

Part 2

Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program?

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If the Old Testament is allowed to stand alone in its prophecies of a future for Israel, most scholars agree that it would be normal to expect precisely what the premillenarians anticipate, that is, that Israel would return to the land, possess it, and enjoy it while being ruled by their coming Messiah. Premillennialism is based on such a literal interpretation in contrast to amillennialism which interprets these prophecies in a nonliteral sense. Many amillenarians admit that the issue is literal interpretation.

Allis, for instance, states, "The Old Testament prophecies, if literally interpreted, cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfilment in this present age." In a similar way, Hamilton states, "Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of a Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal interpretation of the Old Testament."

Having admitted that the Old Testament, if interpreted literally, teaches just such a fulfillment of prophecy as premillenarians anticipate, amillenarians counter with two possible explanations. The most common, following Augustine, is that the prophecies are not to be interpreted literally. Hamilton, for instance, states, "Jesus Himself, in speaking of the whole idea said, 'the kingdom of God is within (or, in the midst of) you'

(Luke 17:21), thus contradicting the idea that it was an earthly, literal Jewish kingdom." Accordingly the majority of amillenarians believe that it is an error to interpret prophecy literally, especially as it relates to the future of Israel or a millennial kingdom on earth. They do not object necessarily to a literal second coming, a literal heaven, and a literal hell, but they object to a literal millennium and a literal fulfillment of Israel's earthly promises.

Another route followed by amillenarians is to state that while the promises are to be interpreted literally, they are conditional promises based on obedience. Allis states, "It is true that, in the express terms of the covenant with Abraham, obedience is not stated as a condition. But that obedience was presupposed is clearly indicated by two facts. The one is that obedience is the precondition of blessing under all circumstances.... This is the general principle of God's providential and also of His gracious dealings with His children.... The second fact is that in the case of Abraham the duty of obedience is particularly stressed.

It is rather remarkable that Allis, who is a strict Calvinist and believes in unconditional election, should make obedience a precondition of blessing under all circumstances. It is quite clear that some blessings of God are conditioned on obedience in both the Old and the New Testaments, and the Mosaic law in particular had many conditional promises. But it is also true that God's sovereign purposes are sure and that what God promises, He can fulfill. Accordingly while Israel was severely disciplined for disobedience, the ultimate fulfillment of the promise is not presented as conditioned on human response, although there will be a godly remnant of Israel who will respond to God. It is true that obedience is stressed on the part of Abraham, but it is

also true that in spite of predicted disobedience, God declared He would fulfill His promises to Israel.

The two diametrically opposed lines of argument against the literal fulfillment of Israel's promises—that they were never intended to be interpreted literally, and that they are literal but conditional—obviously cannot both be true although Allis argues as if they were. What is clear is that those who lived in Old Testament times regarded the prophecies as literal. One certainly would expect clear evidence to the contrary in the New Testament if indeed these prophecies are *not* to be fulfilled in the way the Old Testament saints anticipated. In particular, the question is whether the term *Israel* is applicable to Gentile Christians who form the church, the Body of Christ.

The Testimony of the Gospels

The twelve apostles followed Christ with the clear anticipation that He was to fulfill the promises of the Old Testament as the Jewish Messiah. They did not understand the difference between the first and second comings of Christ and did not comprehend until after the Cross why it was necessary for Christ to die and be resurrected.

In His public ministry Christ clearly anticipated a time period between His first and second comings in which a purpose of God would be fulfilled distinct from His program for Israel, but His followers did not seem to comprehend His teaching. This was in spite of the fact that He gave them many assurances of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel.

In the announcement to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus, the angel Gabriel clearly confirmed the prophecy of a Jewish Messiah who would reign on the throne of David. He announced to her, “And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:31–33). If it were the intent of God to fulfill literally the promises of the Old Testament, it would have been difficult to have expressed them more forcibly than He did to Mary. On the other hand if interpreting the Old Testament prophecies literally was in error, it is inexplicable why the angel would state the person and work of Mary's son in a way that would confirm her supposed misconception instead of correcting it. The throne of David was an earthly throne. “The house of Jacob” in Gabriel's vocabulary could refer only to descendants of Jacob. The kingdom obviously included the fulfillment of the promise to David that he would have a son who would reign on his throne forever. If amillenarians are right, Mary was deceived by the angel Gabriel himself.

It is true that there were misconceptions of the future kingdom, and many of the Jews neglected its spiritual implications. This was handled by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount when He pointed out that if He were to rule on earth His kingdom would involve a spiritual situation different from what was experienced in preceding ages. As opposition to Christ grew, He indicated that the kingdom would not be brought in immediately but would involve His departure and return. In the discourse recorded in

Matthew 13, the kingdom in its mystery form (that is, in a form different from that anticipated in the Old Testament) is pictured as being fulfilled between the first and second advents of Christ.

