

The Stairway to Heaven: Materialism and the Church

Don Closson looks at the threat materialism poses to the church and proposes ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

One of the most popular rock songs of the seventies begins with the lyrics, "There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold and she's buying a stairway to heaven." The words, written by Jimmy Page, Robert Plant and John Paul Jones of the group Led Zeppelin, reflects the fashionable message of anti-materialism that pervaded much of rock music in the late sixties and seventies. The notion of dropping out of the rat race and rejecting the corporate mentality of one's parents formed the foundation of many a rock musician's career. Today, one often hears people refer to the entire decade of the eighties as the "me decade" as if during that period of time Americans were somehow more self-centered and money hungry than during any that came before it. One popular newspaper framed the mindset with a poem:

Now I lay me down to sleep
I pray my Cuisinart to keep
I pray my stocks are on the rise
And that my analyst is wise
That all the wine I sip is white
And that my hot tub is watertight
That racquetball won't get too tough
That all my sushi's fresh enough
I pray my cordless phone still works
That my career won't lose its perks
My microwave won't radiate
My condo won't depreciate
I pray my health club doesn't close
And that my money market grows
If I go broke before I wake

I pray my Volvo they won't take.

Christianity has had a much longer tradition of critiquing a materialistic lifestyle. Jesus' life was lived as a rejection of the merely material perspective. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that we can become enslaved by the desire for money and things. He pleads with us to go beyond concerns for what we will consume and to seek our creator and His will. In Matthew 6:24-25 Jesus taught that "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"

In spite of the fact that materialism is apparently held in low regard by large segments of both popular and religious culture, surveys indicate that it influences the thinking of many Americans. In a recent survey, George Barna found that seventy-two percent of Americans believed that people are blessed by God so that they can enjoy life as much as possible, and fifty-eight percent agreed with the statement that the primary purpose of life is enjoyment and fulfillment. Eighty-one percent believed that God helps those who help themselves. These responses point to the validity of what has been called our "therapeutic culture." The first commandment of this culture appears to be *do whatever makes you feel good, whatever helps you to cope materially*. When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment He responded by saying we are to love God (not things) with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mk. 12:30, 31). That kind of love is self-denying and sacrificial.

In this article, I will look at the threat materialism poses to the church and propose ways for Christians to avoid this snare.

The Millionaire and The Dreamer

In his book *The Gospel and the American Dream*, Bruce Shelley tells the true story of a man who boasted to others that he would be a millionaire by age thirty-five. This young man was known as a really nice guy with a good sense of humor. He was considered bright, thoughtful, and generous to a fault. In 1984 he had acquired many of the appearances of success. He was flying to Dallas from Phoenix weekly on business. He drove a nice company car, and had moved his family into an exclusive neighborhood. He was also doing all the things that wealthy young men should do. He was the program chairman of the local Lions Club, president of the 200-member Arizona chapter of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers, and a board member for the local Boys Club. However, on a Sunday in May 1985, the family missed church for the first time in months. The aspiring millionaire spent the day struggling in vain to scrape together enough cash to salvage his business, his image, and his pride. At 11:30 that night, after the family went to bed, he laid out his insurance policies and then went into the garage. He got into his expensive, company-provided BMW and turned on the ignition. He was dead within minutes.

Here is another story about someone that I know. My friend had an important job working for a large defense contractor in the Dallas area. After a number of years, he had placed a substantial amount of money into 401(k)s and other investments, money that most people would consider their financial security for their retirement years. He had also completed a masters degree in theology and left his well paying job in order to teach part-time at a local Christian college for far less pay. However, this young man's real dream was to purchase a large old house in the city and fill it with students who desired to know God deeply and to live in community with others who wanted to do the same. Eventually, he found just such a house. Knowing that it would consume most, if not all, of his savings, he bought it. It is now a

few years down the road and my friend has virtually run out of money. But his dream is coming true. The house has been completely renovated and both graduate and undergraduate students are living in it. He conducts Bible studies and reading groups with students living in the house and some who do not. He is broke, but he is excited and rejoicing in what God is doing.

The two lives described here depict two different faith systems. The millionaire, claiming to have faith in the God of the Bible, ultimately had placed his faith in things. When he was in danger of losing them, he gave up on life itself. My friend who is renovating the old house is just about out of money. However, he is optimistic and excited about the ministry he is having in the lives of the students living there. He is aware of the financial difficulties that his dream presents, but he is trusting in God to provide even when good business sense may argue against it.

