

Eschatological Problems V: Is the Church the Israel of God?

-

John F. Walvoord

Introduction.

One of the basic issues of eschatology is the question of the literal fulfillment of the prophetic Word. Upon this question hang such vital issues as heaven and hell, the resurrection from the dead, the judgment of saints and the unsaved, and all the other important truths that speak of life and glory after death. It must be clear even to an unbeliever that Christianity stands or falls upon the question of the reality of the hope that is in us. The meaning of the present life of the Christian is undermined and destroyed if there is no literal fulfillment of the prophecies of the Scriptures.

In the field of eschatology, in so far as it may be limited to future events as distinguished from fulfilled prophecy, there are few questions which are more incisive than the question of the fulfillment of prophecies relating to Israel. The *program* of future events is determined largely by prophecies given to Israel. While the basic doctrines of heaven, hell, resurrection, and judgment are not disturbed as to their fact by various interpretations of Israel's prophecies, the resulting order of future events in the prophetic Word as well as the program for the present age is vitally altered by the principles of interpretation adopted.

The question raised in this article is not one of small proportions, nor is it merely a technical study which little affects the structure of doctrine. It is rather one of a number of *decisive* questions which too often is overlooked entirely or its conclusions lightly assumed without proof. The issue, in brief, is this: Has the New Testament body of believers, known as the church, supplanted Israel, thereby inheriting her promises, fulfilling her prophecies, and displacing Israel forever as a chosen people? In other words,

Is the church the Israel of God, the inheritors of Israel's spiritual blessings?

There are many other questions which range alongside the main issue. Is there a future for Israel as a nation? Will Israel be regathered from their present world-wide dispersion? Will the promise of the land given to Abraham's seed be fulfilled? Will the promise to David regarding his everlasting throne and everlasting kingdom and everlasting seed upon the throne be fulfilled? Will the glowing promises given to the prophets regarding a coming age of peace and righteousness in which all will know the Lord from the least to the greatest be fulfilled? Will the promised Messiah reign on the earth, ruling with a rod of iron and displaying perfect justice and mercy? Is there a literal millennium during which Satan will not deceive the nations and Christ will reign on earth?

There have been at least four types of answers to these questions. A *spiritual* interpretation of prophecy has been advanced which brushes aside as impossible any literal interpretation of the prophetic Word. This has declared the Scriptures too vague to support any but the broadest notions about the future. Another attempt to set up a system of interpretation known as *postmillennialism*, begun in the eighteenth century, holds that the present age shall witness an ever-increasing triumph and spread of the Gospel until the promises of a glorious reign of Christ on earth shall be realized, Israel finding its promises answered in the church. Under this scheme

of interpretation, the promises of Israel and the church are merged into one common heritage, and Israel's promises are fulfilled in an earthly millennium.

Two ancient theories have survived and are today being actively promulgated. The view known as *amillennialism*, declares Israel's promises forfeited for the most part or transferred to the church of the New Testament. Such promises as require fulfillment are declared fulfilled either in the present age on earth or in the future in heaven. In brief, there is no millennium, no glorious reign of Christ on earth, no future for Israel as a nation, no regathering for Israel except as they are gathered into the church. For the most part Israel's promises are nullified.

Amillennialism is clearly an ancient theory as to its principal points of interpretation. It was the dominant eschatological viewpoint of the Roman Catholic Church, though occasionally a Catholic scholar has looked with some tolerance on other viewpoints. In the Reformation, eschatology was not a principal point of contention except for the doctrine of purgatory and similar Catholic inventions. Amillennialism was early incorporated into Reformed doctrine not as the result of weighty consideration but rather by default. Calvin, for instance, considered amillennialism the only possible theory because he thought the millennial reign of Christ a limitation of the eternal bliss of the saints-refuted in its entirety, in his opinion, by the eternity of both Christ and the saints. He brushes aside millenarianism as a "fiction...too puerile to require or deserve refutation."¹ It was not until the main issues of the Reformation were settled and the Protestant church established that any real progress could be made in Biblical eschatology.

