What modern Israel reveals about the original and unchanging purposes of God
PLAN A

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Introduction

God has a history of sometimes doing what His people least expect.

And His people have a history of not always liking it.

We only have to think back to occasions such as the exile of Judah to Babylon, which most of His people refused to believe would happen at the time\(^1\), or to the coming of Jesus Himself, who John records was largely rejected by those He came to serve\(^2\). Then there was the controversy in the early Jewish Church when God started to extend the baptism of the Spirit to the Gentiles\(^3\). And let’s not forget the much more recent controversy when He started to restore that same baptism to the Church in just the last century!

All were of God, but all caused offence at the time.

The great prize which was available to those willing to see past the offence, however, was the opportunity to discover something ground-breaking about God and His purposes in the earth. And, each time, we see that this discovery would go on to have a profound and lasting impact on the history of God’s people.

For example, though those that returned from Babylon were clearly by no means a perfect people, one sin we read that they were no longer guilty of was the sin of idolatry that had sent their ancestors...
into exile. Though that earlier generation refused to believe that God’s justice would outweigh His mercy, subsequent generations understood that God will always discipline those He loves.

And though John rightly observed that many of Jesus’ own generation rejected Him, it was Jesus Himself who promised that “God blesses those who are not offended by me.”¹ And what a blessing! For John goes on to confirm that ‘to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.’² His people would now grow to understand that God also transforms those He loves.

As for the early Jewish church, their lesson would soon be that God’s love knows no borders and that “in every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right”³, while the Pentecostal pioneers of the last century encountered the God who is zealous to finish the task the early church started, and have since become the fastest growing religious group in the world.

The very acts of God, therefore, which initially proved to be stumbling blocks for His people soon became stepping stones towards the greater understanding of Him and His purposes which the Church enjoys today. The key in each case, however, was to see past the immediate offence and to take hold of the opportunity which lay hidden beyond.

More recent times, though, have been witness to yet another cause of offence within the Church, as well as beyond it. For in the middle of the last century, an event unparalleled in human history took place when, after nearly 2,000 years of absence, one of

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¹ Matthew 11:6
² John 1:12
³ Acts 10:35
the world’s most famous ancient nations suddenly reappeared on the map, with her land, people and language largely intact. And not just any nation, but Israel—God’s original *covenant* nation.

But why the offence? The reasons given are numerous and tend to range from the theological to the political. Some reasons are more valid than others, but the overall effect is to lead many to openly question this nation’s right to exist.

The question which Christians *should* be asking, however, is whether all this offence is actually evidence that God is yet *again* doing something His people were least expecting. Because if He is, then we can be sure there will be another message hidden behind the scandal that will inevitably end up further reshaping the people of God in the days to come. That would be a message none of us can afford to miss.

So join with us on a journey of discovery that ventures past the usual headlines about the Middle East, searching instead for the fingerprints of God which might be found beyond. It’s a journey which actually takes us through some very familiar landscapes, but the discovery is in revisiting them by some perhaps unfamiliar paths. And as we follow these, we may yet stumble across something significant.

Something very significant.

In fact, we may yet stumble across the original and unchanging purposes of God.
Voice in the Wilderness

The year was 1947 and it was just another hot and dry spring day for Bedouin, Muhammed edh-Dhib, and his cousin, Jum’a Muhammed. In the long tradition of their forefathers, they were herding goats along the shores of the Dead Sea, moving them in search of the sparse grazing available in the lowest valley on earth. On this occasion, however, one of the goats had gone amiss and so Muhammed went off in search. But though history doesn’t relate as to whether he found the lost animal, what he did find would soon send shockwaves around the world.

