

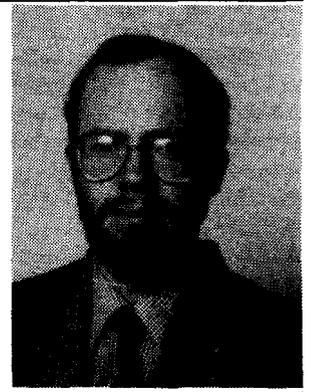
Prophecy and Modern Israel

Whose Promised Land?

Colin Chapman, Lion Publishing, Tring, 1983, p/b, 253pp., £1.95

The Last Word on the Middle East

Derek Prince, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1983, p/b, 186pp., £1.75



Of all the events of the present century probably none has captured the imagination of Christians, and generated so much heat among them, as the birth and adolescence of the modern state of Israel. Because of the fascination of the impression that it relates somehow to biblical prophecy, and because the implications of taking sides in the struggle in the Middle East are so far-reaching, it is imperative for Christians to have an informed and biblical perspective on it.

The difficulty in doing so derives from the fact that several kinds of skill or knowledge are required before a judgment can be made: a knowledge of the historical background to the formation of the state and subsequent events; an understanding of sound principles of biblical interpretation; and an understanding of the aspirations of the peoples involved, which can probably only be acquired by some experience of living among them. All of these skills require sensitivity and openness. A fair and unbiased evaluation and presentation of historical evidence is notoriously difficult, and the historiography of those who have axes to grind should be treated warily. Similarly, the interpretation of the Bible, especially as it relates to the end-times, is an area of some disagreement among Christians. The subject, then, is formidable, the "truth" elusive, the scope for error immense. Here we have two books which address the problem, one with a great deal more success than the other.

Derek Prince's book merits extended treatment not only in its own right, but because it is representative of a highly influential trend among evangelicals in the West. The author, who has lived for a considerable period in Israel, believes what he has witnessed there over the past decades has been the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The prophetic promises about the return of the people of Israel to their land, chiefly in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are taken to refer to the modern Jewish immigrations to Palestine, which culminated in the formation of the Israeli state. Such a view has been taken not only by Derek Prince, but well-canvassed in the works of Lance Lambert (see a note below on a recent book from him) and many others. The extent of its influence is reflected in the Living Bible's use (deplorable, in my view) of the term "Israelis" instead of "Israelites" in the Old Testament. We shall look at Prince's interpretation both of prophecy and recent history.

i) **Prophecy** The treatment of Isaiah 11:14 furnishes one small example of the method adopted. When we read there: "They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; . . . they will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them", this is taken to mean a) that Philistia is equivalent to Palestine, and therefore that this part of the prophecy has now been fulfilled; and b) that at some yet future date Israel will establish control over territory which is now in Jordan (since the nations mentioned by Isaiah were in that geographical area), pp. 68f. Similarly on Isaiah 43:6: "I will say . . . to the south, 'Do not hold them back'. Here "the south" is equated with the modern state of Yemen. (The Hebrew for

south is *yamin*. "Yemen" in Arabic, also simply means "south"), p. 75. Again Jeremiah's famous New Covenant prophecy (Jeremiah 31:31ff.) is said to find its fulfilment in recent and current events, since it has the restoration of Israelites to the land at its heart.

There is serious error here at two levels. The first is that of simple exegesis. In Isaiah 11:14 it is impossible to equate "Philistia" with modern Palestine for a number of reasons. First, the area designated is a good deal smaller than Palestine, referring only to a narrow coastal strip in the south of what is now Israel. Such considerations are all-important in Prince's own view of things, and therefore this is fatal. The Philistia-Palestine equation is a semantic red-herring (as is the discovery of "Yemen" in Isaiah 43:6). Secondly, the object of the prophecy is not a geographical area at all, but a people — a people which — like the Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites — has disappeared in any recognizable shape or form from the face of the earth. For this reason it is futile to attempt to read off the fulfilment of such a prophecy in modern events. In reality, the point of the prophecy is that one day the tables will be turned on Israel's oppressors, and Israel herself will be saved. How and when is not said. The terms used, however, are intractably *ancient*, and cannot stand as ciphers for modern entities. (It must be stressed that these are mere examples, and that similar criticisms can be made in relation to more or less every passage treated).

