

Part 1:

Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program?

—
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One of the Major problems in the interpretation of the Bible is the relationship of the New Testament to the Old Testament. Many volumes have been written to point out the diverse character of these major portions of Scripture. Old Testament theology has developed the major constituent elements of the Old Testament, and New Testament theology has made a similar analysis of the New Testament, but the relationship of the two continues to be a major issue in theological interpretation.

The Interpretation of the Old Testament

Liberal theologians, who are not concerned with the problem of the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, are free to declare that both the Old and New Testaments must be interpreted in the light of modern culture and that the Old and New Testaments are not to be taken literally. Conservative theologians, holding the concept that the Bible is inspired of the Holy Spirit and therefore cannot contain contradictory statements, are committed to the principle that both the Old and New Testaments are infallible in their presentation of divine truth. However, even in conservative schools of thought, there is the constantly repeated concept that the New Testament reinterprets the Old Testament and that one must accordingly be governed primarily by the New Testament in formulating theological truth. This has been a dominant premise of conservative amillennialism, which recognizes that the Old Testament anticipates an earthly kingdom, but which contends

that, based on New Testament revelation, these prophecies must not be interpreted literally. Appeal is often made also to the field of typology in which individuals, situations, and events in the Old Testament are interpreted as typical illustrations in the New Testament, with the result that the actual historical or theological import of the original statements is questioned.

Another problem area is the fact that many people in the lifetime of Christ misinterpreted the Old Testament. This has given rise to the constantly reiterated conclusion that the New Testament reinterprets the Old Testament and that the real meaning of the Old Testament is therefore to be found in the New. In the process of these various approaches to the interpretation of the Old Testament, the question as to what the Old Testament actually teaches as normative truth is sometimes obscured.

Among these problems, one of the definitive questions is whether the New Testament church fulfills Israel's prophetic programs. Here, among conservative interpreters at least, are two distinct schools of thought: (a) the teaching that Israel has a special program of God, beginning with Abraham and continuing on into eternity to come, and (b) the teaching that the programs of God for Israel and the church are essentially one and consist in the fact that both are the recipients of God's salvation.

This problem has been stated by Ladd in his brief but definitive work *The Last Things*. He points out the contrast between the Old Testament and the New Testament in their presentation

of Israel and the church. He states, “In the Old Testament the eschatological salvation is always pictured in terms of the national, theocratic fate of the people Israel. *There are no clear prophecies of the Christian church as such in the Old Testament.*” By contrast, Ladd then points out:

Instead of being a nation, the church was an open fellowship of people who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. At first the church consisted largely of Jews, but Acts tells the story of how the church moved out into the Gentile world, accepted many Gentiles into its fellowship, and concludes with the story of Paul preaching to a largely Gentile church in Rome. Eschatology in the New Testament deals largely with the destiny of the church.

He concludes, “Here we have two different stories: the story of the nation Israel and the story of the church. What are we to make of this apparent dilemma?”

In discussing the problem, Ladd points out that two opposing answers have been proposed. He labels one the dispensational interpretation and he calls the other the interpretation of progressive revelation.

Two radically different answers have been proposed, and every student of prophecy must choose between them. The first is to conclude that God has two different programs: one for Israel and one for the church. Israel was and remains and is to be a theocratic people who are destined to inherit the promised land of Israel, for whom Jesus will be the literal Davidic king, when the prophecies of the Old Testament will be literally fulfilled. This system is called *Dispensationalism*.

He continues, “The two chief tenets of Dispensationalism are two peoples of God for whom God has two different programs and destinies—theocratic and earthly for Israel, spiritual and heavenly for the church.”

