

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

**I S R A E L**

**O N**

**H I G H**

**A L E R T**

HOW CONFLICT AND WARS IN THE MIDDLE EAST  
ARE SETTING THE STAGE FOR THE END TIMES

**R O N R H O D E S**

**I S R A E L**

**O N**

**H I G H**

**A L E R T**

**R O N R H O D E S**



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### **Israel on High Alert**

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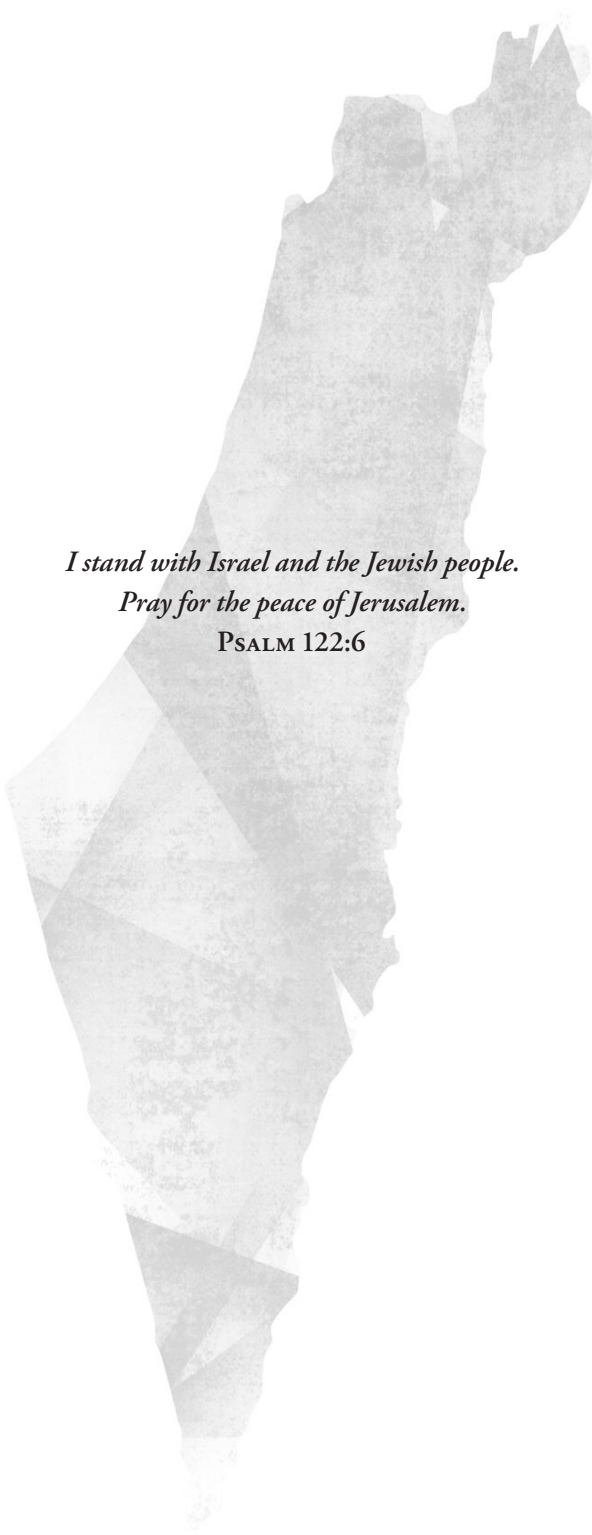
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*I stand with Israel and the Jewish people.  
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.*  
PSALM 122:6

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've always been fascinated by Bible prophecy. After becoming a Christian, I gravitated toward prophecy books written by certain professors at Dallas Theological Seminary—John F. Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Charles C. Ryrie. Little did I know then that in the not-too-distant future, I would study under these men at the seminary. I remember those years with great fondness, and I acknowledge my personal indebtedness to these great teachers of the Word.

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Most of all, I express profound thanks and appreciation to our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself is the heart and center of biblical prophecy. May He be glorified and exalted in this book.