The second level at which there is error is a deeper, theological level. This can be illustrated by the author's treatment of the new Covenant sections of Jeremiah. More important than the sort of exegetical deficiency noted above is the failure to draw certain conclusions which the method certainly demands. Prince believes that the New Covenant passage refers to a modern turning to God by Jews, supremely exemplified (or yet to be exemplified) in Israel (pp. 89ff.). This means that God's "writing the law upon their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33) refers only to the conversion of modern Jews. Prince states his conviction that such a conversion has actually begun, and speaks of a remarkable new interest among Jews in Jesus (pp. 95f.).

There are two problems here. The first is that such an interpretation ignores the fact that Jesus himself explained the New Covenant by relating it to his own work of atonement (1 Corinthians 11:25 — Jesus can only have the Jeremiah passage in mind). This suggests that the coming of Jesus gives an unexpected new turn to the interpretation of prophecies relating to Israel's restoration (more of this in a moment). Secondly, Prince has failed to carry through all the implications of his interpretation. The New Covenant passage has as its context Jeremiah 30:33, which relates in its entirety to the restoration of Israel. Though he has quoted certain parts of these chapters, he has not observed that a literal understanding of them is destructive of Christian theology. For if the restoration of Israel is to be understood as Jewish immigration to the modern state, then we must also have all the paraphernalia

described in 33:13-22, viz i) a new King David, v. 18, (who cannot be Christ, since this would be to espouse a *figurative* interpretation of the sort that Prince has rejected in relation to the New Covenant itself) and ii), more horrendously, a return of the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system, v. 18. To expect this as part of God's ultimate fulfilment of his purposes for mankind is to fail to see that Christ's work has forever abolished their necessity, and indeed shown that their efficacy was never more than a foreshadowing of himself. The theology of the Book of Hebrews is thus abolished at a stroke, and Christ himself dishonoured. (Notice especially Hebrew 7:26-8:13, ch. 10, and the centrality of Jeremiah's New Covenant passage in both as an argument for a completely new order in Christ.)

ii) **History** Faulty exegesis and theology is never merely an evil in itself but always has serious practical consequences. In the approach to modern Israel of which Prince's book is typical the consequences are in the shape of a biased assessment of twentieth century events in Palestine, which is massively loaded against the Palestinian Arabs. To any independent observer of those events it is clear that no side — neither the Jews nor the Arabs nor the world-Powers which became involved in the struggle — emerges with a clean record. Jews, convinced of a divine right to possess the land, have been ruthless in making it good. Arabs, seeing themselves in danger of losing what had been theirs for 1300 years, have responded in kind. There have been brutal atrocities on both sides. One of the most unacceptable features of Prince's book, however, is the way in which Arab outrages are paraded and condemned, while the equally vicious acts of the Jews, where they are alluded to at all, are seen as somehow inevitable. The Arabs had "terrorist gangs"; the Jewish *Haganah* used "guerrilla warfare tactics" — and those who assisted them, like the British officer Orde Wingate, are heroes who helped fulfil the divine purpose (p. 46, cf. pp. 44, 48).

Those who are determined to see Israeli expansion as the fulfilment of God's final purposes for the world inevitably end with just this sort of blunted conscience. Because the Jewish cause is just, almost anything is permissible. Indeed a kind of madness follows the first fatal fascination with modern Israel, conditioning the "believers" to expect and applaud a course of events in line with Jewish aspirations. It is in this context that Prince can claim that only Jews have a right to rule Jerusalem — a statement which, in the present climate, can only be called inflammatory. Yet he goes further to say that God will judge the nations by the attitude they adopt to Israel in the final conflict — a far cry from, e.g., Matt. 25, which he manages, grotesquely, to cite as his authority, pp. 158f.

This madness has global implications. It is well-known that the militant Zionists' chief single source of moral support is not world Jewry, but evangelical Christians who have been swayed by the sorts of arguments Prince presents. (Their number has been put at 40,000 in America alone). For these, a final conflict is inevitable, featuring the pro-Israeli USA and the anti-Israeli USSR. This is the background to President Reagan's astonishing recent remarks about the USSR as the source of all the evil in the world. Such an attitude ought to send shudders through those who think Christians have a *moral responsibility* in relation to world tensions and the possibility of nuclear war. Is the nuclear holocaust (whether or not it is the harbinger of Christ's return) to be hastened by the irresponsible prejudices of Christians?

After all this it is more than a relief to turn to Colin Chapman's book. In a sea of abuse of the Bible this is an island of carefully exegesis and sensitive historical assessment. The author has

spent fifteen years in different countries of the Middle East, most recently in Beirut. In contrast to Prince, his experience has been primarily, though not exclusively, among Arabs. Yet the book is certainly not anti-Jewish. Its essence is fairness.