Ladd explains the second approach to prophecy in these words: “The second way of interpreting prophecy is to recognize the progressive revelation and to interpret the Old Testament by the New Testament. The Old Testament must be interpreted (and often reinterpreted) by the new revelation given in the person and mission of Jesus Christ.” He continues his discussion by supporting the second view, the reinterpretation of prophecy as he sees it in the New Testament as it relates to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

That many Jews in the time of Christ had misinterpreted the Old Testament is clear to all observers. It is also clear that none of the Jews then seems to have understood the difference between the first and second comings of Christ, nor did they comprehend the forthcoming program for the church such as the New Testament outlines. Whether this is reinterpretation or additional revelation remains to be considered. Ladd does not offer any detailed study of what he calls dispensationalism, and the issue remains, Does the New Testament effectively dispose of these promises and deny their literal fulfillment? Amillenarians usually say yes. Ladd, as a premillenarian, would be expected to say no, but he does not give a clear answer in this particular study. The question remains whether God has a special program for Israel which differs from His program for the church, or whether the two programs are identical. Before turning to the supposed “reinterpretation” of the Old Testament by the New, it may be well to set forth clearly what the Old Testament teaches on the subject of Israel’s future program, and then ask the question, What does the New Testament teach about this?

That there are many similarities between God's program for Israel and God's program for the church should be apparent. Israel has the same Savior, the same basis for her salvation in the death of Christ, and the same prospect for eternal glory. Certain facets of Israel's program, however, are totally foreign to the church, just as certain promises which God has given to the church differ from those given to Israel. These form the basis for the conclusion of dispensationalism that there are two programs, so far as history is concerned, even though there is only one way of salvation.

Literal versus Nonliteral Interpretation

Ladd is correct that the issue in interpretation is whether Israel has a special program as contrasted to the program of God for the church, but the contrast is misstated as a contrast for or against progressive revelation. Dispensationalists all recognize that there is the element of progressive revelation throughout Scripture, and in fact this is inherent in and emphasized by dispensational interpretation. The difference between the dispensational interpretation and the nondispensational interpretation is not an affirmation or denial of progressive revelation, but rather is the contrast between literal versus nonliteral interpretation. It seems quite clear to most observers of the history of doctrine that prior to the writings of the New Testament, prophets as well as ordinary people in the Old Testament understood that God had a special program for Israel, and that this had its consummation in the coming of their Messiah and in their repossession of the promised land. The golden age predicted in the Old Testament for Israel anticipated a literal fulfillment.

The difference in interpretation originates when amillenarians and some premillenarians interpret the New Testament as contradicting or amending this concept to the extent of substituting a nonliteral fulfillment of these hopes voiced in the Old Testament. The issue accordingly is not progressive revelation versus nonprogressive revelation, but rather whether in progressive revelation there is contradiction or correction of what was commonly assumed to be the main tenor of Old Testament revelation. Accordingly the issue is whether the Old Testament teaches a literal fulfillment of specific promises for Israel and whether the New Testament contradicts or supports literal interpretation. Here is the major issue between amillennialism and premillennialism, and also the issue between dispensational premillennialism and nondispensational premillennialism as these terms are commonly used today.

The extent to which the Old Testament specifically prophesies a special program for Israel has already been published by the writer, and the major contribution of the Old Testament to this subject needs only to be restated under four headings: (a) predictions concerning Abraham; (b) predictions concerning the nation Israel; (c) predictions concerning the land; and (d) predictions concerning the kingdom.

Predictions Concerning Abraham

According to Genesis 12:1-3, God made specific promises to Abraham as follows: "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing."

One is confronted immediately with the question as to whether these promises are literal. It seems clear that Abraham literally went from his country to another country and that he was to be literally separated from his relatives and his father's house. This is illustrated in the fact that

Abraham made the journey to the promised land. The promise to Abraham that a great nation would come from him, even though he had no children at that time, has been literally fulfilled in history.

God obviously blessed Abraham in many respects. His name is considered great, not only in Christendom, but also in Judaism and in Islam. The life and ministry of Abraham have been a blessing to the world. The principle that God would bless those who blessed Abraham has been illustrated abundantly in history, and those who have persecuted Israel have come under the promised curse.

The final promise that all families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham has been fulfilled literally, not only in the writing of Scripture from Jewish pens, but also preeminently through Jesus Christ. In the light of this pattern of literal fulfillment, it would seem strange on the surface that anyone would question the literalness of these promises. Conservative amillenarians usually recognize the literal fulfillment of these promises up to a point where it does not contradict their eschatological views, but they insist that any literal fulfillment of these promises

should not lead to the conclusion that there is a separate program for Israel.