*Come soon, Lord!*

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## INTRODUCTION

# ISRAEL ON HIGH ALERT

**I** *srael is on high alert*—more so than ever before. The reasons are not hard to understand:

First and foremost, on October 7, 2023, Israel was viciously attacked by Hamas without warning. In response, Israel declared war on Hamas. Israel had already been on high alert, but after this attack it went on *highest* alert.

Of course, trouble had been brewing in the Middle East for a long time. Israel is surrounded by Muslim nations who passionately seek to bring an utter and complete end to her.

Israel is a mere 8,000 square miles. It is minuscule compared to the 5,000,000 square miles of hostile Arab real estate that surrounds her.

A key component of the Middle East conflict is Islamic fundamentalism, a religious philosophy that seeks to establish Islamic dominance in the Middle East and eventually the rest of the world. Israel, a symbol of Jewish power, is viewed as a grievous insult to Allah and cannot be permitted to exist in the Islamic world. Israel must therefore be pushed into the sea.

Hezbollah—literally, the “party of God”—is a Lebanese umbrella organization of radical Islamic Shiites who hate Israel. They advocate the establishment of Shiite Islamic rule in Lebanon and the liberation of all “occupied Arab lands,” including Jerusalem. Hezbollah has been relentless in vowing to destroy Israel. Iran has continually backed Hezbollah to the tune of hundreds of millions of

dollars. Members of Hezbollah were delighted to see the Hamas attack on Israel.

Hamas—literally, the “Islamic Resistance Movement”—believes that negotiations with the Israelis are a waste of time because the Arabs and the Israelis cannot coexist. The military wing of the organization has committed countless terrorist attacks and atrocities against Israel, including hundreds of suicide bombings. Hamas has received heavy funding from Iran through the years, and used much of this funding to finance its 2023 attack on Israel.

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei claims that Iran has *the* major role to play in the destruction of Israel, and for that reason must obtain the strongest weapons possible. Khamenei has promised that Israel will not survive the next 25 years. With that threat in mind, it is sobering to realize that Iran is seeking to develop nuclear weapons and obtain missiles capable of delivering nuclear payloads.

Another key component of the Middle East crisis is Arab nationalism, a movement that seeks to unify Arabs as one people by appealing to a sense of their common history, culture, and language. This movement is secular and seeks to gain and maintain Arab power in the Arab lands of the Middle East. Arab nationalists seek to end—or at least minimize—direct Western influence (by the United States) in the Arab world. As well, Arab nationalists view Israel as a cancerous tumor that must be excised.

It appears that the stage is now being set for what has been called the Ezekiel invasion (Ezekiel 38–39). Scripture reveals that Russia and a group of Muslim nations—Iran, Sudan, Turkey, Libya, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and possibly northern Afghanistan—will launch a massive invasion into Israel. It is alarming that these very nations have already developed—or are now developing—alliances with each other. It is even more alarming when one considers that Hamas and Hezbollah are basically satellite puppets of Iran. These groups and nations all have a strong motive to see Israel destroyed. (More on all this later in the book.)

*So, YES—Israel is indeed on high alert!*

This seems ironic, for the city name of *Jerusalem*, in Hebrew, literally means “city of peace.” Peace has been elusive in Jerusalem in modern times. In fact, peace has been elusive throughout the entire Middle East. The truth is, the Middle East has been an arena of conflict for the past 70 years. Wars in the region include the War of Independence (which brought Israel’s statehood—1947–1948), the Suez War/Sinai Campaign (1956), the Six-Day War (1967), the War of Attrition (1968–1970), the Yom Kippur/October War (1973), the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990), the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the Lebanon War (1982–1985), the Persian Gulf War (1991), the War with Iraq (1991–2003), the War on Terror (2001 to the present), the Syrian civil war (2011 to the present), and the Israel-Hamas War (2023).

The acts committed by Hamas during the opening days of the Israel-Hamas War were unconscionable to civilized people. Some Israeli children were burned alive. Other Israeli children were beheaded. Whole families were executed. In some cases, parents were executed in front of their children, and in other cases, children were executed in front of their parents. These atrocities were so brutal—*so utterly inhumane and egregious*—that a dark sense of angst and outrage descended upon much of the civilized world.