Approaching the area known as Qumran, Muhammed noticed a cave entrance he hadn’t seen before, perched high up the cliffs of a deep wadi. Whether in search of the goat or just out of curiosity, he cast a rock into the darkness. The sound that returned was not the bleat of livestock, however: it was the unmistakable clatter of breaking pottery. With curiosity now piqued, Muhammed climbed into the cave and was greeted by the sight of a large number of clay jars. Most were empty, but some were sealed and, once opened, revealed several fragile scrolls.
Neither Muhammed nor his cousin understood the writing on these clearly antique parchments, but they took a handful back to share with their community. After some deliberation and not realising their true value, they decided to sell the scrolls to a couple of local antiquities dealers for today’s equivalent of about $40. Before long, the documents caught the attention of a scholar from the American Schools of Oriental Research who, after some investigation, realised that these were ancient copies of biblical scriptures. The next few years would reveal that the caves actually held more than 800 scrolls and that nearly all the Old Testament was represented, including numerous copies of Deuteronomy, Isaiah and the Psalms. This great collection became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Israel’s Last Stand**

The scrolls also contained a large amount of information about the people who originally hid them. Though not all historians are agreed on their identity, they were clearly a Jewish sect seeking refuge in the Judean desert from what they perceived as the excesses and corruption of early first-century Jerusalem. They pursued an ascetic lifestyle of simplicity and self-denial, and were careful archivists of the scriptures and many other writings of the times. Some believe that John the Baptist, whose baptismal ministry functioned not far away up the Jordan river, either spent time with them or was to some degree influenced by them.
It would not be long, however, before the troubles of the mountain-top city they had left behind would boil over and eventually consume this remote community in the valley far below.

The first omen of things to come was the Jewish defeat of the Roman garrison at Herod’s nearby desert hillfort, Masada, which signalled the start of the ‘Great Jewish Revolt’ in AD66. As great as it was, the Roman response was inevitably greater, and the ensuing siege of Jerusalem resulted in the city’s ultimate fall in AD70. Masada would then soon become the scene of Israel’s last stand, with the Romans eventually snuffing out the remaining hopes of the nation in AD74. It would therefore have been during these fateful last days that the Qumran community hid their precious scrolls, granting them the protection they knew they could not grant themselves.

**Message in a Bottle**

Today, however, their great sacrifice has become our great gain, as the scrolls they left for us have proven to be significantly the oldest collection of Old Testament manuscripts ever found. Some of them are up to a thousand years older than the previous oldest, and all date back to the times of the nation and culture from which the scriptures originally came. This therefore provided a unique opportunity to find out if the Bible we read today is indeed the same as the one which Jesus read all those years ago, and the clear verdict of the scrolls is a resounding yes! The Bible’s claim to be the inspired and unchanging word of God
has been confirmed true and the scrolls have been much celebrated for this great contribution to biblical research.

But there's actually a deeper and even more significant message behind the discovery of the scrolls and yet one that has gone largely unnoticed. That is partly because it is not so obvious. But it is also because it is perhaps not so easy to accept. The clues, however, are all there for the solving and the first clue is the year in which the scrolls were discovered.

The Timing Clue

Think about it: the circumstances by which the scrolls were found could have occurred in any year of the last two millennia during which they were hidden from sight. After all, nomadic shepherds had been passing through this area with their herds for generations. So how is it that these parchments, which were concealed in Israel's last days as a nation, just happened to be accidentally rediscovered in the very year that the United Nations voted for Israel to become a nation once again? What are the chances of that? Slim, to say the least!

The Content Clue

But the case for coincidence is undermined further still by the second clue, which is the actual content of the scrolls. For if there is one dominant theme which runs throughout the Hebrew scriptures, it is the theme of the covenants which God made with
man and the way they governed the unstable but enduring relationship between the people and the land of Israel.

After the covenant God made with Noah to never again destroy the earth, He made a covenant with Abraham to one day save the earth. He didn’t spell out all the details of the plan behind the covenant, but just that it would involve Abraham becoming a great nation through whom all nations would be blessed.

For a man who had neither the land nor family required to become a nation, it was a testament to Abraham’s faith in God that he trusted for Him to provide both. And because faith is pleasing to God, He later promised that Abraham would in fact be the father of many nations and that his descendants—later confirmed as being through Isaac and Jacob—would inherit the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession. This latter aspect of the covenant is made pretty clear in Genesis 17:7–8:

“I will confirm my covenant with you and your descendants after you, from generation to generation. This is the everlasting covenant: I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And I will give the entire land of Canaan, where you now live as a foreigner, to you and your descendants. It will be their possession forever, and I will be their God.”

It is also later revealed that the authority with which God is able to do this is the authority of ownership. For example, in Leviticus 25:23, He tells the people of Israel:

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1 Genesis 26:3
2 Genesis 28:13
“The land must never be sold on a permanent basis, for the land belongs to me. You are only foreigners and tenant farmers working for me.”