Much of the discussion revolves around the meaning of “the seed of Abraham” (AV) or the meaning of his “descendants” (Gen 12:7). Here both Testaments seem to justify the conclusion that the descendants of Abraham are considered in three categories: (a) the natural or physical descendants of Abraham, (b) those who are the descendants of Abraham in the sense of being believing Israelites or true believers like Abraham, as illustrated in the contrast between natural Israel and spiritual Israel in Romans 9:6–8; (c) those who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, whether Jews or Gentiles, in that they believe in God even as Abraham did, as illustrated in Galatians 3:6–9. Accordingly, Gentile Christians are considered to be among the descendants of Abraham because they are in Christ, who is a descendant of Abraham.

Having recognized this distinction, however, it should be observed that the promises also have to be classified as applying to one or more of these three concepts. Some promises apply to all physical descendants of Abraham, such as the promise that he would be the father of many nations (Gen 17:4). In the revelation of the law of Moses where specific promises are given Israel for obedience or for disobedience, the issue relates to spiritual Israel, not Gentiles. When considering the third aspect—spiritual descendants of Abraham—it should be noted that Galatians 3:6–9 specifically alludes to the blessings which are promised the Gentiles in Genesis 12:3, that is, blessings to “all the families of the earth.” Accordingly the principle of literal interpretation is supported, but proper distinctions do not blur the clear lines of demarcation among (a) the nation as a whole, (b) spiritual Israel or believing Israelites, and (c) the church composed of Jews and Gentiles.

Subsequent to the original promise given to Abraham, further details are given, largely relating to the natural descendants of Abraham as such or the particular portion of his descendants who are spiritual. As will be seen in the study of the promises concerning the land beginning in Genesis 12:7, it is demonstrable that these promises are to be interpreted literally to the physical descendants of Abraham and are never transferred to Gentiles. The same is true for other promises that relate to the nation of Israel as a whole, and the promises in regard to the Davidic kingdom again concern the physical descendants of

Abraham, excluding Gentiles. Amillenarians or nondispensational premillenarians who quote Romans 9, Galatians 3, or similar passages do not seem to realize that they are assuming what

they are trying to prove. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, the promises given to Abraham were literally fulfilled and this created an expectation on the part of those to whom they were revealed that a literal fulfillment was to be expected. This is supported and sustained by an examination of predictions relating to the nation of Israel, those relating to the promised land, and those relating to the Davidic kingdom.

Predictions Concerning the Nation Israel

In relation to promises concerning the nation Israel, the distinction has already been made between spiritual Israel, that is, those who were true believers in God, and natural Israel, that is, those who were simply physical descendants of Abraham. A further distinction, however, has to be made between those who are descendants of Jacob and his twelve sons and those who were descendants of Ishmael, Esau, or the children of Keturah.

In the unfolding revelation in the Book of Genesis, these distinctions are clearly made. Isaac, the son of Sarah, was to inherit the promises specifically given to the descendants of Abraham, not Ishmael. In like manner, Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac, are clearly distinguished, and Jacob, the younger of the twins, is the one who inherits the specific promises that God would fulfill for the nation Israel. Accordingly, in Scripture a sharp distinction must be observed between the descendants of Abraham in general and the descendants of Jacob, or Israel. This is the heart of the present Arab-Israel controversy and is important to the theological debate between amillennialism and premillennialism.

The specific promises given to Israel as descendants of Abraham are that they would be a great nation, that their numbers would be innumerable (Gen 26:4), and that God would bless them abundantly (Gen 12:2; 26:3–5). It is also clear that the promise of blessing on those who bless Israel, the promise of cursing on those who curse Israel, and the promise that all families of the earth would be blessed are to be fulfilled specifically through Jacob and his twelve sons, rather than through the other descendants of Abraham. These promises are further supported by the fact that the nation is promised continuity forever, a promise that is repeatedly made in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 17:7–8; Jer 30:11). Accordingly premillennarians hold that Israel's promised future includes her repossession of the land and her blessing under God in the future millennial kingdom following the second coming of Christ.

Opponents of premillennialism have followed two different courses. The more extreme have denied that the descendants of Abraham should be taken in any literal sense. According to Pieters, the term *Israel* merely indicates the people of God without relation to either national or racial characteristics. He avoids, however, the contradictory evidence in the Bible and, for instance, skips completely any discussion of Genesis 15 where Israel as a nation is promised her land.