The fourth type of interpretation, known as premillenarianism, holds that the Scriptures demand a future fulfillment of the prophecies relating to Israel, that Israel will be restored as a nation and regathered to the land of Palestine, that the promises to Abraham regarding the possession of the land by his seed will be fulfilled by Israel, that the promise to David regarding his throne will be fulfilled by the return of Christ to reign on the earth, that the prophetic foreview of a glorious and righteous kingdom on earth will be fulfilled through the return and reign of Christ, and that there will be a literal millennium on earth before the eternal state.

It has been too often assumed that the Scriptures clearly teach that the church has supplanted Israel, inheriting Israel's promises, and putting aside forever any hope of their restoration as a nation. It has been disturbing to this view, to say the least, to witness the continuance of Israel as a distinct race after almost nineteen hundred years of dispersion among other races-certainly a miracle of no parallel, and a forceful argument that Israel has a destiny. It is also patent that those who attempt to divert Israel's promises to the church are at odds among themselves as to the best means of transferring these promises. Among the amillennialists-who are the most persistent enemy of the fulfillment of Israel's promises by Israel-there is serious disagreement, some holding Israel's promises are all fulfilled in this age, others that they are fulfilled in heaven, still others who wish to combine the two elements, conveniently pushing along to future fulfillment those prophecies which cannot be forced into the mold of present events. But all amillennialists in the nature of the case must assume that there is clear warrant in the Scriptures for believing that promises specifically given to Israel are going to be fulfilled by a church largely composed of Gentiles. The issue before us is whether there is a Scriptural basis for this, whether, indeed, God has cast aside Israel as a nation forever, and has embraced the church instead, deeding to them all His promises to Israel.

¹ 1. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Seventh Edition; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), Vol. II, pp. 250-251.

The controversy is settled by the answer to the question of whether the church in its entirety is ever designated Israel in Scripture. If the church is called Israel, it would be a good reason for transferring the promises belonging to Israel along with the name. If, however, only those who are Israel naturally, in the flesh, are called Israel, there is no warrant to transfer the promises even if some of Israel are in the church. In attempting to determine the facts, the inquiry will follow four lines: (1) the continued contrast of natural Israel and Gentiles; (2) the continued contrast of natural Israel and the church; (3) the distinction between spiritual Israel (the Israel of God) and Gentile Christians; (4) the question whether Israel is expressly disinherited. Reserved for discussion in later articles are contributory factors to the argument such as the question of whether the church actually fulfills the promises given to Israel and whether Israel's promises are conditional or unconditional.

I. Israel and Gentiles Contrasted.

It should be obvious to anyone making even a casual study of the subject that the terms *Israel* and *Gentiles* continue to be used after the institution of the church at Pentecost and that the terms are mutually exclusive. Both Gentiles and Israelites continued to exist after the church began, and while some of each came into the church, the Gentiles and Israelites continued as such. Israel as a nation is addressed again and again *after* the institution of the church (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28, etc.). A notable instance is Paul's prayer for Israel that they might be saved (Rom 10:1)-obviously a reference to Israel outside the church.

The term *Jew* also continues in the New Testament after the beginning of the church. In 1 Corinthians 10:32 it is specifically mentioned: "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God." Here is a clear threefold division of humanity into (1) Jews, (2) Gentiles, (3) church of God.

While Israelites and Gentiles who became Christians and were joined to the church have a new destiny quite apart from the natural stock from which they come, the Scriptures also reveal a future for Israel and Gentiles who reject Christ. In respect to the Gentiles, suffice it to say that their course continues until the return of Christ when they will be judged. God's program for the Gentiles is itself a major theme of prophecy. Significant to our present study, however, is the fact that Israel is also assured a future program. This is quite apart from the place of Israel in the church.

The Apostle Paul calls attention to Israel's unique place and privilege constantly in his epistles. He declares that their peculiar promises include the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the fathers, and the privilege of being the people of whom Christ should come (Rom 9:4, 5). Now, it is obvious that Paul is referring to Israel *in unbelief* when he refers to those who have these privileges, for he declares: "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are the Israelites..." (Rom 9:3, 4). He declares that they even in unbelief "are Israelites," and relates to them all the peculiar privileges of Israel. It is evident that the institution of the church did not rob Israel in the flesh of its peculiar place of privilege before God.