Prophetic scripture warns us that Israel will increasingly be a sore spot in the world in the end times. In Zechariah 12:2 we read, “Behold, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples” (ESV). This can also be translated, “I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling” (NIV). If there’s one thing this verse tells us, it’s that even though Israel is small, the end-times turmoil generated by this nation will affect many larger nations. The nations that surround Israel are Islamic. They are brutally anti-Semitic. We may expect plenty of “reeling” in the years to come.

In past decades, Israel enjoyed at least some level of security based on its friendship with the United States. That friendship suffered a

setback in 2016 when the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution condemning Israeli settlement construction on territory that the Palestinians have claimed for their future state (as part of the so-called two-state solution). Contrary to how past US presidents have stood by Israel in vetoing such resolutions, Barack Obama, in his last month in office, chose not to veto the resolution.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel understandably charged, “From the information that we have, we have no doubt that the Obama administration initiated it, stood behind it, coordinated on the wording, and demanded that it be passed.”<sup>1</sup> Many saw this as a betrayal of friendship on the part of the United States.

Meanwhile, Obama’s action was praised by terrorist organizations: “Palestinian terrorist factions, including the Islamist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, welcomed the UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel’s settlement policy.” Indeed, “the Iran-backed Islamic Jihad announced that the UNSC resolution is ‘a clear condemnation of Israel’s occupation and aggression, and a victory for the Palestinian people, securing a global consensus in their favor.’”<sup>2</sup>

It concerned me to hear such things—especially considering how favorably President Biden continued to view the two-state solution even after the Hamas attack. Part of my concern is rooted in the scripture I just cited, Zechariah 12:2: “Behold, I am about to make Jerusalem a cup of staggering to all the surrounding peoples” (ESV). But more importantly, in verse 3, God unequivocally states: “On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples. *All who lift it will surely hurt themselves*” (emphasis added). This means that in the end times, Jerusalem will be at the center of international controversy. Various nations will become intoxicated with a desire to possess and control Jerusalem. The nations of the world—perhaps the United Nations—will seek to internationalize Jerusalem and control its future. But Zechariah prophetically warns that all who attempt to control Jerusalem for their own purposes will quickly suffer calamity.

This is one reason I fear for the future of the United States. If

our country seeks to influence and control Jerusalem—or to internationalize it—we may find ourselves on the receiving end of God’s judgment.

I also fear for the future of the United States in light of the Abrahamic covenant, in which God promises in regard to Israel: “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt” (Genesis 12:3). I have said it many times before: My reading of biblical prophecy leads me to believe that the United States will weaken in the end times. The reasons for this weakening may well include the United States’ eventual abandonment of Israel and the subsequent judgment from God. Of course, I was glad to see President Biden’s support for Israel in the face of the Hamas attack in October 2023.

An eventual lack of US support for Israel is particularly worrisome given the vitriolic hatred of Israel by radical Islamists. They not only want to annihilate the Jews, but they also want the land of Israel back. As prophecy expert Mark Hitchcock put it, “Israel is the ultimate prize for radical Islam.”<sup>3</sup>

A big part of that prize relates specifically to the city of Jerusalem—a city considered holy by both Jews and Muslims. Because of Muslim-Jewish animosity, the tiny city of Jerusalem in the tiny nation of Israel is “ground zero” for a gargantuan end-time conflict.

In this book, I will explore the many components that have led to the current Middle East conflict. This, in turn, will help us to understand why Israel is perpetually on high alert these days. I will address Israel’s rebirth as a nation and the conflict this has caused among Muslim nations. I will zero in on Jewish Zionism, Arab nationalism, and radical Islam. I will clarify the beliefs of both mainstream Muslims and radical Islamists. I will touch on the claim that Islam is a religion of peace. I will also address the Israel-Hamas War.

