindling in Israel these days, and perhaps rightly so as Messianic congregations gain strength. These Jewish congregations are increasingly meeting with Palestinian Christians for fellowship and to demonstrate their oneness in Jesus, and there is often a spiritual liveliness in their meetings, which is lacking in many UK Christian churches. This trend is set to continue, especially as these believers face opposition on at least two fronts, from the Muslims and the Jewish Ultra Orthodox.

God is building a people for himself in the State of Israel and preparing the way for the end-times harvest from Jewish nation. Spiritually speaking it is a case of “watch this space.”