Could it be that many Christians have succumbed to the notion of rugged individualism, placing the building of an earthly empire above the building of God's kingdom? James 5:1-3 holds a severe warning for those tempted by wealth. "Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." God warns believers against placing their faith in things and treating people as expendable commodities.

The Sources of Materialism

In spite of both secular and religious messages against materialism in our culture, it still seems to have a great deal of influence on the lives of typical Americans. Why is this? I propose that there are two sources of materialism: philosophical materialism and functional materialism.

C. S. Lewis defines philosophical materialism as the belief held by people who "think that matter and space just happen to exist, and always have existed, nobody knows why; and that the

matter, behaving in certain fixed ways, has just happened, by a sort of fluke, to produce creatures like ourselves who are able to think.”^{1} Philosophical materialism imagines a universe without a spiritual dimension. Carl Sagan, one of the most popular and prolific writers on science in history, held to philosophical materialism. He wrote that the physical cosmos is all that exists, and we inhabit this cosmos as the result of a series of chance occurrences. If one holds to this position, being anything but materialistic would be illogical. This does not mean that philosophical materialists treat all people as if they were merely things. It just means that they have no good reason for treating them in any other way. The atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen wrote, “We have not been able to show that reason requires the moral point of view, or that all really rational persons, unhoodwinked by myth or ideology, need not be individual egoists or classical amoralists. . . . Pure practical reason, even with a good knowledge of the facts, will not take you to morality.”^{2} Bertrand Russell wrote that humans are nothing more than impure lumps of carbon and water, and yet late in life talked about his love for humanity.^{3} What is there to love about impure lumps of carbon and water? It is hard to live out philosophical materialism. That is why there are very few who hold to this viewpoint.

Survey after survey reveals that the vast majority of Americans believe that a God exists. If most Americans believe in God, why do so many of them live as though He is unimportant? Why do they act like functional materialists? Why do so many Christians measure their success in life by materialistic standards? We could blame our modern society. The triumph of scientism, the tendency to reduce every phenomenon to materialistic components, often leaves little room for behavior motivated by a spiritual reality. However, I believe that the problem goes deeper than this.

Every believer experiences a battle between the spirit and the

flesh. In Galatians 5:17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Further, he warns the Galatians that people whose lives are filled with selfish ambition and envy, among other things, will not inherit the kingdom of God. This is not saying that one will lose his or her salvation, but that a life consumed by materialistic desires is probably devoid of a spiritual dimension. If the Holy Spirit is not evident, there is no regeneration and no salvation.

Jesus’ ministry was filled with teachings about materialism, both in parables and more directly. In fact, the beginning of His ministry is highlighted by His experience in the wilderness where Satan tries to tempt Him with materialistic seduction. Consideration of the temptation of Christ sheds light on how our surrounding culture operates in much the same way as Satan did in the desert.

Materialistic Temptations

In examining the seduction of materialism and its impact on the church, it is significant that at the beginning of Jesus’ short ministry He was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience deprivation and temptation (Matt. 4:1). Biblical writers often use the word *tempt* to mean “to try something for the purpose of demonstrating its worth or faithfulness.”[\[4\]](#) Jesus’ fasting in the desert provides His followers with an example of earthly suffering they could relate to. It also provides a model for how to resist temptation.

Satan’s testing of Jesus in Matthew 4 should be a warning for Christians in our highly materialistic culture. Satan still uses these techniques today to test the faithfulness of the body of Christ. Matthew tells us that the first temptation Satan uses is to fulfill a perfectly normal bodily need. Jesus is hungry; He had fasted for forty days and nights. Satan

suggests that He turn the stones into bread, something well within Jesus' capabilities. Believers wrestle with the same suggestion from Satan today. But what is wrong with fulfilling normal bodily functions? We need food, clothing, and shelter (and some would add sexual outlets) to survive. God made us that way, right?

Satan's temptation is to reduce human nature to what might be called the *will to pleasure* principal, the idea that sensual pleasure explains all of our motivations and needs. Jesus responds with the Scripture "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt. 4:4). He replaces the *will to pleasure* view of human nature with a *will to meaning* view. We cannot live on food alone; humans must have meaning and purpose to survive. In his personal struggle to survive a Nazi concentration camp, the psychologist Victor Frankl discovered that when men lost meaning they quickly died. Mankind needs a transcendent reason to continue striving against the struggles that life presents. It is the Word of God that provides the only true foundation for this struggle.