In addition, I will explore the United States’ historic role as a friend of Israel and how that friendship may wane in the years ahead. I will pay special attention to what prophetic scriptures reveal about how

Russia and a group of Muslim nations will one day launch a massive end-times invasion into Israel—and how *no nation will support Israel during this invasion*. I'll also talk about God's destruction of these Islamic invaders, and how this will lead to a shift in the global balance of power in the end times.

Finally, I will address the trouble Israel will experience during the tribulation period—that future seven-year interval that precedes the second coming of Jesus Christ. I'll talk about the rising persecution of the Jews, both before and during the tribulation period. I'll address the current efforts related to the rebuilding of the Jewish temple, and the role this temple will play during the tribulation period. I'll investigate how the antichrist will initially seem a friend to Israel but will ultimately double-cross Israel and seek to destroy her. I'll close by explaining how the future Jewish remnant—those who survive through the tribulation period—will be saved by Christ just prior to His second coming, and how God's ancient covenant promises to Israel will finally be fulfilled during Christ's millennial kingdom.

These are exciting days to be alive. We are witnessing the stage being set for the fulfillment of many end-time prophecies related to Israel. That's a major reason I wrote this book.

One thing that will become progressively clear as you read along is that God is in control of human history. God Himself asserts, "Everything I plan will come to pass, for I do whatever I wish" (Isaiah 46:10). God assures us, "It will all happen as I have planned. It will be as I have decided" (14:24). In view of such scriptural facts, theologian Robert Lightner advises us:

When viewed from the perspective of Scripture, history is more than the recording of the events of the past. Rather, what has happened in the past, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future is all evidence of the unfolding of the purposeful plan devised by the personal God of the Bible. All the circumstances of life—past,

present, and future—fit into the sovereign plan like pieces of a puzzle.<sup>4</sup>

In like manner, well-known author C.S. Lewis—once a professor at Oxford University—commented: “History is a story written by the finger of God.” His point was that God controls the nations (Job 12:23; Psalm 22:28; Daniel 4:17); He sets up kings and deposes them (Daniel 2:21); and He does all according to His sovereign plan (Acts 4:27-28).

Israel has a special place in God’s sovereign plan of the ages. As my friend David Reagan put it:

The Scriptures reveal the Jews as “the apple of God’s eye” (Zechariah 2:8). Their land is described as “holy” (Zechariah 2:12). Their city of Jerusalem is termed the “center of the nations” (Ezekiel 5:5). They are pictured as the wayward wife of God (see Ezekiel 16 and the book of Hosea). And the Bible makes it clear that they will be the object of both God’s wrath (Jeremiah 30:7) and His grace (Zechariah 13:1) in the end times.<sup>5</sup>

The way I see it, one of the most magnificent manifestations of God’s grace is His *miraculous preservation of Israel for the past 2,700 years*. Just think about it:

- After Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in AD 70, the Jews were dispersed to more than 130 nations around the world.
- The Jews were mistreated and relentlessly persecuted wherever they went.
- And yet—thousands of years later—their national existence and even their language have been fully restored.

The preservation of the Jews is probably best summed up in Psalm 124, which was originally written in the context of Israel's wilderness wanderings. I think that all who read it will see its modern application:

What if the Lord had not been on our side? Let all Israel repeat: What if the Lord had not been on our side when people attacked us? They would have swallowed us alive in their burning anger. The waters would have engulfed us; a torrent would have overwhelmed us. Yes, the raging waters of their fury would have overwhelmed our very lives. Praise the Lord, who did not let their teeth tear us apart! We escaped like a bird from a hunter's trap. The trap is broken, and we are free! Our help is from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

The amazing survival of Israel over thousands of years—against all odds—has led one commentator to speculate:

If the story of Israel were submitted as a movie script, it would be rejected for being too fantastic to believe. After all, the restoration of sovereignty in our ancestral homeland after 2,000 years, the return of the exiles of our people from across the globe, the defense of Israel against implacable enemies, and the transformation of Israel from a desert backwater to a global technological power, seems to defy both history and logic.<sup>6</sup>

*Israel's preservation is an incredible thing to ponder!*

## CORRECTLY INTERPRETING BIBLICAL PROPHECIES ABOUT ISRAEL

**C**hristians love to debate issues related to biblical prophecy. Sometimes the debate relates to when the rapture of the church will occur—before the tribulation period, during it, or after it. Another debate is whether the antichrist will be a Roman Gentile or a Muslim leader. Still another is whether America is mentioned in Bible prophecy. And there is much discussion about whether the mark of the beast will be some kind of tattoo on the skin, or an electronic chip implanted under the skin.

