

# Israel

## Is It the Key to Earth's Last days?

Will God help the Jews rebuild the Temple?  
During a coming tribulation period ,will  
Jews from Israel play a leading role?

by Ed Dickerson

ONCE AGAIN conflict has riveted world attention on the Holy Land, especially among those Christians who look to the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple as a sign of the imminent Rapture. Until recently, two obstacles remained. First, the lack of a perfect red heifer required as a sacrifice for the laying of the Temple cornerstone. Second, the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place occupying the Temple mount.

A scant month before hostilities intensified, a farm in Israel witnessed the birth of a perfect red heifer. Rabbis examined the calf and declared it suitable. That left the Dome of the Rock as the only remaining obstacle.

During the recent fighting, a group of Palestinians took hostages and holed up at the Church of the Nativity. Israeli snipers and tanks surrounded the shrine. These actions fueled speculation that renewed fighting in and around Jerusalem might provide a similar situation at the Dome of the Rock, giving Israelis an excuse to demolish the Muslim holy place and open the way to replace it with the Temple.

Iran's continued development of nuclear weapons in defiance of the international community raised tensions throughout the region. Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad openly espouses an apocalyptic view of the future, at least rhetorically welcoming nuclear war as a prelude to the return of the Twelfth Imam. Even the stoutly secular Washington Post newspaper featured a column titled, "In Iran, Arming for Armageddon." (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/15/AR2005121501428.html>) To many, the end of all things seemed near.

Does the Bible predict such a chain of events in the Holy Land? Will God help

the Jews rebuild the Temple?

### **Special privilege?**

If God still focuses on Jerusalem and the Jews, then all these events may have great significance. If not, they may be a distraction, diverting our attention from truly momentous matters. So the answers to all these issues revolve around one central question: Are the Jews still the chosen people or does God now focus His activity on the church?

God did say, " "Israel is my firstborn son." " (1) We know that in Bible times, the priesthood of the family passed to the firstborn son. So, as the firstborn of God, the reasoning goes, the Jews will always have a special relationship with God.

But this notion of special privilege through birth repels many in our egalitarian society. They feel more comfortable with Colossians 3:11: "There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all" (NAS).

How can we resolve the apparent contradiction in these texts and know whether to focus on Israel or the church?

At least part of the answer lies in a seldom-noted pronouncement by the apostle Paul: "The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual." (2) Paul used Adam and Christ as his illustration. Adam, the first member of the human race, is the "natural" Adam. Because of his sin, he passed on to all of his natural children a legacy of sorrow and death. Christ came, Paul says, as the second, "spiritual Adam." Because of His sinless life and perfect sacrifice, He passes on to His spiritual children a legacy of joy and life.

Does Paul's argument concerning Adam and Christ end with them, or does it extend further? The Old Testament supplies surprising evidence.

As we mentioned earlier, during the time of the patriarchs, spiritual leadership supposedly passed to the firstborn son. We take that for granted, but now let's look at the evidence to see how often it actually worked out that way. Let's start right at the beginning, with Adam's sons. It seems obvious from their offerings and God's verdict that firstborn Cain was not the spiritual son. Abel was!

In fact, Paul's pattern in which the "natural" firstborn differs from the "spiritual" repeats itself again and again. We are hard-pressed to find a single significant case where the firstborn actually receives the birthright.

### **True of the kings**

The kings repeat the principle, bearing some further examination. The physically imposing Saul turned out to be a spiritual fiasco. None of his descendants occupied the throne. David, neither the first king of Israel nor the firstborn of his own family, succeeded Saul. He became a prophet, making him a spiritual king and progenitor of the royal line to which Christ was born.

Solomon followed David on the throne. But, as we should now expect, Solomon was not David's first son. David had at least six older sons.(3) And Solomon was not the first son of David by Bathsheba. Their first died a few days after birth.(4) Solomon, as the spiritual second king, became an example of piety and wisdom, representing the "Golden Age" of Israel.

And it doesn't stop there. The natural splendor of the first Temple pales in comparison to spiritual glory of the smaller, second Temple. For while the Shekinah, the visible presence of God illuminated the first Temple, Christ graced the second Temple with His physical presence.

All these examples make it clear that Paul has identified a crucial principle: whether it's a matter of patriarchs, kings, Temples, or even "Adams," the second, when spiritual, supersedes the first, when it's merely physical.

And so it is that a "spiritual" second Israel supersedes the physical first. When the Jews claimed that their descent from Abraham merited a favorable position for them in God's estimation, Jesus disputed their claim. He said, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the things Abraham did."(5)

Paul elaborated on this idea: "Understand, then, that *those who believe* are children of Abraham."(6) "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit."(7)

The words of Christ and Paul both attest that the Israel of faith, the *spiritual* Israel that was second in line, supersedes the *physical* Israel that was first in line.

God still loves the Jews. He loves them as He loves all His children. He offers salvation to Jews on precisely the same basis as he does to anyone else. When Jews accept this priceless offer, they become a part of spiritual Israel.

So, God does not focus exclusively on "natural" Jews nor on present, natural Jerusalem. Neither should His spiritual children pin their hopes on the events in modern Palestine. Abraham himself, the father of the faithful, understood that no human-made abode could ever be home. "He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."(8)

With Abraham and the faithful through the ages we look not to this Jerusalem but to the New Jerusalem. There all spiritual Israel, Jews and Gentiles alike, will live through all eternity.

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- (1) Exodus 4:22
- (2) 1 Corinthians 15:46
- (3) 2 Samuel 3:2
- (4) 2 Samuel 12:18
- (5) See John 8:39
- (6) Galatians 3:7, emphasis supplied
- (7) Romans 2:28,29
- (8) Hebrews 11:10