A more conservative reply adopted by many amillennarians and some postmillennarians is that while Israel continues as a race, she does not continue as a political entity or as a nation. For instance, Hendriksen takes the position that the term Israel in Romans 11:25–26 refers to those Israelites who are believers in God and part of the church in the present age. In like manner, Charles Hodge, although a postmillenarian, takes the position that the word *Israel* in the Bible never refers to Gentiles. He does not believe that Israel has a political future, and he holds that the prophecies of Israel's future blessing are fulfilled in her role in the church in the present age. It is most significant that some amillennarians and postmillennarians concede that the word *Israel* normally means Israel. The remaining question is whether the prophecies relating to Israel can be fulfilled by Israel within the church in the present age. The answer is found in the promises

concerning the land and the kingdom, both of which lose significance if they are not interpreted literally.

The Scriptures are explicit that Israel has perpetuity as a nation. In relating the New covenant to the nation Israel, God describes her millennial blessings in Jeremiah 31:31–37 and specifically states in verses 35–37, “Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: ‘If this fixed order departs from before Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me forever.’ Thus says the LORD, ‘If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,’ declares the LORD.” It would be

difficult to find a more specific statement that Israel as a nation will continue forever.

Amillenarians contend, however, on the basis of the quotation of this passage in Hebrews 8, that this is applied to the church. This will be discussed in part 3 of this series.

The promise given to Jeremiah is repeated in many other portions of the Old Testament which affirm the absolute certainty of the fulfillment of the promises to Israel as a nation.

Predictions Concerning the Land

The crux of the question of literal interpretation is found in the many promises given in the Old Testament concerning the land of Israel. Amillenarians are forced to adopt one of two explanations: either that the promises are not literal but refer to heaven, or that the promises are literal but are conditional and Israel failed to meet the condition.

A study of the promises to Israel concerning the land demonstrate that both of these explanations are without support in the Old Testament.

The literalness of the promises concerning the land are supported by the fact that Abraham left his home in Mesopotamia and traveled to the promised land. If the promises concerning the land were only to be considered spiritually and referred to heaven, he could have remained where he was without any geographical movement. It is also clear that when he did come to the land, God said in Genesis 12:7, “To your descendants I will give this land.” It is evident that He was referring to the land in which Abraham was residing. In Genesis 13, when Abraham separated from Lot, he was instructed, “Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever” (13:14–15). It is obvious that God is not talking about heaven, but about a literal land.

This is further brought out in the confirmation of the covenant by the shedding of blood in Genesis 15, where Abraham is assured not only that he will have physical offspring, but also that his descendants will literally possess the land. According to Genesis 15:18, God’s covenant stated, “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates.” The Scripture goes on to define the heathen tribes that lived in that area at the time, certainly not a

fitting description of heaven. Amillenarians like Pieters find it convenient to skip this passage entirely.

The promise is once again repeated in Genesis 17:8. “And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting

possession; and I will be their God.” It is obvious that Abraham understood these promises as intended to be fulfilled in their literal sense.

This is confirmed by later passages in Genesis. According to Genesis 26:3, Isaac is promised that his descendants will possess the land, in contrast to the descendants of Ishmael. In Genesis 28:13, God assured Jacob that the promises of the land will be for his descendants, not the descendants of Esau, and He further promised to bring him back to the land at a later time.

At the end of the Book of Genesis the entire family of Abraham was back in Egypt, out of the promised land and without fulfillment of the promises. However, even before the children of Israel went to Egypt, God had predicted that they would make this departure. According to Genesis 15:13–14, God promised them that they would be strangers in a land that was not theirs, but that later they would return to their land. This was literally fulfilled in the exodus from Egypt and the subsequent possession of the land by the people of Israel under Joshua. Although they did not possess all the land, it is quite clear that they were proceeding on the basis of literal fulfillment of the promises.

According to Joshua 1:2–4, Joshua was told, “Moses My servant is dead; now therefore arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you, just as I spoke to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon, even as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and as far as the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun, will be your territory.” It should seem clear that the promise of the land was partially fulfilled.