For our purposes, the most important debate relates to the proper method to use in interpreting prophecy—the *literal* method or the *allegorical* method? Obviously, one's decision on this matter will affect one's entire prophetic viewpoint.

For example, one's position on this issue will determine whether the reference to Christ's 1,000-year kingdom in Revelation 20 should be interpreted as a literal kingdom in the future, or Christ's present reign over the church from heaven. It will determine whether the 144,000 Jews—with 12,000 from each tribe—should be interpreted to refer to literal Jews or is a metaphorical reference to the church. It will determine whether the two prophetic witnesses of Revelation 11 should be viewed as two literal prophets, or they are a figure of speech referring in some way to the church. And it will determine whether the covenant promises made to Israel in Old Testament

times (the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants) should be interpreted in reference to Israel, or in reference to the church in some kind of an allegorical way.

What's more, one's position on this debate will determine whether the various judgments referred to in prophetic scriptures—the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10-12), the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46), the judgment of Israel (Ezekiel 20), and the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)—should be seen as separate and distinct judgments (as literalism holds), or as perhaps one general judgment at the end of the age (as allegorism holds). Obviously, one's interpretive approach will lead to very different views on end-time issues, particularly in relation to Israel.

## **Interpretive Approaches to Understanding Bible Prophecy**

### *A Survey of the Allegorical Approach*

Early in church history (by the second century AD), an allegorical school of prophetic interpretation arose in Alexandria, Egypt. This school of thought interpreted Scripture in a nonliteral sense. Hidden, symbolic meanings were sought in biblical texts.

The emergence of this allegorical school of interpretation soon led to the rise of amillennialism in the early church. Amillennialism is the view that the prophecy in Revelation 20 regarding the millennial kingdom should not be interpreted as a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth, but rather must refer to Christ's present spiritual rule over the church from heaven. The terms "a thousand years" and "the thousand years" are allegorically understood to mean a very long time.

The grammatical-historical (literal) approach to Scripture was largely regained by the church fathers by the third century. Nevertheless, premillennialism—based on a literal interpretation of prophecy, which holds to a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on earth following the second coming—eventually fell by the wayside. The allegorical approach to interpretation gained huge momentum.

History reveals that this early emergence of the allegorical method had enormous influence upon subsequent generations of church history. The well-known theologian Augustine adopted the point of view that Scripture, with the exception of prophecy, should be interpreted naturally and literally. He was inconsistent on how to understand Bible prophecy, however. While he accepted a literal second coming of Christ, as well as a literal heaven and hell, he concluded that prophecies of a future millennial kingdom should not be understood literally. He believed that if these prophecies were taken literally, one would have to conclude that people in the millennial kingdom would regularly engage in excessive feasting, which he viewed as carnal and unworthy of believers. He thus concluded that the church was already living in the millennium, and, as such, is part of the spiritual kingdom of God. Indeed, he believed that Christ is even now reigning through the hearts of Christians.

Augustine's view became the dominant view of the Roman Catholic Church. As well, Reformation luminaries such as Martin Luther and John Calvin adopted his view. Because such well-known theologians in church history adopted the allegorical understanding of the millennial kingdom, many today have adopted the same view. In fact, some today apply the allegorical method not just to the millennium but to other aspects of biblical prophecy as well. For example, many argue that *virtually all* the prophecies related to Israel are somehow fulfilled allegorically in the church. (This is known as *replacement theology*.)