Next, Jesus is tempted with a formula for *instant status*. Satan suggests that He perform a miracle that would surely convince the Jews that He is their Messiah. He should throw Himself down from the temple. His survival will be just the right sign needed for the Jews to recognize Him. The only problem with this plan is that it is not the will of the Father. Jesus might gain notoriety, but He would lose His integrity. Jesus responds by declaring that we are not to put God to the test. We are not to presume that God will accept our plans with miraculous support. We conform to His will; He does not conform to ours.

Finally, Satan shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and tells Him that they are His if He will only worship him. Satan is tempting Jesus with what might be called the *success syndrome*. If Jesus' goal is to be the king of the Jews, why

not do it the easy way? Jesus replies to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (Matt 4:10). Likewise, we are not called to success, but to obedience. There are many messages in our surrounding culture encouraging the pleasure principal, the importance of status, and the idea of success at all costs. However, as believers we are to seek a higher standard than pleasure, regardless of what others think and often in the face of disappointing results.

Material Possessions and the Church

A Cuban pastor recently attended a conference in Dallas and noticed how people here often say that they have no time. He said that people in Cuba have relatively few things but rarely run out of time. This brings to mind the idea of opportunity cost. This rule from economics tells us that if we spend our resources on one thing we cannot use them on another. If our focus is on things, and our time is spent buying, using, fixing, and replacing them, do we really have time to build the relationships with people necessary to communicating the Gospel?

In his book *A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions*, Dr. Gene Getz suggests some biblical principles to guide Christians in their relationship to material things. First, he notes biblical warnings against being materialistic. As we mentioned earlier, it is possible for believers to be in bondage to things; we cannot serve both things and God. Second, accumulating wealth brings with it specific temptations. The fifth chapter of James and the book of Amos describe how financial power can lead to economic injustice as well as other forms of oppression. In Acts 8, Luke warns believers that some in the church will use the Christian message to benefit themselves. Since this was present at the very beginning of the Church, we should not be surprised or discouraged when we see it happen today.

As the church looks for the imminent return of Christ, believers should avoid the increasing tendency to intensify love for self, money, and pleasure. The warning in 2 Timothy 3 tells us to avoid those who succumb to this temptation. Christians also have to constantly be on guard against self-deception and rationalization when living in an affluent society. When the church at Laodicea imagined itself self-sufficient and without need, Jesus described them as wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17-18).

How then do Christians avoid materialism? The apostle Paul writes that godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6). Do we have enough faith to believe this revealed truth? If so our first priority in life should be the pursuit of contentment rather than riches. As Paul declares, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Phil. 4:12-14).

When God blesses us with abundance, our goal should be to use it in creative ways to further God's kingdom, for where our treasure is so is our heart (Matt. 6:19-21). Jesus taught the disciples not to be absorbed with worry about the future but to seek His kingdom and his righteousness (Matt. 6:34).

What happens when people use their material possessions in harmony with God's will? A good example is given in Acts 2. When believers had given up their claim to even their personal belongings, God added to their number daily. How we use our wealth has a great impact on the watching world. A second effect is that love and unity are created in the body of Christ. When the church was sharing their personal possessions, "all the believers were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). What could be more powerful in our materialistic age than a church using its wealth to further God's kingdom, united in love, and growing daily in numbers? This is how the early church had such a remarkable impact on its surrounding culture. Do we have enough faith to trust God

for the same today?

Notes

1. Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan: New York).
2. Craig, William Lane, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 61.
3. Israel Shenker, "The provocative progress of a pilgrim polymath," *Smithsonian* (May 1993), 128.
4. Graham H. Twelftree, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 821.>

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"How Can a Christian Be Superstitious?"

Sue, I have a Christian friend who is highly superstitious. This is very surprising to me. I would like to be able to give him scriptural references which apply to this. I cannot understand how he reconciles the sovereignty of God with superstition. He actually thinks that things like "knocking on wood" have affect on the outcome of situations. He is also highly intelligent. If you know if any articles which address this, I would appreciate that information as well.

I share your incredulity at your friend's belief in both superstition and a sovereign God!

