

PREACH

the Word

Vol. 9 No. 2

November/December 2005

according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 1:1)

The Bible lies open before you to Amos or Jeremiah or Malachi. The eyes of boys and girls, men and women are looking directly at you. As you read the text, the thought flickers across your mind: “Is it legitimate to apply this message to this audience?”

WHO IS ISRAEL?

“The most successful Christian fiction series ever” (*Publisher’s Weekly*): that’s *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days* and its eleven sequels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins (1995-2004). More than 42 million copies of the books have been sold, not counting a separate series for 10-14 year-olds. Members of your congregation will find them for sale with the best-sellers in the book departments of your local discount department stores. My public library offers them all. The authors claim that their website (www.leftbehind.com) averages over 80,000 hits a day.

The books’ appeal lies in a somewhat believable cast of fictional characters, presenting the authors’ millennial understanding of the End Times. The plot will not turn off average recreational readers. The return of the Jews to Israel and the establishment of the new state by the U.N. in 1948 is real history. After that, fiction takes over: unbelievable prosperity for the Jewish nation; a failed Russian attack (cf. Ez 38-39); the Rapture (cf. 1Th 4:17); the seven-year Tribulation; the revelation of the Antichrist, establishing his headquarters in New Babylon, *Iraq*; 144,000 Jewish evangelists, accepting and preaching the Christ they rejected in A.D. 30 (cf. the reconnected and then enlivened dry bones in Ez 37; cf. Rv 7); the Jews’ rebuilding of the Temple and then its desecration by Antichrist; the Battle of Armageddon; the Millennium, finally established at Christ’s *Glorious Appearing*—title of the twelfth and most recent book in the series.

In *Left Behind*, Christians committed to a Law-and-Gospel understanding of the Scriptures find themselves in a strange world. Over it all looms a sort of eschatological mushroom cloud, supposedly foretold in prophecy, to frighten God’s children back home. The evangelistic message of the series: *it’s high time now to get ready for the Rapture, or else*. That’s a far cry from the gospel of grace shining from the cross and also from the sober appeal Jesus attached to the signs of the end in Luke 21, all fulfilled in his own generation: “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Lk 21:28). Model believers in *Left Behind* are members of the “Tribulation



Donald Muth, 1983, Minnesota District Catechism, (c) Martin Luther College Library, New Ulm, MN

Force,” awakened from apathy by the Rapture, who “make their decision for Christ,” and enlist on his side for the duration, no matter the cost.

For the eschatology underlying this fiction, see LaHaye and Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Tyndale). To the authors, “the infallible sign” of the approach of the end-times is the establishment of the modern state of Israel by the United Nations in 1948 and the return of the Jews to The Land. This epochal event “constitutes a preparation for the end of the age, the setting for the coming of the Lord for his church, and the fulfillment of Israel’s prophetic destiny” (J. Walvoord). The End-Time prophecies unfolding before our eyes “could not be fulfilled until Israel was in her land.” A large ingredient of the Biblical-contemporary flavor of the fiction is the prominence of Jerusalem, the rebuilt Temple, and the modern state of Israel as God’s supposed plan unfolds. Who is Israel according to LaHaye and Jenkins? Answer: Watch the TV news, read your evening paper, find it on the map. Israel today is the modern Middle-Eastern Jewish state (foretold in Scripture!). In the authors’ scheme, “*separating Israel and the church* is one of the major keys to understanding Bible prophecy.” (*continued*)