While returning to the land, however, Israel was solemnly warned by Moses, as recorded in Deuteronomy 28:63–68, that if they disobeyed the Law, they would be driven out of the land again. Subsequent history reveals that this was also literally fulfilled. First the ten tribes were carried off into captivity in 721 B.C. by the armies of Assyria, and the two remaining tribes were conquered by Nebuchadnezzar by 605 B.C. and subsequently carried off to Babylon. Here again, the literalness of the promise is brought out in the prophetic Scriptures.

But they were also promised later possession of this land. Jeremiah, the prophet of the Babylonian captivity period, declared in Jeremiah 29:10, “For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.’” Sixty-eight years later the captive Daniel came into possession of the written prophecies of Jeremiah and on reading this verse immediately gave himself to prayer and fasting to God in anticipation of the fulfillment of this promise (Dan 9:1–19). Again it is clear that Daniel regarded the promise of the return to the land as literal and regarded the land itself as literally belonging to Israel. The Book of Ezra records that two years later, in answer to Daniel’s prayer, approximately fifty thousand exiles returned to begin the reestablishment of the nation in their ancient land. The whole tenor of Scripture and its fulfillment in these stirring events support the concept of a literal land and of literal possession of it by the nation Israel.

But the end was not yet, for the same prophecies which predicted that Israel would go back from the Babylonian captivity also predicted eventually their worldwide dispersion. In the words of Moses, it was predicted, “Moreover, the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth; and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone, which you or your fathers have not known” (Deut 28:64). The prophecy goes on to picture the sad lot of Israel, persecuted and without security of life, in her dispersion among the Gentiles.

In summary, the Scriptures predicted that Abraham’s people would leave the land promised to them, and that was literally fulfilled in their bondage in Egypt. It was also predicted they

would come back to the literal land, and they did. The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities were predicted, and they were literally fulfilled. It was predicted that Israel would come back to the land, and this again was literally fulfilled.

Subsequent to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, and the people of Israel were indeed scattered throughout the whole world. All of this illustrates and supports the pattern of literal fulfillment in relation to a literal land for a literal nation Israel. The only real question which remains is whether the Bible predicts that they will come back to the land a third time and possess it forever.

Here, if anything, the prophets are more explicit than in any of the preceding dispersions or regatherings. It is almost the

theme song of the major and minor prophets that Israel will ultimately possess the land.

According to Isaiah 11:11, the children of Israel will return “from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.” It should be obvious that this description is of the final regathering of Israel from her worldwide dispersion. This theme is repeated again and again in Scripture, as in Isaiah 43:5–7 where Israelites are said to come from “the ends of the earth.” Isaiah 60:21 states categorically, “They will possess the land forever.” Isaiah 66:20 refers to them as being gathered “from all the nations.”

Jeremiah 16:14–16 indicates that the regathering of Israel will be complete and not partial. “‘Therefore behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when it will no longer be said, “As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt,” but, “As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them.” For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers. Behold, I am going to send for many fishermen,’ declares the LORD, ‘and they will fish for them; and afterwards I shall send for many hunters, and they will hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and from the clefts of the rocks.’” This promise has certainly never been fulfilled up to the present time.

A most illuminating promise is given in Jeremiah 30:1–7 where the return of Israel to the land is said to follow her future time of tribulation. Jeremiah 32:37 states, “Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath, and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety.” The passage goes on to describe the nation’s spiritual blessing.

Many additional quotations could be cited. Among the more significant is the promise of Amos 9:14–15, “‘Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,’ says the LORD your God.” This passage pictures a revival and blessing under the hand of God, and the promise is given of permanent possession. James alludes to this passage in Acts 15:15–18.

Another dramatic passage is Ezekiel 39:27–28. “When I bring them back from the peoples and gather them from the lands of

their enemies, then I shall be sanctified through them in the sight of the many nations. Then they will know that I am the LORD their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer.” Significantly, this passage not only mentions the regathering of Israel, but also the fact that none

of the Israelites will be allowed to remain scattered among the Gentiles. To date, this has not been fulfilled.