Only God can grant possession rights over a land He personally claims as His own.

But the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would soon come to learn that the right to possess God’s land is not the same as the right to live in it. Instead, living in God’s land means living on God’s terms, and so these were the terms that formed the basis of the next covenant which God made with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. God later confirmed the purpose of this covenant through the prophet Jeremiah:

“I said to your ancestors when I brought them out of the iron-smelting furnace of Egypt, ‘If you obey me and do whatever I command you, then you will be my people, and I will be your God.’ I said this so I could keep my promise to your ancestors to give you a land flowing with milk and honey—the land you live in today.”¹

But the reason God was telling this to the prophet all these years later was because his people had by this stage consistently failed to keep the terms of the covenant and were now facing the prospect of their first exile at the hands of the Babylonians.

So did this signal the failure of God’s promise to Abraham? Had the covenant through Moses, which was supposed to enable God to honour the earlier covenant, actually become the means by which He would now have to break it?

¹ Jeremiah 11:4–5
Well, thankfully not. For God showed Moses right at the beginning that the day of exile would inevitably come, but that exile would never have the last word:

“When I have turned their hostility back on them and brought them to the land of their enemies, then at last their stubborn hearts will be humbled, and they will pay for their sins. Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land must be abandoned to enjoy its years of Sabbath rest as it lies deserted.”

What this means is that the point of exile was only ever to prepare God’s land to receive back its people and to prepare the people to be restored back to God’s land, however long that process might take. The final word, therefore, would always be God’s original promise to Abraham, which is why the Bible records that the nation of Israel was restored after exile by the Babylonians and why we should always have expected the same to happen after the later exile by the Romans.

In the year the scrolls were rediscovered, that’s exactly what happened.

**The Location Clue**

But the final nail in the coffin of the case for coincidence must surely be the third clue, which is the *location* of the scrolls’ discovery. Of course, this was the same location in which they were originally hidden, but this just happened to be a location of great meaning in Israel’s long and turbulent history.

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1 Leviticus 26:41–43
Apart from anything else, this was where the nation was actually born. Just eight miles upstream of Qumran is Jericho, which is thought to be the oldest continually populated city on earth. It is also the same Jericho which fell at the hands of the invading armies of Joshua, soon after they had passed through the Jordan river which was miraculously parted by God. Here, therefore, at some 400 metres below sea level, the people of Israel first entered the Promised Land—God’s land.

But why here? Well, this was the generation whose fathers had famously refused to enter the land some forty years earlier, complaining that the inhabitants were huge—some even giants—and that they seemed like grasshoppers before them\(^1\). As a result, God vowed that none of that faithless generation would even see His land let alone enter it, and that it would be their children who would take it instead. So what better way to demonstrate that the children had learned from their fathers’ mistakes by leading them to attack this ‘land of giants’ from the very lowest place on earth? The forty-year wanderings had obviously worked some good!

And yet the more profound and enduring significance of this location was not just as a place of depth, but as a place of death.

The children of Israel were not just required to first descend to enter the Promised Land, but to enter it through a river whose actual name means ‘to descend’. The Jordan is a river which is birthed in glory on the snow-covered heights of Israel’s highest point, Mount Hermon, towering over the nation from the north.

\(^1\) Numbers 13:31–33
And from there it hurries down through the lush pastures of the Golan Heights to the Sea of Galilee, where it pauses a while to feed many with food and water. Its next and final destination, however, is a very different sea in the depths of the earth where there is no life at all, and it is in this place of a glorious life surrendered that the Israelites are led to pass through into God’s land. Does this remind us of anything?

*For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.*

The message behind God’s choice of gateway to His own land is clear! As Jesus put it to Nicodemus:

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”

This, therefore, is the primary significance of this location to God and to His people. Its depth speaks of the requirement for humility and faith to walk in God’s land, but the river Jordan speaks of the requirement for both repentance and resurrection if we are to enter into it at all.