THREE FROM WALTHER

- 1 “‘He that believeth not shall be damned.’ This too, is a sweet word, for he does not say ‘He that has sinned much for a long time shall be damned,’ but states no other reason for man’s damnation than his unbelief ... nothing in his past record shall damn him ... The Lord never makes mention of hell except for the purpose of bringing men to heaven. So in this passage ... These last words of the Lord should not be emphasized thus: “He that believeth *not* shall be damned,” but thus: “He that *believeth not* shall be damned.” (404)
- 2 “It is the Law that reproves unbelief. Where? In the First Commandment, which signifies that ‘we are to fear, love and *trust* in God above all things.’ Unbelief, no matter in what relation it is viewed, is forbidden in the First Commandment. When I commit the sin of unbelief, I sin because I break the Law, which requires me to trust in God and believe his Word.” (282)
- 3 “God’s disposition towards us is as we picture it to ourselves. If one believes that God is gracious to him, he certainly has a gracious God. If we dress our heavenly Father up as a scarecrow, as a God who is angry with us, we *have* an angry God, and his wrath rests upon us.” (137)

Who is Israel? (Part 2 of 4)

But who is Israel in Scripture? Is the Scriptural Israel in our hearers’ minds as we expound an Old Testament sermon text? Do we take the time to explain *Israel*, especially for sake of the less-informed members of our flocks—the ones who may give a serious hearing to *Left Behind*? Sermons and Bible classes today cannot avoid Bible history lessons. Israel, Abraham’s grandson, the patriarch who trusted in the Lord’s promise and “struggled with God and with men and overcame” (Ge 32:28) is the people’s father. In Exodus the “sons of Israel” become simply “Israel,” the people the Lord rescued from Egypt and prepared to serve as Messiah’s cradle. Listen to the love in his voice: “This is what the Lord says,” Moses told Pharaoh. “Israel is my first-born son” (Ex 4:22). “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son ... It was I who taught Ephraim (Israel) to walk, taking them by the arms” (Ho 11:1,3). Moses reminded the people of the Lord’s covenant with their fathers: “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God ... I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob” (Ex 6:6-8). At the foot of Sinai, where he made his law-covenant with them, he honored the people of Israel with princely titles: “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:5f.).

Our listeners today should see Old Testament Israel as the visible church B.C. OT Israel was a nation among nations—in that respect unlike Christ’s church today—but above all the people whom God hedged in with his law and assembled around his promise of redemption through the Messiah (he *himself* sometimes called Israel by Isaiah!). God graced Israel with matchless spiritual gifts: “the adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises ... the patriarchs. And from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ” (Ro 9:4f). But already in the calf-idolatry at Sinai and often in the following centuries it became plain that Israel was not an unmixed body of believers, no more so than a congregation or a synod today. God’s Word accomplishes its purpose: it creates faith. But “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children” (Ro 9:6f). There was an Israel according to the flesh, mere physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This majority became more and more hardened in unbelief. (*continued*)

Thinking About Thanksgiving

One of the men in our monthly Pastors’ Study suggested that Acts 14:8-20 could work for Thanksgiving:

THE TRUE GOD INSPIRES TRUE THANKS

- 1 A man with a sad life listens to the Word of Life.
- 2 Pagan churchmen thank the wrong god.
- 3 Thankless Israel tries to kill Jesus’ messenger.
- 4 Local Christians continue the Gospel work.

Who is Israel? (Part 3 of 4)

But within this nation were the people whom God treasured above all nations as his own according to the Spirit, believers like Simeon, waiting for the Consolation of Israel (Lk 2:25). Sometimes he called them the Remnant, the elect who survive the hardening of the mass of their people. Through faith in Christ they will inherit the promises given to the patriarchs. We New Testament Christians face the same spiritual dangers as his ancient people (1 Co 10). He tenderly comforts us with the same promises. You and I can sleep soundly tonight because “he who watches over *Israel* will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps 121:4). Do we read the Psalms that way, trusting that what *Israel* was millennia ago, God has made us today, his beloved people through faith in Christ? Would we make better use of the Psalms if that truth sunk deeper into our hard hearts? (*continued*)

A SAMPLER OF SERMON SALUTES

Have you ever found yourself in a well-worn groove with your sermons' greetings?

"Grace and peace to you, from him who is, and who was, and who is to come (Rv 1)."

"As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore (Ps 125)."