### *A Survey of the Literal Approach*

Based on decades of research, I've concluded that the proper approach to use in interpreting biblical prophecy is the literal approach. The word *literal*, as used in hermeneutics (the science of interpretation), comes from the Latin *sensus literalis*, which refers to seeking a plain, straightforward sense of the text, as opposed to a nonliteral or allegorical sense of it.

Bible expositor J. Dwight Pentecost, one of my former professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, said that “the literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. It is called the grammatical-historical method to emphasize the fact that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations.”<sup>1</sup>

Here are some of the key reasons for adopting a literal interpretation of prophetic scriptures:

1. It is the normal approach in all languages.
2. The greater part of the Bible makes great sense when taken literally.
3. The literal approach allows for a secondary or allegorical meaning when demanded by the context.
4. It is the only sane and safe check on the subjectively prone imagination of human beings.
5. It is the only approach in line with the nature of biblical inspiration—the idea that the words of Scripture are “God-breathed.”<sup>2</sup>

Within the biblical text itself, we find multiple confirmations for using the literal method of interpretation. For example, later biblical texts take earlier ones as literal, as when the creation events in Genesis 1–2 are taken literally in later passages (see Exodus 20:10-11). This is likewise the case regarding the creation of Adam and Eve (Matthew 19:6; 1 Timothy 2:13), the fall of Adam and his resulting death (Romans 5:12,14), Noah’s flood (Matthew 24:38), and the accounts of Jonah (Matthew 12:40-42), Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2-4,11), and numerous other historical figures.

Further, Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah (Jesus) were fulfilled literally in New Testament times. More specifically, more than 100 predictions about the Messiah were fulfilled literally at Jesus's first coming, including the prophecies that He would be (1) from the seed of a woman (Genesis 3:15); (2) from the line of Seth (Genesis 4:25); (3) a descendant of Shem (Genesis 9:26); (4) the offspring of Abraham (Genesis 12:3); (5) from the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10); (6) the son of David (Jeremiah 23:5-6); (7) conceived of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14); (8) born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); (9) the heralded Messiah (Isaiah 40:3); (10) the coming King (Zechariah 9:9); (11) the sacrificial offering for our sins (Isaiah 53); (12) the one pierced in His side at the cross (Zechariah 12:10); (13) predicted to be "cut off" or die about AD 33 (Daniel 9:24-26 NASB); and (14) the One who would rise from the dead (Psalm 2; 16).

Moreover, the prophecies about Israel in the Old Testament were fulfilled literally. David Reagan summarizes it this way:

*Dispersion*—The Jews were warned repeatedly that they would be dispersed worldwide if they were not faithful to their covenant with God. Consider the words of Moses: "The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other..." (Deuteronomy 28:64; see also Leviticus 26:33).

*Persecution*—The Lord also warned the Jews that they would be persecuted wherever they went. Again, the words of Moses are graphic in this regard: "And among those nations you shall find no rest, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot; but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing of eyes, and despair of soul" (Deuteronomy 28:65).

*Desolation*—God promised that after their dispersion, their land would become "desolate" and their cities would

become “waste” (Leviticus 26:33). Moses put it more graphically when he said, “The foreigner who comes from a distant land... will say, ‘All its land is brimstone and salt, a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass grows in it’” (Deuteronomy 29:22-23).

*Preservation*—But God in His marvelous grace promised He would preserve the Jews as a separate people during their worldwide wanderings. (See Isaiah 66:22; Jeremiah 30:11; 31:35-37.) Isaiah puts it in a colorful way. He says the Lord could no more forget Israel than a mother could forget her nursing child (Isaiah 49:15). He then adds that God cannot forget Israel because He has them tattooed on the palms of His hands! (Isaiah 49:16).<sup>3</sup>