If the promises of the land as already fulfilled in history have been fulfilled literally, on what basis can the promises of the future be denied their literal fulfillment? Certainly this cannot be done on the basis of the Old Testament prophecies, and few amillenarians care to debate it on this basis. Almost always the reference is made to the New Testament handling of these promises. The issue, however, is whether progressive revelation ever reverses preceding revelation and denies its validity. It is on the basis of consistency of fulfillment of prophecy historically that premillenarians project a consistent literal fulfillment of prophecy in the future.

Predictions Concerning the Kingdom

According to 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17, David was promised that his kingdom would continue forever. “When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; Your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam 7:12–16).

In this prophecy, in addition to God predicting that David’s son would build the Temple and that he would have a child to succeed him on the throne, God specifically promised that the throne of David’s kingdom would continue forever and never be taken away from the descendants of Jacob. It is clear from subsequent Scripture that there would be a long period of time during which no one would sit on the throne, as indicated in Hosea 3:4–5. But Hosea 3:5 states plainly, “Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days.”

All conservative interpreters recognize that the prophecy is ultimately to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ as the Son of David. The difference in point of view, however, is whether it will be a spiritual reign in the hearts of believers or a literal reign on earth.

The testimony of the prophecies in the Old Testament supporting this Davidic covenant indicate that it is an earthly kingdom, basically political in its nature, although it involves spiritual blessings. This is brought out in Isaiah 9:6–7. “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.” Again this fact is supported in Jeremiah 23:5–6. “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I shall raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, “The LORD our righteousness:”’” “This reign of the seed of David is related to the return of Israel to the land, as brought out in Jeremiah 23:7–8. “‘Therefore behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when they will no longer say, “As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,” but “As the LORD lives, who brought up and led

back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.” Then they will live on their own soil.”“ The promise is repeated so often and in such similar terms that it is amazing that anyone would attempt to spiritualize it and find other than a literal fulfillment.

Further examination of such passages as Jeremiah 30:8–9; 33:14–17 ; Ezekiel 37:22–25, and similar prophecies makes it clear that the Old Testament prophecies are presented as if intended for literal fulfillment. If one had only the Old Testament, even some amillenarians would agree that the indications are that the promises were intended for a literal fulfillment. They claim, however, that the New Testament justifies taking these promises in a nonliteral sense.

Accordingly, a thorough study of the New Testament

aspect of this doctrine is necessary in order to confirm the literalness of Israel’s future program. This will be the subject of parts 2 and 3 in this series.

Part 2

Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program?

—
John F. Walvoord

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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.

Part 3

Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program?

—
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The Argument from Galatians 6:15-16

While amillenarians often use the argument that it is not necessary for Israel to be explicitly identified with the church just as it is not necessary for the doctrine of the Trinity to be supported by the word *Trinity* in the Bible, many of them point to Galatians 6:15–16 as the one explicit reference. Accordingly it bears careful scrutiny.

Paul in Galatians is attempting to deal with the question of grace versus law, both as a way of salvation and as a way of sanctification. He concludes in Galatians 6:15, “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” He then says in verse 16, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” The question raised by this passage is whether the expression “the Israel of God” is identical to the “new creation” described earlier in the verse, applying to the entire church.

Appeal is made to the fact that the Greek preposition *καί* is sometimes used in an explicative sense and is equivalent to *namely*. Or it could be used in an ascensive sense and translated *even*. But the normal meaning of *καί* is that of a simple connective as indicated by the translation “and.” Burton has a complete discussion on this matter.

Though Rom 9⁶ 1 Cor 10¹⁸ show that Paul distinguished between Israel according to the flesh and the Israel according to election or promise, and Rom 2²⁹ Phil 3³ suggest that he might use *τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ* of all believers in Christ, regardless of nationality, there is, in fact, no instance of his using *Ἰσραὴλ* except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof. These facts favour the interpretation of the expression as applying not to the Christian community, but to Jews; yet, in view of *τοῦ θεοῦ*, not to the whole Jewish nation, but to the pious Israel, the remnant according to the election of grace (Rom 11⁵), including even those who had not seen the truth as Paul saw it.... In view of the apostle's previous strong anti-judaistic expressions, he feels impelled, by the insertion of *καί*, to emphasise this expression of his true attitude towards his people. It can scarcely be translated into English without overtranslating.