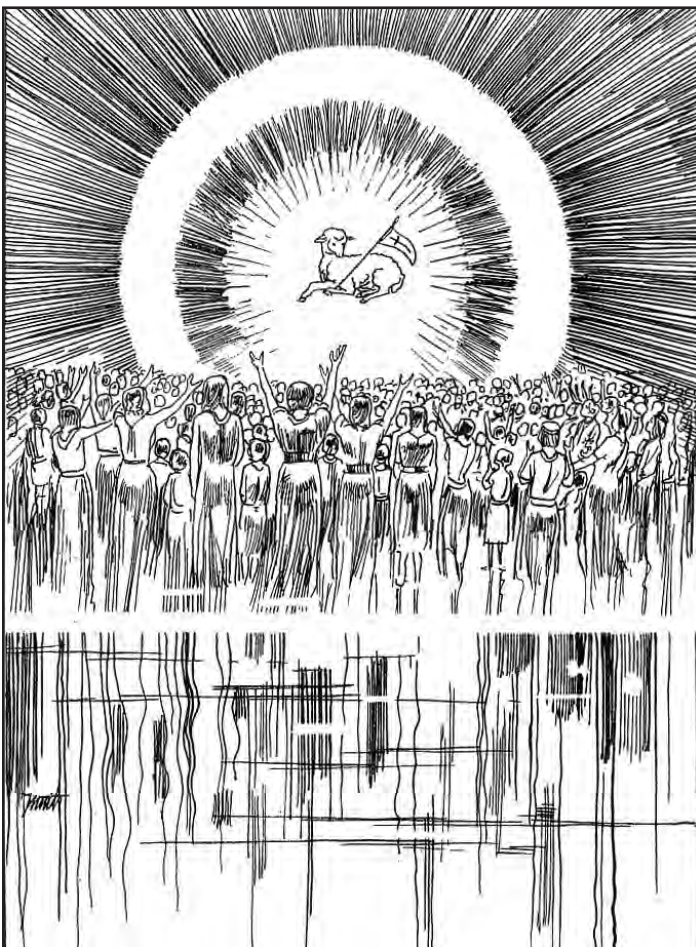
"Praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ (Ep 1)."

"Peace to all of you who are in Christ (1 Pe 5)."

"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness (Cl 2)."

"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love (2 Jn)."

"This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 118)."



Donald Muth, 1983, Minnesota District Catechism, (c) Martin Luther College Library, New Ulm, MN

Who is Israel? (Part 4 of 4)

God sent his Son first, and Christ Jesus in turn sent his disciples first to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 15:24; 10:6). The nation of Israel as a whole followed their leaders in rejecting "this Christ, this King of Israel," challenging him to come down from the cross and later persisting in unbelief. Already during his ministry Jesus prophesied old Israel's sad end: "Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:12). Paul and his helpers saw this happening as they began their mission work in Israelite synagogues, only to see most of his Jewish brothers and sisters filled with jealousy at the saving of the Gentiles, while rejecting God's good news for themselves. Only a few believed. When Paul turned to the Gentiles, he found his authorization not only in his Lord's mission command, but in Messianic prophecy: "I have made you—the Christ—a light to the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth" (Is 49:6; Ac 13:47).

So who is Israel today? The New Testament leaves no doubt: "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham.... So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Ga 3:7-9). "There is no longer Jew nor Greek ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Ga 3:28f).

It is *God's new Israel*, believing Jews and believing Gentiles, that Paul has in mind at the end of Galatians when he blesses his readers: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—those who trust the good news of the cross—even to *the Israel of God*" (Ga 6:16). To us, his new, spiritual Israel, looking up in faith to the cross on Calvary, he gives the titles once conferred on Jacob's descendants at Mt. Sinai: "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God ... Once you were *not* a people, but now you *are* the people of God; once you had *not* received mercy, but now you *have* received mercy" (1 Pe 2:9f.). You do not preach often on Romans 9-11? Paul's metaphor for God's astounding grace ought to be better known: we Gentile Christians are like branches of a wild olive tree. Through faith in Christ God has graciously grafted us onto the root-stock of his cultivated olive to replace the branches broken off because of unbelief. Now "all Israel"—Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—"will be saved" (Rm 12:26). *Who is Israel? Christians, look in the mirror.*

This great mystery is revealed to and through the apostles of Jesus. A wall separated Gentiles from God. On our side of the wall we were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope (yes, let it

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

sink in!) without God in the world (Eph 2:12). Christ destroyed the barrier when he kept the law for us and reconciled us all to God, making peace with God and peace between divided humanity in his one body nailed to the cross. “Through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). He made the two one. Jesus is our peace.