Now, here is what’s significant: God fulfilled *all* these prophecies literally over the past few thousand years. The Jews, for an extended time, had not been faithful in their covenant relationship with God. In AD 70, Titus and his Roman warriors overran Jerusalem and destroyed its temple, and the Jewish people were scattered across the face of the earth. Wherever the Jews went, they were persecuted, often severely. This culminated in the Nazi Holocaust of World War II. But through it all, God preserved the Jews—both their culture and their ancient language. As Reagan puts it, “the fulfillment of this latter prophecy has been one of the most remarkable miracles of history. No other people have ever been so dispersed and yet been able to retain their identity as a nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Because God’s past prophecies about Israel were fulfilled literally, we have every reason to believe that His future prophecies about Israel will likewise be fulfilled literally. The precedent for interpreting prophecy literally has therefore been set. As theologian Charles Ryrie put it, “in the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy, fulfilled prophecy forms the pattern.” Indeed, “the logical way to discover how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to discover how He fulfilled

it in the past. If the hundreds of prophecies concerning Christ's first coming were fulfilled literally, how can anyone reject the literal fulfillment of the numerous prophecies concerning His second coming and reign on the earth?"<sup>5</sup>

Prophecy scholar Mark Hitchcock observes,

The Bible contains about 1000 prophecies, about 500 of which have already been fulfilled down to the minutest detail. With this kind of proven track record—500 prophecies fulfilled with 100 percent accuracy—we can believe with confidence that the remaining 500 yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecies will also come to pass at the appointed time.<sup>6</sup>

We even find examples of Jesus Himself interpreting Old Testament prophecy literally (Luke 4:16-21 is a good example). Jesus thereby indicated His acceptance of the literal method.

Also, by specifically indicating within the text the presence of "parables" (see Matthew 13:3) or an "allegory" (Galatians 4:24), the Bible makes it clear that the ordinary meaning is a literal one. And by providing the interpretation of two of the parables, Jesus revealed that there is a literal meaning behind such parables (Matthew 13:18-23). (More on this shortly.)

There is another observation we can make here. When Jesus rebuked those who did not interpret the resurrection as a literal event, He indicated that the literal interpretation of Old Testament prophetic verses on the resurrection was the correct one (see Matthew 22:29-32; Psalm 2; 16). Jesus's use of Scripture constitutes one of the most convincing evidences that Scripture—including the prophetic portions—ought to be interpreted literally, unless the context indicates otherwise (such as Jesus telling a parable).

### *The Literal Method and Figures of Speech*

The literal method of interpretation does not disregard the fact that some passages include figures of speech. For example, when the

Bible speaks of the eyes, arms, or wings of God (Psalm 34:15; Isaiah 51:9; Psalm 91:4), these references should not be taken literally. We know that God does not have these physical features because He is said to be pure Spirit (John 4:24). Likewise, He cannot literally be a rock (Psalm 42:9), which is material. But we would not know *what is not literally true* of God unless we first knew *what is literally true*. (You may have to read that sentence a couple times.)

For example, if it were not literally true that God is pure Spirit and infinite, then we would not be able to say that certain things attributed to God elsewhere in the Bible are not literally true. When Jesus said, “I am the true vine” (John 15:1 NIV), the literal method of interpretation does not take this as physically true. Rather, we understand this as a figure of speech that communicates the literal truth that believers derive their spiritual life and sustenance from Christ, our spiritual vine. It is important to understand all this, for prophetic apocalyptic literature—such as the books of Daniel and Revelation, which speak a great deal about Israel—make heavy use of figures of speech.

I grant that sometimes it may be difficult to determine when a passage should not be taken literally. But certain guidelines are helpful in making this determination.

Briefly put, a text should be taken figuratively...

- when the text itself authorizes the figurative sense, as when Paul said he was using an “allegory” (Galatians 4:24), or when Jesus was telling parables (Matthew 13:3);
- when it is *obviously* figurative, as when Jesus said He was a door (John 10:9); and
- when a literal interpretation would contradict other truths inside or outside the Bible, such as when the Bible speaks of the “four corners of the earth” (Revelation 7:1).

In sum, Bible expositor David Cooper suggests that we ought to “take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, prophecy scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum suggests that “unless the text indicates clearly that it should be taken symbolically, the passage should be understood literally.”<sup>8</sup>

This is in keeping with what we learn from Genesis, the first book in the Bible. When God created Adam and Eve in His own rational image, He gave them the gift of intelligible speech. This enabled them to communicate objectively with the Creator and each other (see Genesis 1:26; 11:1,7). Scripture is clear that God sovereignly chose to use human language as a medium of revelational communication, often through the “Thus says the Lord” pronouncements of the prophets (for example, see Isaiah 7:7; 10:24; 22:15; 28:16; 30:15; 49:22; 51:22; 52:4).