The author is convinced that an understanding of the twentieth-century history of Palestine is an essential pre-requisite of a proper use of the Bible in relation to it. (As every preacher knows, it is exceedingly difficult to apply scripture to a situation about which one knows little). To this end there is, first, a brief account of the history of Palestine from Abraham to the present day. There follows an invaluable chapter simply containing extracts from the writings of people who have been closely involved in the events, including the early Zionists such as Herzl and Weizmann, their spiritual sons, Moshe Dayan and Menachem Begin, Arabs, journalists and British politicians. Other relevant documentation such as the vital Balfour Declaration completes the picture. This chapter, for which alone the book is worth buying, is historically convincing because of the different viewpoints represented, and moving, because of its catalogue of the horrors and ironies of the sorry tale. It makes clear that each side has its share both of tragedy and guilt. Neither is the natural or moral superior of the other. Most interesting is the development that is charted from the early Zionists' naive belief that the Arabs would present no problems and that the Jews themselves would without doubt be a model of fairness, through the dawning awareness that there was indeed a problem in the meeting of which they might well emerge with discredit, to Menachem Begin's chilling: "In our country there is only room for Jews", (p. 168). Already, the reviewer has interpreted the material. The author simply lets it appear, not flinching from presenting anything which would put either side in a poor light. Along with Jewish ruthlessness, it is abundantly clear that Arab greed (in land-sales, often by wealthy absentee landlords) and internal divisions have made a major contribution to their present deprivation.

Chapman then turns to prophecy, and particularly to the sorts of passages which are vital to Prince's case (though he nowhere refers to that book, nor indeed to any similar one). His main contention in this section is that the New Testament writers believed that many of the prophecies in question were fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus — or *would* be fulfilled in his second coming. (Cf. our criticism of Prince on the New Covenant). The following strands of prophecy-fulfilment, identified by Chapman, may be mentioned here.

i) Those who greeted the birth of the child Jesus saw the event as *the restoration of Israel* (pp. 120ff.).

ii) In the Beatitudes, "the meek shall inherit the earth," is an application of an Old Testament passage (Ps. 37:11) which referred to "the land". i.e. the land was not regarded by Jews in a narrow nationalistic sense. Rather, what was true of it in the Old Testament is now extended to the whole earth (pp. 124f.).

iii) The book of Revelation sees the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecies as taking place in "new heavens and a new earth" (pp. 147f., Rev. 21-1ff., 22), a further example of the "de-nationalization" of land.

iv) Much of the language of Mark 13, Matt. 24, Luke 17 (viz. the so-called "mini-apocalypse") is, on the basis of clear Old Testament analogy (such as Isaiah 13), applicable to the fall of Jerusalem in 70AD, and not to modern events, pp. 130ff. (Mark 13:24ff., however, relates to the second coming of Christ). The whole argument is thorough and detailed, and cannot be adequately reflected here. The reader is advised to peruse it carefully for him or herself.

The final major chapter of the book asks the question whether

biblical prophecy can be used to assess modern events in Israel in any other way than as a prediction of them. The result is a searching criticism of Israeli methods and tactics in the light of Israel's own law — the Old Testament. When land-acquisition takes the form of confiscation in place of purchase, when life is held so cheaply that Golda Meir can claim the Palestinian people never existed (p. 168), then there is a serious question whether there is respect among Jews for the God who, they claim, has given them the land. As any serious student of the Old Testament knows, God's people of old never held the land by absolute right. Even in their tenure of it they could be called "sojourners" (p. 105, Lev. 25:23), and that tenure was only ever secure while there was devotion to the Lord and his ways (105-111, Deut. 28). This telling treatment of prophecy in relation to the land is all in the light of the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-

3) of which a vital — and neglected — aspect is that God's people should be a blessing to "all the families of the earth" (p. 100f.). Can the Israelis honestly say that they are a blessing to the Arabs in Palestine?

By way of conclusion to these remarks on the two books in question, it is clear that, from the perspective of both prophecy and modern history, the issue of Whose Promised Land? is by no means so simple as it appears to those who see in modern events the unequivocal signs of the end-times. What can those in the mould of Derek Prince make of the prophetic statement: "Blessed be Egypt *my people*", Isaiah 19:23-25 (cf. Chapman, p. 190) — or of the awkward historical fact of the presence of Arab Christians in Palestine (Chapman, p. 104)?