This declaration is given added weight by the fact that in Ephesians 2:12, Gentiles are expressly declared to have been excluded from the promises given to Israel: "That at that time ye [Gentiles] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." The passage goes on to state their privilege as Christians in the church. It is noteworthy that Paul does not say that the Gentiles came into these same Israelitish promises when they were converted; rather he

pictures a work of God bringing Jew and Gentile into a new order entirely-“one new man” (Eph 2:15). It may be concluded without further argument that the distinction between natural Israel and Gentiles is continued after the institution of the church-Israel is still a genuine Israel, and the Gentiles continue to fulfill their part. While this fact of the Scriptures is more or less admitted even by the amillennialist, the significance is not adequately realized. The continuance of Israel and Gentiles as such is a strong argument against either one being dispossessed of their own place. Israel is not reduced to the bankruptcy of the Gentiles-to become “strangers from the covenants of promise” (Eph 2:12), and the distinction between the two groups is maintained on the same sharp lines as before the church was instituted.

II. Natural Israel and the Church Contrasted.

Not only is natural Israel contrasted to Gentiles, but it is also contrasted to the church as such. The amillennial position fully agrees to this contrast, but in doing so, its supporters do not realize that the basis of their own argument is jeopardized. If natural Israel continues as an entity apart from the church with its own program and destiny, it becomes at once an interesting and vital argument against the transfer of Israel’s promises to the church or their loss by any other means. The amillennialists are forced to a position which by its nature is untenable. They must admit the existence of natural Israel apart from the church because it is too evident that this is a fact of Scripture and history. They cannot admit any program for them or any possibility of a national future for them.

The Scriptures, however, speak of a future for Israel, and that in the New Testament. The testimony of Scripture is confirmed by the obvious fact that Israel in the flesh has continued to exist as a distinct people even in centuries of dispersion. The Scriptures reveal that God has placed Israel in the present age in a peculiar relation to Himself and that He contemplates a renewal of His mercies to them at a future period.

The classic passage found in Romans eleven deals specifically with the problem before us. Has God no program for Israel as such? Paul raises the question himself: “I say then, Hath God cast away his people?” (Rom 11:1). He goes on to answer in the negative, indicating that at the time of the writing of Romans there was a remnant out of Israel saved by grace who had their part in the church. Unbelieving Israel is declared to have been blinded: “What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Rom 11:7). He speaks of this blinding as their “fall,” which, because of the present privilege of Gentiles to receive the Gospel and salvation on the same terms as Israel, becomes “the riches of the Gentiles” (Rom 11:12). He then goes on to compare their fall with their fulness: “Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?” (Rom 11:12). In other words, if the blindness which has fallen upon Israel nationally during this present age was the occasion for great blessing for the Gentiles, the “fulness” of Israel will bring a richness of blessing which will be “much more.” Now, obviously, there can be no fulness of Israel if they have no future. Their fulness will come when the present condition of blindness is lifted.

He takes occasion to warn the Gentiles of their present privilege on the basis of this argument. In Romans 11:15, he refers again to the future blessing of Israel: “For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” It is true that he speaks of Israel being broken off that the Gentiles might be grafted in

(Rom 11:17–24), but he also speaks of the *future* ingrafting of Israel back into “their own olive tree” (Rom 11:24). This is contingent upon their “blindness” being lifted, and it is declared that the blindness will continue “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom 11:25). The use of the word *until* signifies not only that the period of Gentile blessing will end, but it also indicates that a future period of Israel’s ingrafting will follow. Samuel H. Wilkinson has brought this out: “If and when an ‘until’ sets a time-limit to any group of conditions, it makes the said group of conditions to be *temporary* not *everlasting*, to be *preliminary* not *final*. And the change, whatever it be, which is to occur when the time-limit is reached and passed, must surely refer to the same object as that which was submitted to the temporary conditions. With these two reasonable considerations in view, it will be found that all the time-limits described in the New Testament leave room for the full scope of Old Testament prophecy to become in due time realized.”²

The distinction between Israel outside of the church and the church itself, then, is a highly significant fact of Scripture. The Scriptures clearly state that Israel in unbelief is blinded, that this blinded condition is temporary not final, that the blindness will be lifted when the present period of Gentile blessing is concluded. The fulfillment of the covenants with Israel will follow, as Romans 11:26–32 indicates. Not only the fact of Israel’s continuance is revealed, but Israel’s present program and future blessings are specifically outlined in Romans eleven and other portions of Scripture which need not be discussed at this time.