If the primary purpose of God’s originating of language was to make it possible for Him to communicate with human beings, as well as to enable humans to communicate with each other, then it must follow that when speaking to people, He would use language in its normal and plain sense. This view of language is a prerequisite to understanding not only God’s spoken word but His written word (Scripture) as well. This is why the following dictum is important: *When the plain, literal sense of Scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense.*

Pentecost thus comments:

Inasmuch as God gave the Word of God as a revelation to men, it would be expected that His revelation would be given in such exact and specific terms that His thoughts would be accurately conveyed and understood when interpreted according to the laws of grammar and speech. Such presumptive evidence favors the literal interpretation, for

an allegorical method of interpretation would cloud the meaning of the message delivered by God to men.<sup>9</sup>

A relevant example relates to the specific promises God has made to Israel, including the land promises in the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18-21; 17:21; 35:10-12; see also Isaiah 60:18,21; Jeremiah 23:6; 24:5-6; 30:18; 31:31-34; 32:37-40; 33:6-9; Ezekiel 28:25-26; 34:11-12; 36:24-26; 37; 39:28; Hosea 3:4-5; Joel 2:18-29; Micah 2:12; 4:6-7; Amos 9:14-15; Zephaniah 3:19-20; Zechariah 8:7-8; 13:8-9). The plain sense of these verses makes perfect sense. There is no good reason to say that such verses will not be fulfilled with Israel but are rather “spiritually fulfilled” in the modern church—a position held by proponents of replacement theology.

### *The Literal Method and Symbols*

It is likewise critical to understand that the literal method does not disregard Scripture’s use of symbols. The Bible includes symbolic language—especially in apocalyptic books like Daniel and Revelation. But each symbol is emblematic of something literal.

For example, there are symbols in the book of Revelation that represent literal things. John said the “seven stars” in Christ’s right hand were “the angels [or messengers] of the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20). Likewise, he said “the seven lampstands” were “the seven churches” (1:20), the “gold bowls filled with incense” were “the prayers of God’s people” (5:8), and “the waters” represent “masses of people of every nation and language” (17:15). Clearly, then, each symbol represents something literal. There are often textual clues that point us to the literal truth found in a symbol—either in the immediate context, or in the broader context of the whole of Scripture.

### *The Literal Method and Parables*

Finally, as noted earlier, the literal method of interpretation does not disregard the use of parables. Jesus often used parables that are not to be taken literally. Yet each parable has a literal point to convey.

That Jesus wanted His parables to be clear to those who were receptive is evident in the fact that He carefully interpreted two of them for the disciples—the parables of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9) and the tares (13:24-30). He did this not only so there would be no uncertainty as to their correct meaning, but to guide believers as to the proper method to use when interpreting the other parables. The fact that Christ did not interpret His subsequent parables indicates that He fully expected believers to understand the literal truths behind the parables by applying the methodology He illustrated for them.

### **Israel in Bible Prophecy**

In this book, I will explore a variety of prophecies—*all interpreted literally*—that relate directly to Israel and her circumstances in the end times, including...

- Israel's rebirth as a nation;
- the continual flow of Jews back to the holy land from all the countries of the world following Israel's rebirth;
- the increasing persecution of the Jews;
- the nearing Ezekiel invasion against Israel;
- the eventual rebuilding of the Jewish temple;
- Israel during the tribulation period;
- the conversion of the Jewish remnant toward the end of the tribulation period;
- Christ's rescue of the Jewish remnant from the forces of the antichrist at the end of the tribulation period; and
- the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants in Christ's millennial kingdom.

In the next chapter, we will begin by considering one of the most important of all end-time prophecies—the rebirth of the nation of Israel. This single prophetic event sets the stage for everything that follows.