Here are two powerful scriptures that I think are eye-opening concerning superstitious Christians:

Exodus 20:2-5 – The first commandment:

“I am the LORD your God . . . You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God . . . “

Being superstitious is to trust in an act, like knocking on wood or not stepping on a crack, instead of in God. It is nothing less than idolatry! (This is why astrology is also wrong, also idolatrous—it is trusting in the stars instead of the Star-Creator!) When we trust in a superstition instead of in God, we are making it into an idol.

The other scripture is in 2 Kings 1:3:

“But the angel of the LORD said to Elijah the Tishbite, ‘Go up and meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and ask them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel that you are going off to consult Baal-Zebub, the god of Ekron?’”

I think this verse makes it clear that consulting (and of course, trusting) anything other than the one true God is an insult and affront to God.

I’ll be interested in hearing his response to this information . . .

Sue Bohlin

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Israel's History Written in Advance

According to an old story, the powerful Prussian King Frederick the Great had a chaplain who was a Bible-believer, though Frederick himself was a rationalist. One day, Frederick challenged his chaplain, "In a word, give me a good argument for the God of the Bible." His chaplain, a knowledgeable man, responded, "The Jew, your majesty!" To unpack the chaplain's concise remark is the purpose of this essay.

Neglected Evidence for the God of the Bible

The history of the Jews is a demonstration of God at work, sometimes miraculously, sometimes providentially, in the affairs of men and nations. The particular significance of the Jews—in contrast to other nations—is that God called Israel His special people and made covenants with them through Abraham, Moses, and David. In addition, the Old Testament predicts what God planned to do with His people. We'll look at three rather wide-ranging prophecies about the nation Israel and see how they have come to pass. These involve first, the covenant curses; second, an acted parable of the marital relations between God and Israel; and finally, a prediction of Israel's return to her own land.

The first area of prophecy involves what God promised to do to the nation of Israel if they did not keep the laws Moses had given them from Mt. Sinai.

When the Israelites were rescued from slavery in Egypt about 1,400 B.C., God made a contract or covenant with Moses to define Israel's relationship to Him as His own special people. This covenant reminded them of what God had already done for them and what He promised to do in the future. God had saved

them from slavery, brought them safely through the desert, was about to bring them into possession of the land of Canaan, and would protect them from all disasters if they would be faithful to Him. To test their faithfulness, God gave them an elaborate set of laws—some moral, some civil, some ceremonial—which also set them apart from the nations around them. God showed His reality through the lifestyle that He had designed for Israel. In Deuteronomy 4:5-8 Moses explained it:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about these decrees and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'

Moses goes on to say only Israel has a God who is near when they pray, and only His people have such righteous laws to guide them.

In the 28th chapter of Deuteronomy and the 26th chapter of Leviticus, the provisions of the covenant are set out in the form of blessings and curses—blessings if Israel would obey God's commands and curses if they disobeyed. Through these sanctions, Israel would be reminded of how they were doing in obeying God, and their neighbors would see an objective demonstration of God's judgment in history.

Israel as a History Lesson

Israel's history demonstrates that when they broke the laws God gave them, they experienced exactly the results God predicted would happen if they were unfaithful. No other nation has prophesied its own downfall with such accuracy. Thus history demonstrates how accurately God predicted what would happen to Israel if they disobeyed His laws. And what did God predict? To summarize nearly a hundred verses,

Israel's disobedience brought wasted effort in labors; natural disasters such as drought, blight, and locusts to their crops; and disease and death to their animals and themselves.

Their enemies would defeat them in battle and besiege their cities, resulting in plague, famine, cannibalism, and starvation. They would be scattered to foreign countries. There some would die; others would live in constant fear of both real and imagined disasters, or turn to other gods. They would be sold as slaves. Their numbers would decline greatly, as they suffered from fearful plagues, prolonged disasters, and lingering illnesses. What an amazing list of disasters!

Not only are these curses severe, but the Bible predicts them in some detail. In Deuteronomy, fourteen verses describe the blessings and fifty-four the curses. In Leviticus, eleven verses are blessings and thirty-two are curses. Altogether, over 75 percent of the verses concern curses for disobedience. God-predicted disasters will be a major part of Israel's future.