III. Spiritual Israel and Gentile Christians Contrasted.

While the contrasts between Israel, Gentiles, and the church are severally important, the crux of the argument is the contrast between spiritual Israel, that is, those who have become Christians, and Gentile Christians. The two-fold origin of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians is obvious to all. In the attempt to disfranchise Israel of her promises, however, it is claimed that the church composed of both Gentiles and Jews takes Israel’s place of blessing completely. It is pointed out that there has always been an inner circle of Israelites who were the “true Israel” and that these were the genuine inheritors of the promises, not the nation as a whole. It is the purpose of this discussion to inquire into only one phase of the problem—Is the church ever identified with true or spiritual Israel, that is, are Gentile Christians ever included in the designation *Israel*? The problem of whether the church actually inherits Israel’s promises and realizes them is reserved for later treatment.

Two principal passages are the foundation for the discussion. In Romans 9–11, the problem comes up repeatedly. In Romans 9:6, it is revealed: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” Those who have opposed a future for Israel find in this passage a proof text for their theory that only a portion of Israel, that is, those who are “spiritual,” inherit the promises, and the rest are excluded from the promises. An examination of this passage, however, will reveal that the real contrast is not between those who inherit Abraham’s promises and those who do not. It is rather that the promises to Abraham are classified as belonging either to Israel according to the flesh or Israel which enters into the spiritual promises by faith—which are given also to Gentile believers (Gal 3:6–9, 14). It is not, therefore, a contrast between those who are excluded and those who are included, but rather a contrast between those who inherit only the national promises and those who inherit the spiritual promises. The line of national promises is narrowed

² 2. *The Israel Promises and Their Fulfillment* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, Ltd., 1936), p. 78.

to Isaac and his seed (Rom 9:7), and the line of spiritual promises is narrowed to those who believe. In the present age, Israel as a nation is blinded, which blindness will be lifted. As individuals, Israelites who believe belong to the election of grace (Rom 11:5–10). Both Israelites in the flesh (unbelievers) and Israelites who believe are genuine Israelites. They are sharply distinguished as to present blessings. Unbelieving Israelites are lost and blinded, while believing Israelites come into all the present blessings of the church. The distinction is always on the ground of whether or not they believe in Christ, not on whether they are true Israelites.

The second principal passage is found in Galatians 6:15, 16, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.” It has been alleged on the basis of this passage that the church as such is specifically called the “Israel of God.” To this is opposed the fact that everywhere else in the Scriptures the term *Israel* is applied only to those who are the natural seed of Abraham and Isaac, never to Gentiles. If it can be sustained that in this passage the church is called *Israel*, it would, of course, be an argument for the identification of the church with Israel in the present age—though by no means conclusive, in the face of the constant use of the term *Israel* in the Scriptures in reference to unbelieving Jews. An examination of Galatians 5:15, 16, however, instead of proving any such identification is rather a specific instance where Jewish believers are distinguished from Gentile believers, and this by the very term *Israel of God*.

In Galatians 5:15 the contrast is brought out between “circumcision” and “uncircumcision,” i.e., between Jew and Gentile. This contrast is declared to avail not in Christ Jesus, but that rather the issue is a new creation when either Jew or Gentile becomes a believer. God’s blessing is declared on those who walk according to this rule (among the Galatians who were Gentiles), and also “upon the Israel of God.” The use of *καὶ* is difficult to explain apart from the intention of the writer to set off the “Israel of God” from those considered in the first half of the verse. It is rather another indication that Gentile and Jewish believers are on the same level as *καὶ* is used principally to link coordinate parts of a sentence. In any case, the argument of those who would destroy Israel’s national hope based upon this verse is not founded in sound exegesis. The passage does not state explicitly, even if strained to accommodate their view, that the “Israel of God” and the “new creation” are identical. It is safe to say that, if these key passages which are claimed as special proof of the identification of Israel and the church do not teach this doctrine, then there is no passage in the New Testament in which the term *Israel* is used as synonymous with the church. In every case, the term is used either of the nation Israel as such, still in unbelief, or of that believing remnant which is incorporated into the church without destroying the national promises to Israel in the least.