DOGMATICS

Foundations of Dogmatics

Otto Weber, Eerdmans

(UK Distributor: Paternoster). 1981. Volume I: 659pp.
Volume II: 721 pp. £43.80 for both volumes

This massive work is a translation of the German *Grundlagen der Dogmatik* which first appeared in 1955, and has long been regarded as a standard textbook of the subject. With good reason. Here in the space of two quite manageable volumes is a comprehensive survey of the main themes of Christian doctrine, from the point of view of a reasonably conservative Reformed German theologian.

Volume I contains six parts. The first is an extended discussion of the place and relevance of dogmatics in the Church and in the Christian life. Weber deals with what he calls "Biblicism", or non-dogmatic Christianity, with the problem of ethics, and with the confessional nature of the Creeds. In the second part he expands this discussion with a historical survey of dogmatics, starting with the Early Church and carrying on down to Barth and Bultmann. The survey has weaknesses of which Weber is well-aware, but it is a masterly presentation of post-Reformation developments in Germany, in particular.

Part Three deals with revelation and the doctrine of Scripture, giving a very full account of the many different positions which have been held in Germany, and entering into a fruitful historical dialogue with the Reformers and with Protestant Orthodoxy. Weber does not distinguish Evangelicalism from Fundamentalism, which he tends to caricature somewhat, but apart from this, his treatment is judicious and enlightening.

Part Four examines the Trinity, which Weber fixes at the centre of all Christian doctrine, a move which at once distinguishes him from nineteenth-century Liberalism and even from Karl Barth, whom he is not afraid to criticise when necessary. In Parts Five and Six Weber concentrates on the Creation and on Man, dealing with the great problem of Sin and the Image of God. This is extremely good, and will repay careful reading. Weber understands the limitations of the Reformers at this point, and is not afraid to criticise Melancthon and the later Lutherans for distorting Luther's principles by a return to scholastic modes of thinking.

Volume 2 begins with Part Seven and continues through to Part Eleven. Part Seven takes up nearly a third of the volume, and deals with Christology. The treatment is remarkably wide-ranging and it has not dated as one might imagine. Weber comes to some very conservative conclusions about the Incarnation, for example, and his willingness to accept traditional exegesis on disputed points of Scriptural interpretation is highly refreshing.

Part Eight deals with the Work of the Holy Spirit, which is mainly

concerned with justification. Here the work is more dated and rather incomplete. The Person of the Holy Spirit is not really treated, nor is the work of sanctification, particularly with reference to the charismatic gifts. Part Nine is his treatment of Election, which he refers to the Community as opposed to the individual. Part Ten deals with the Church and Part Eleven treats of Eschatology. These sections contain a great deal of useful information, and are extremely helpful in outlining the main points of debate in the historic Church. They are unfortunately also now quite out of date, since so much discussion has gone on since 1960 in these areas. To cite but one obvious example, his treatment of the Roman Church is necessarily pre-Vatican II, and therefore more than a little one-sided, despite his real efforts to be fair. In the same way, he has not really absorbed the liturgical developments of our time.

The translation in by D.L. Guder, of Fuller Theological Seminary, and it is most lively and readable. Occasionally there are slips which could have been avoided — Platonian instead of Platonist, Turretini instead of Turretin, Elliot-Bynns instead of Elliot-Binns, and so on. On page 86 of Volume 1, Augustine of Hippo is curiously confused with Augustine of Canterbury, at least if the date of death is anything to go by!

It is inevitable that a work of this kind should be compared with the dogmatics of that other great conservative German, Helmut Thielicke, whose *Evangelical Faith* has appeared in English at about the same time. Weber is much easier to read and more generally reliable as a guide to the issues, though doubtless he is less philosophically brilliant than Thielicke and will probably not be as influential on theological thought. This is a textbook more than a new study, though Weber's own originality comes through strongly on every page.

If the work is to be criticised it must be on account of its narrowness. As a Reformed theologian, not a Lutheran, one might have expected Weber to have been more conversant with theologians of his own tradition outside of Germany. As it is, he makes only passing reference to Abraham Kuyper and the Dutch school of neo-Calvinism, has little to say about French or English theology (apart from an occasional mention of Baxter, Ames and Perkins), and almost nothing about the Americans. The Princeton School is ignored, despite the importance of Warfield for the doctrine of Biblical Inspiration, and the only "American" theologians named are Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich! It would be hard to be more Germanocentric than that! This bias is understandable but it is bound to compromise the work's usefulness in the English-speaking world. This is a great pity, since otherwise it is a first-rate piece of scholarship deserving of the closest attention by students and pastors alike.

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