This proportion is very unusual. Other religious people might concede that their own history had been three-fourths disaster, but who would admit it had been three-fourths disobedient? And this proportion is borne out not only by the history of Israel recorded in the Bible, where one might claim the biblical history writers either molded the narrative to match the prophecy or adjusted the prophecy to match the history. It is also demonstrated in the long history of disaster experienced by the Jews after the Bible was written.

No other national group has experienced such disaster as the Jews. Most nations have not survived long enough to experience so much disaster! Yet Israel has experienced disaster at every point sketched in the long lists of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. They have, unfortunately, been persecuted again and again for over two thousand years. For most of that time they were without a national homeland, having been driven out of

Palestine. They have faced decimation and sometimes genocide from nearly every group they have lived among: Greeks, Romans, Christians, Muslims, Nazis, and Communists. Even now the recently re-established nation of Israel faces continual harassment and threats of annihilation from hostile forces all around her.

In the midst of these curses, however, comes a promise that Israel will not be totally destroyed.

Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God (Lev. 26:44).

But as predicted, the Jews still exist as a people today. “Of course!” you say. “If Israel had been destroyed, we would never have heard of them.” Not true – unless they had been destroyed before the coming of Jesus. With the rise of Christianity, the Old Testament was preserved by non-Jews and would have survived whether the Jews survived or not. In fact, many of the threats the Jews have faced came in the past two thousand years. Yet Israel, unlike most oppressed nations of antiquity, has survived as a distinct people.

Thus the evidence from Israel’s predicted covenant curses points to God’s activity in history, keeping His words of both judgment and promise.

Israel’s Harlotry

It’s easy to miss the book of Hosea in the Old Testament. But it describes an amazing parable that would picture Israel’s situation for some two thousand years. The prophet Hosea was divinely directed to live out a powerful parable depicting God’s relationship with Israel.

In chapter 1, Hosea is instructed to marry a harlot, Gomer,

and have children. He obeys, thereby picturing God's choice of the nation Israel for a personal relationship with Him, even though Abraham was an idolater when God called him and the Israelites were idolaters when they were called out of slavery in Egypt.

In chapter 2, Gomer runs off with her lovers. In the same way, Israel abandoned God for the more sexually exciting worship of the Canaanites, even though God had brought the people safely into the promised land. Finally Gomer winds up in slavery, as Israel would later be taken captive to Assyria and Babylon.

In chapter 3, Hosea is directed to go and buy her back. But she is to have no relations with Hosea or with her lovers. This last event in Hosea's living parable is a prediction of the status of Israel for a long time to come:

For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king . . . in the last days (Hos. 3:4-5).

Hosea predicted that Israel for "many days" will lack a king, even though God had promised that Israel would never lack a descendant to sit on the throne if the nation was obedient to God.

In fact, the prediction states that Israel will lack even a prince. Since in Hebrew, "prince" means a government official, not the son of the king, Israel would lack both government and king.

Hosea also predicts that sacrifice, pillar, ephod, household idols will be lacking. Two are associated with the sacrificial system and two with idolatry. Sacrifice was an integral part of Israel's covenant and worship. The ephod, a sort of vest, was one of the most important of the ceremonial garments worn

by Israel's high priest. Although some pillars had orthodox uses, the most common reference is to those used in Canaanite worship. Israel was to lose both true worship and the false religion which had been such a problem since it entered Canaan.

This has happened exactly! Since A.D. 44 (the death of Herod Agrippa I), Israel has had no native king to this day. For 1,878 years, from the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 to the formation of the modern nation in 1948, Israel had no government of its own either. Thus the predictions regarding Israel's governmental status were fulfilled in detail.

With the loss of the Temple and the priestly garments came the end of the sacrificial system. Israel has not had a high priest to this day. So Hosea's prophecy about the loss of sacrificial worship has also proved true.

From A.D. 70 to 1948, the "sons of Israel" lacked all six items predicted in Hosea 3:4. Now they have a government, but five are still lacking. Hosea 3:4 has been literally fulfilled.

A Regathering of Israel?

In our own generation we may also be seeing the fulfillment of Hosea 3:5. Many Jews have physically returned to Palestine in this century. If their seeking of "God and David their king" is understood as a turning to Jesus as the true Messiah, we can point to the growing Messianic Jewish movement which has flourished in the past two decades. But we are still too close to these events to be sure.