IV. Is the Nation Israel Disinherited?

One of the assertions which is made confidently by those opposed to a future for Israel as a nation, is that Israel through their rejection of Christ have been rejected by God as a nation. Now it is clear from both Scripture and history that Israel as a race is scattered throughout the world up to this hour, preserved in their identity but without a national home. The question is whether they will ever be restored as a chosen nation and whether the promises given to them as a nation will be fulfilled. It is not the purpose of this treatment to examine the great bulk of evidence—this being reserved for future articles. It is asserted, however, that Israel’s promises are transferred to the church and that no spiritual Israel will ever exist apart from the present order found in the church. It is claimed that Israel is expressly disinherited.

In refutation of this theory, a host of Scriptures can be found having more or less bearing on the problem. It has already been demonstrated, at least in part, that there is a New Testament basis for believing Israel has a future, and if so, then Israel is not disinherited. Two principal passages, however, will suffice to deal with the crux of the problem.

In Matthew 21:43, Christ said, after the parable of the householder, “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.” This seems, at first glance, to be a categorical disinheriting of Israel. A further examination of the passage will bring up several important questions, however. What did Christ refer to by “you,” the nation (present and future) of Israel or the immediate generation and individuals to whom He was speaking? What “nation” is going to receive the “kingdom of God”? What does He mean by the “kingdom of God” anyway?

These questions are not easily answered in a few words, but the clue will be found in the answer to these questions. It will be noted, first, that there is used in this passage the “kingdom of God” in contrast to the usual expression for Matthew, “kingdom of heaven.” The “kingdom of God” is apparently the sphere of genuine faith in God and the sphere of genuine rule. It is never used in the Scriptures to include unbelievers whether in Matthew or other New Testament books. On the other hand, the “kingdom of heaven” seems to be concerned with the outward display of God’s government and *appearance* rather than reality. The wheat and the tares of Matthew thirteen are both in the kingdom of heaven—the wheat representing genuine believers, the tares representing those who are merely professing believers. The taking of the kingdom of God from the Jews was, then, a declaration that they, that is, the scribes and Pharisees represented in the parable as the wicked husbandman, would never enter the kingdom of God, i.e., would never be saved. It is obvious that this was true *ipso facto*, but on the other hand it is also clear that *some* Jews did enter the kingdom of God, and that the nation of Israel as such never did enter the kingdom of God even in the Old Testament. It had always been limited to those who were genuine believers in the true God. Further, the “kingdom of God” is not to be identified with the millennial kingdom prophesied for Israel and the Gentile nations, though the millennial kingdom is an important manifestation and phase of the kingdom of God.

The declaration of Christ in this passage resolves itself into a declaration that the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees would never be saved because of their rejection of the “son” of the “householder,” and that others would take their place. Gaebelein suggests that the “nation” which will take their place will be other Israelites: “The nation to whom the Lord promises the Kingdom is not the Church. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Habitation of God by the Spirit, the Lamb’s Wife, but never a nation. The nation is Israel still, but that believing remnant of the nation, living when the Lord comes.”³

The second major passage bearing on this problem is Romans 11:1–32. As previously pointed out, this chapter deals with the question whether God has cast off Israel. As indicated in previous discussion, Paul’s answer, and God’s answer, is that Israel has not been cast off. They have a present election of grace, a future promise of re-ingrafting after their blindness is lifted. This process is declared to result in “all Israel” being saved (Rom 11:26). The “all Israel” is in contrast to the present remnant of Israel being saved in the church. Instead of individual salvation, Israel once again will come into national blessing before God. On the basis of this brief study of this major passage, it may be concluded that its proper interpretation bears out the

³ 3. A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Our Hope, 1910), Vol. II, p. 138.

same thought as found in Matthew. There is not a single passage in the New Testament rightly interpreted in the light of its context and principal terms that either indirectly or directly teaches that Israel is finally disinherited.

On the basis of the contrasts in Scripture between Israel and Gentiles, and between Christian Israelites and Christian Gentiles, and the contrast between unbelieving Israel and the church, it has been demonstrated that there is no basis in Scripture for the theory that the church and Israel are identical. The assertion that Israel is expressly disinherited in favor of the church has also been found to be without proper ground in Scripture. A further study of the factors bearing on this question, to be considered in later articles, will only confirm this preliminary investigation.

Dallas, Texas