The burden of proof is on the expositor to show that the word is used in the sense of “namely” or “even.” Such proof is completely lacking. It is significant that Arndt and Gingrich avoid listing Galatians 6:16 in their study of unusual uses of *καί*. Robertson has no reference to it in either his *Grammar* or his *Word Pictures*. It is also interesting that commentators who do not have a particular burden to prove that Israel is the church usually do not comment on the problem.

Under the circumstances the simplest explanation is the best, that is, that what Paul is saying is that those who walk by the rule of grace as a new creation in Christ are worthy recipients of His benediction of peace and mercy, but that from his standpoint this is especially true of the Israel of God, by which Paul means Israelites who in the church age trust Jesus Christ. This is a natural and biblical explanation. In any case this verse is not an explicit statement that the Israel of God equals the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. If those who contend for this point of view had a better verse, they obviously would not use this text. Allis, for instance, merely cites it as a proof text without discussion.

The Argument from Romans 9-11

As previously pointed out, leading amillenarians and postmillenarians are included with those who deny that New Testament references to Israel are always equivalent to the church. However, both premillenarians and amillenarians who want to find fulfillment of Israel's prophecy in the church appeal to Romans 9–11 .

Ladd, for instance, devotes a whole chapter to the subject "What about Israel?" in his attempt to identify Israel as the church. His argument centers on the treatment by Paul of the relationship of Israel to the church in Romans 9–11 . After stating the special character of Israel's relationship to God in Romans 9:4–5, Paul proceeds in verses 6–8 to distinguish between the physical seed and the spiritual seed. "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'Through Isaac your descendants will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

Everyone agrees that those who are physical descendants of Abraham are not assured individual salvation or spiritual blessing. Not all of Abraham's physical descendants inherit the promises given to Jacob. Likewise neither can all the descendants of Jacob presume on their natural lineage.

What Paul is distinguishing here is spiritual Israel or true Israel from Israelites who have only a physical connection. On this point all can agree. But there is no reference in this verse to Gentiles. While it is true according to Galatians 3:6–9 that Gentile Christians are spiritually descendants of Abraham, they are never called descendants of Jacob, and this is the point at issue.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament agree that all the descendants of Abraham do not participate in the particular promises given to Israel. It is also true that all physical Israel will not inherit the promises, but only spiritual Israel. To expand this, however, to the statement that spiritual Israel includes Gentiles is to assume what is never taught in Scripture. The fact is that all through Romans 9–11 the thought depends on a careful distinction between Gentiles and Israel. In the past, Israel had many advantages over the Gentiles. In the present age they have the opportunity to receive Christ on an equal basis with Gentiles. In the future, they will be restored to a privileged position, as is brought out in chapter 11 .

Ladd, however, argues from Romans 9:23–26 that the quotation from Hosea applies to the Gentiles a prophecy originally given to Israel. The passage is as follows, "And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, 'I will call those who were not My people, "My

people,” and her who was not beloved, “beloved.” And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, “You are not my

people,” there they shall be called sons of the living God.”“ Ladd states, “Then Paul does an amazing thing. He quotes two passages from Hosea which in their Old Testament context refer to Israel and applies them to the Christian church which consists largely of Gentiles, and he does this to prove that the Old Testament foresees the Gentile church.”

Ladd here is guilty of reading into the passage what it does not say. It is clear all the way through Romans 9 that the vessels of mercy mentioned in verse 23 include both Jews and Gentiles, and in verse 24 he specifically mentions both classes. However, in verses 25–29 the Apostle reverts back to the marvelous fact that Jews can be saved in this present age, and in his quotation from Hosea he claims that there is partial fulfillment in the present age because the people of Israel can be restored and become sons of the living God. The fact that Paul is talking about Israel and not Gentiles is demonstrated in verses 27–29 where he quotes from Isaiah beginning with, “And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel...” It is not until verse 30 that he returns to consider the Gentiles and this is introduced by the question, “What shall we say then?” In other words Ladd’s assertion that Hosea is referring to Gentiles is not supported by the context. In this entire chapter Paul is talking about Israel in contrast to the Gentiles.