After the beheading of John the Baptist, symbolizing the opposition to Christ, and the further evidence of unbelief in the attempt of the Pharisees to test Jesus, Christ announced the future church. To Peter He said, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will

build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matt 16:18). Here was an announcement of a new entity which would not be Israel nor would it fulfill Israel’s prophecies. Obviously the disciples did not understand the promise because it was so foreign to their thinking, but did this new undertaking of God replace or fulfill spiritually the promises given to Israel?

The subsequent teaching of Christ is clear that it does not. When the mother of James and John sought a special place of privilege for her sons, Christ did not rebuke her and tell her that she had a wrong interpretation of the kingdom. Instead He answered, “‘You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’ He said to them, ‘My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right hand and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father’” (Matt 20:22–23). Here, instead of correcting the disciples, He affirmed the fact that there would be a kingdom, that He would sit on a throne, and that there would be others sitting on His right and His left. This is obviously not a picture of heaven, but of the kingdom on earth which Christ anticipated.

The concept of an earthly kingdom is further confirmed by Christ in His conversation with His disciples concerning their role in the kingdom. Christ said to them, “And just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:29–30). Here again the picture is one of an earthly kingdom, not the throne in heaven, and one of administering justice to the twelve tribes of Israel, something that will be unnecessary in heaven. For the disciples it was an absolute confirmation of the literalness of the Old Testament prophecies, and it was clear that the disciples understood it this way. If they were interpreting the Old Testament literally when it should be interpreted spiritually, this would have been a good opportunity for Christ to correct their error. Instead He confirmed their method of interpretation.

The Testimony of the Book of Acts

The belief of the disciples that there would be an earthly kingdom and that they would reign with Christ is perpetuated even after the Cross. When they gathered with Christ prior to His ascension, He instructed them to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Spirit which would occur soon. They naturally questioned how all this related to the prophecies of the kingdom. Accordingly Acts 1:6 states, “And so when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, ‘Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?’” It is most significant that they did not ask *if* He was going to restore the kingdom to Israel, but rather *when* it was to occur. This was a legitimate question so far as the preceding teaching of Christ was concerned.

Here at long last, if they were in error in anticipating a literal kingdom being restored to Israel, Christ should have made the necessary correction. Instead it is recorded, “He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth,’” (Acts 1:7–8). While Christ affirmed that He could not answer their question about *when* it would occur, He in effect said that it was on schedule but that the time was not to be revealed. Instead He reminded them that in the interim, while they were waiting for the future kingdom, God would have a different work for them to do. They would be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses of His death and resurrection in keeping with His earlier revelation in Matthew 16 that it was His purpose to build His church.

A study of the Gospels and of Acts accordingly confirms rather than refutes the concept of literal interpretation. This is what Christ encouraged the disciples to believe and this is what He promised by way of fulfillment. The entire Gospel of Matthew is written to explain why Christ did not fulfill these promises in His first coming and why He in effect postponed them until His second coming. Matthew not only explains that there is a spiritual form of rule while the King is absent between the first and second advents, but also that when the second coming occurs Christ will literally sit on the throne and judge the world (Matt 25:31–46). It is significant that those who try to make Israel and the church identical or in some way have the promises of Israel fulfilled in the

church seldom appeal to the Gospels for proof, although they assume that their conclusions are correct. Actually the four Gospels are barren of any support of the idea that the present age is the fulfillment of the promises given to Israel.

Is *Israel* Ever Used as a Synonym for the *Church*?

Opponents of the idea that Israel's promises will be fulfilled literally often point to literal fulfillment as a complete absurdity and an unreasonable extreme. Allis, for instance, writes, "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel literally." Allis here attempts to prove that the concept of a literal fulfillment of Israel's prophecies is confined to a small Brethren movement, when as a matter of fact a number of scholars who are not premillennial hold that the term *Israel* always means *Israel*. An illustration of this, as mentioned in the discussion of Israel in the Old Testament, is the famous Calvinistic scholar Charles Hodge of the nineteenth century. In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* he clearly distinguishes between Jews and Gentiles and never makes the term *Israel* equivalent to the church. For instance, in his exegesis of Romans 11:26 he states, "Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation." In a similar way, William Hendriksen, well-known amillenarian commentator, in his exegesis of Romans 11:25–27 states that Israel means Israel. Accordingly it must be concluded that Allis's statement that this is an unprecedented extreme is untrue. In fact, there is an observable trend among modern scholarship to regard Israel as meaning only Israel. To be sure, amillenarians may find other reasons for denying premillennialism, but it is not on the basis of the concept that Israel is identical to the church. If the universal understanding of the Old Testament prior to the time of Christ were that the promises to Israel were to be fulfilled literally, certainly it should take strong and unequivocal language in the New Testament to correct this misconception. Appeal is made, however, to certain specific passages in the New Testament which some have interpreted as confirming the idea that Israel's promises are fulfilled by the church. These passages will be discussed in the next article in this series.