Whether or not Hosea 3:5 refers to Israel's return to the promised land, a number of other Old Testament passages do. Let's look at one such passage, Isaiah 11:11-16. Verse 11 reads:

Then it will happen on that day that the LORD will again

recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.

Sometime after Isaiah wrote these words, Israel was to be regathered to its homeland. The reference to a “second time” as well as the places from which they would return suggests that this is not the return from the Babylonian exile.

According to the whole passage, several significant features will characterize this return. First, verse 13 suggests that Israel will no longer be two nations as it was after Solomon’s time, but a single unified country . Second, Israel will fight the surrounding nations (the Philistines, the Edomites, The Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Egyptians) as a part of this return (vv. 14-15). Third, something spectacular will happen to dry up the “tongue of the sea of Egypt” and the “River,” presumably the Euphrates (v.15). Fourth, the places from which the return will take place are explicitly named, except for the general phrase “islands [or ‘coastlands’] of the sea” (v.11).

Of these four items, three have already occurred in the return of Jews to Israel in our own generation; only the third has not yet taken place.

The return of Jews to Palestine and the formation of a state of their own is amazing in itself, given that just a century ago the territory was controlled by the Muslim Turks who hated the Jews. Yet a world Zionist movement was formed; the land came under the control of Britain at the end of World War I; Britain allowed the Jews to have a homeland; the Nazi holocaust drove Jews to Palestine who otherwise would have stayed in Europe; the United Nations agreed to partition Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state; and the Jews were able to defeat a coalition of Arab states bent on their destruction.

The Jewish state formed in 1948 in Palestine included persons descended from both the northern and southern tribes. The enmity of the divided kingdoms that existed at Isaiah's time has, in fact, been healed.

Israel has already fought with all the surrounding nations, in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973. Though the Philistines, Edomites, and such are no longer identifiable as separate peoples, the Arab nations occupying their lands (and most likely including some of their descendants) are Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria. These were the nations Israel fought and dispossessed to regain its territory.

Once again, the prophecies of the Bible about the Jews show the God of the Bible to be true.

In this essay we have examined three significant passages in the Bible that predict the history of Israel. We have shown that numerous prophecies from the Old Testament regarding Israel have been fulfilled. We have made the following observations:

1. The Jews would have fierce and repeated persecution and disaster. This has been characteristic of the nation for two thousand years.
2. In spite of such disasters, the Jews would continue to exist as a recognizable people group, in spite of treatment which has destroyed other such people groups.
3. Israel would be without a king for a long period of time. Israel has been without a king for nearly two thousand years, though a Davidic royal dynasty was an important part of the Old Testament revelation.
4. Israel would lack government officials for a long time. Now, after almost 1,850 years, the Jews have them again.
5. Israel would lack sacrifice and ephod, both associated with

God's commands at Mt. Sinai. This has been true for nearly two thousand years and is quite surprising in view of how important sacrifice and the priesthood were in the Old Testament.

6. Israel would lack pillar and idols. This seems obvious today, because the Jews so adamantly worship one God, but the situation was rather different when Hosea made the prediction about 800 B.C.

7. Israel would return to its land as a single united nation. A century ago, such an event would have seemed almost impossible. Palestine was controlled by a Muslim government which had no interest in providing a homeland, much less an independent state, for the Jews. Yet it has come to pass!

8. The countries explicitly named in Isaiah 11 have been nearly emptied of Jews in this return to Palestine.

9. The Jews have fought successfully with the surrounding nations in establishing and maintaining the new state of Israel.

Sadly, some elements of the Christian church have ignored or participated in the persecution of God's special covenantal people, the Jews. Yet Romans 9-11 exhorts Christians never to rejoice in the misfortunes of the Jews. To do so brings shame to the church and to our Lord.

As we look at God's hand in the history of Israel it may seem fierce to us, for at least two reasons: first, we regularly ignore the biblical teaching that there is a life beyond this one, and that in the last judgment with its rewards and punishments everything will be made right, and no one will get less than he or she deserves; and second we regularly minimize our own sin, blaming our actions on circumstances and environment. Whatever may be the faults of our parents, teachers, or society, God will apportion to them (and us!) exactly what we deserve—unless we accept the offer of God's

forgiveness through believing on Christ as our personal Savior.

Are all the predictions we have listed trivial? Did they just happen by chance? Or is the God of the Bible indeed the One who controls history and who announces the end from the beginning? The decision is yours.

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