We should not therefore be surprised that it was at this site, some 1,400 or so years later, that John the Baptist would choose to conduct his baptismal ministry. It is easy to imagine when reading about the crowds coming to him from Jerusalem that perhaps they were just popping across a field or two to find him. But the reality is that he was requiring them to completely leave behind God’s great hilltop city and to descend until they had walked right out of His

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1 Romans 6:4
2 John 3:3
land, so that they might walk back in and back up with clean hands and a pure heart as if it was for the very first time. What a powerful complement to John’s message of “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!”  

And what significance it must have been for Jesus to lay down in the river whose short journey from glory to death foreshadowed his own, and yet to rise back up in the resurrection power of the Spirit.

This is God’s prophetic gateway to His land and so proved to be the main route by which the Israelites originally entered under Joshua, were later exiled by the Babylonians, then returned from Babylon and were finally defeated by the Romans. It is the site most associated with the recurring birth, death and resurrection of the nation. And it just happened to be in this same area that the Dead Sea Scrolls were hidden and later found.

**Joining The Dots**

So what story emerges when we put these three clues together?

It is the story of how, when God’s people were driven to the edge of His land and either exiled or destroyed, His promises for them were not. Despite many throughout the centuries believing that the Jewish people had somehow forfeited any rights to their ancestral homeland, the reality was that their birthright had merely been hidden away for safe keeping in the very place the nation had first been born. The land itself contained the truth of who she really belonged to, awaiting the day when God

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1 Matthew 3:2
would call upon her to reveal it once again. The prophet Hosea foresaw this when he wrote:

“Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence.”

By the time 1947 came around, the best part of two millennial ‘days’ had passed on God’s clock and the time had come to revive His people’s fortunes once again. It was time for Him to remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and to “remember the land”. So from the dark tomb in the valley of death and resurrection, God called back to life His ancient promises and, within just a few months, the rulers of the world were calling for Israel to be resurrected as a nation once again. Truly, as it is written in Psalm 47:8:

*God reigns above the nations, sitting on his holy throne!*

**Wilderness Voice**

So this is the deeper story behind the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and it is a story with a profound message. Not just that God’s word does not change, but that:

“I am watching over my word to perform it.”

And not just His word in the general sense, but in the very specific sense that:

“I would no more reject my people than I would change my laws that govern night and day, earth and sky. I will never abandon the descendants of

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1 Hosea 6:1–2 (NIV)
2 See 2 Peter 3:8
3 Leviticus 26:42
4 Jeremiah 1:12 (ESV)
Jacob or David, my servant, or change the plan that David’s descendants will rule the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, I will restore them to their land and have mercy on them.” ¹

To put it simply, the message of the scrolls is that God’s plans have not changed from the very beginning.

It’s still about Plan A.
About ICEJ

The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem was established in 1980 in recognition of the biblical significance of all of Jerusalem and its unique connection with the Jewish people. Today, it represents millions of Christians, churches, and denominations to the nation and people of Israel. We recognize in the restoration of the State of Israel God’s faithfulness to keep His ancient covenant with the Jewish people.

Our main objectives are:

To stand with Israel in support and friendship

To equip and teach the world wide Church regarding God’s purposes with Israel and the nations of the Middle East

To be an active voice of reconciliation between Jews, Christians, and Arabs, and to support the churches and congregations in the Holy Land

Our vision is:

To reach every segment of Israel’s society with a Christian testimony of comfort and love

To reach and actively represent to Israel the support of denominations, churches, and believers from every nation on earth

From its head offices in Jerusalem, the ICEJ reaches out into more than 170 countries worldwide, with branch offices in over 90 nations.

Thank you for taking the time to read this publication and to learn more about the work and the ministry of the ICEJ. Please consider joining us in taking a stand for Israel and the Jewish people around the world. We are your Embassy in Jerusalem!

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Have you ever watched a film and thought you knew how it would end, but then a twist in the plot suddenly changed everything? How did it make you feel? Intrigued or frustrated?

For many in the Church, the recent rebirth of the nation of Israel is a plot twist that can evoke a similar mix of feelings. To some, the sudden return of this key character to the story is a source of great delight, but to others it is a cause of confusion.

Ultimately, however, any plot twist is an opportunity: an opportunity to get insight into what the story has actually been about from the very beginning.

So join with us as we explore what the unprecedented event of Israel’s resurrection reveals about the original and unchanging purposes of God, and what these mean for us today and in the days still to come.