So who is Israel? New Testament Gentile Christians confess that we are “other sheep” no longer: “We are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (Ps 100:3) with the believing remnant of his OT Israel. “God no longer has a role for the nation of Israel to play either today or in the future in the unfolding of his master plan for the world” (Gerlach). The blood descendants of Abraham have now become a potential mission field. There is just one way into the Good Shepherd’s fold: faith in him, mankind’s substitute. Do we—honestly?—join Paul: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (Ro 10:1)? We do not help them by awaiting a mass conversion of Israel according to the flesh in the End Times. After their tragic history, including brutal treatment at German (many of them would say Lutheran) hands, they need our unreserved love, a clear confession of Jesus as their only Hope, and prayers for the rescue of their souls: “Almighty and everlasting God, you love to show mercy. Hear the prayers we offer to you for your ancient people, that acknowledging Jesus Christ, who is the Light of truth, they may be delivered from their darkness, through the same Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen” (TLH p 104). So God’s Israel today prays for his ancient people.

Note: Revelation by Wayne Mueller (People’s Bible) and Siegbert Becker (The Distant Triumph Song) do not lend themselves to fictional treatment and will not sell like Left Behind. But our church libraries look forward to a “People’s Bible Teachings” volume on the End Times. Pastors will profit from G. Wolff’s article in WLQ 77:1 (Jan ’80): “Is the Establishment of the State of Israel a Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecy Concerning the Return of All Israel to Canaan?” See also Joel Gerlach “Armageddon: Oil and the Gulf War,” NWL (April ’91).

Prof. Paul Eickmann, Watertown, WI
pkeickmann@juno.com

YOU CAN PRINT THAT

1 “Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind? Who knows why certain notes in music are capable of stirring the listener deeply, though the same notes slightly rearranged are impotent? ... There is no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly.”

E.B. White (*The Elements of Style*)

2 “Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me?”

(Isaiah 57:11)

3 “The advantage of the *inductive* method is that you will get a hearing. Stephen was stoned, but not before he got his message across. Paul, likewise, got a hearing in Athens. In both cases an inductive approach assured this. In general, then, audience analysis is all-important in determining the type of argumentative approach to use. Ask yourself, “What kind of attitude does the audience have toward me and my proposition?” When you can answer that, you will know whether your approach ought to be inductive or deductive. Must you approach them as Nathan confronted David, or can you move directly to your thesis? *Hostility indicates induction, friendliness indicates deduction.*”

Jay Adams (*Pulpit Speech*)

4 “[The Lutheran pastor] is neither pope nor employee. He is nothing more, nothing less than the ambassador of Christ, who has just come from the palace, from the heart of God, with a message. St. John the Baptist: ‘Ecce Agnus Dei! He must increase; I must decrease!’”

Daniel Deutschlander,
What it Means to be a Lutheran Pastor,
Pastoral Motivation Series, MLC, March 2005.

WHO IS ISRAEL?
Pastor Tom Jeske
Omaha, Nebraska

 PREACH
the Word

Preach the Word is published bimonthly by the WELS Commission on Worship
2929 N Mayfair Rd, Milwaukee WI 53222-4398 414/256-3265
<Bryan.Gerlach@sab.wels.net> Back issues are at wels.net, jumpword “PTW”

Pastor Thomas Jeske, editor <tomjeske@livinghopeomaha.com>
Wayne A. Laitinen, managing editor <laitinen@newulmtel.net>