It could be argued that there is a partial application of the Hosea prophecy to Gentiles because they were not the people of God but now in the present age can become sons of the living God. However, the entire Old Testament including the Book of Hosea points out that Israel in covenant relationship with God forsook that covenant and has to be restored—and this was never true of the Gentiles. Accordingly Ladd’s decision to adopt a spiritualizing hermeneutic because he “*finds the New Testament applying to the spiritual church promises which in the Old Testament refer to literal Israel*” is not really justified by the quotation from Hosea. Ladd is reading into it what he wants it to say rather than what it actually says. Even Ladd agrees that in chapter 11 Paul returns to literal Israel. The fact, however, is that Paul is dealing with literal Israel all the way through these chapters.

The metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11 has occasioned a great deal of exegesis, usually influenced heavily by what the interpreter wants the passage to say. The olive tree has its natural branches cut off in order that branches from the wild olive tree could be grafted in. Paul then predicts that the day will come when the wild olive branches will be cut off and the natural branches grafted back in. The question is, What does the olive tree represent?

The most natural interpretation is that it represents the place of blessing as defined in the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:3, which predicted that in Abraham all nations will be blessed. Israel was blessed by its relationship to Abraham as illustrated in the Old Testament where the Israelites were a favored people. Their rejection of Christ, however, has brought about a judicial blinding or hardening as mentioned in Romans 11:25, which states that “a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in.” This refers to the difficulty in the present age for Jews to see the truth concerning Christ. In the present age Gentiles are especially blessed, but Israel is largely in unbelief.

The passage indicates that Israel’s blindness originated when Christ was on earth and will end when the time of Gentile blessing concludes with the rapture of the church. After the period of the Gentile blessing, Israel will have a further period of special blessing when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

In this passage, as in earlier passages in Romans, there is no need to confuse Israel with the church. In fact the contrast between Israel and Gentiles continues to be observed. While Paul makes clear that Israelites can be saved in the present age, it is also clear that it is a period of unusual blessing for the Gentiles, in contrast to what precedes and what follows. That Israelites and Gentiles share blessing in the church in the present age all will affirm. However, the passage does not teach that Gentiles become Israelites. In fact Paul's entire argument is based on the *contrast* between Israel and the Gentiles in the period preceding the present age and in the period following the present age.

Much has been written on the phrase "all Israel will be saved." Here Hodge, although a postmillenarian, makes the text clear.

Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation. The Jews, as a people, are now rejected; as a people they are to be restored. As their rejection, although national, did not include the rejection of every individual; so their restoration, although in like manner national, need not be assumed to include the salvation of every individual Jew. Πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ is not therefore to be here understood to mean, all the true people of God, as Augustin[e], Calvin, and many others explain; nor all the elect Jews, i.e., all that part of the nation which constitute "the remnant according to election of grace;" but the whole nation as a nation.

As in previous references to Israel and the Gentiles in Romans 9–11, Israel remains Israel and Gentiles remain Gentiles and neither term is in itself equivalent to the church.

The Argument from Philippians 3:1-3

In the Old Testament the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision and anyone not circumcised was considered cut off from the covenant. "The circumcised" referred therefore to those Jews who claimed their right to the promises given to Abraham and the Jewish nation by observing this rite of circumcision. By contrast, Gentiles are called uncircumcised. Those who want to make Israel and the church identical have very often referred to Philippians 3:1–3 as contradictory evidence. The passage states, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."

When Paul says "we are the true circumcision," he is of course referring to himself and fellow Jews. The word true is not in the Greek text but is added by way of explanation by the translators. While Jews were to be physically circumcised, Paul teaches that Gentiles can fulfill the same idea by being set apart to God without the physical act. Here those ambitious to prove that Israel is the church arbitrarily state that verse 3 is referring to Gentiles, something the passage does not indicate. While it may be conceded that Gentile Christians who are separated to God fulfill the concept of circumcision, even this concept distinguishes Gentile Christians from Christians who are of the nation Israel. Paul further points out that physical circumcision even for a Jew is not enough, and in Romans 2:28–29 he states, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." Accordingly while Gentiles may achieve spiritually what a spiritual Jew achieves, it is not by the physical act of circumcision. Instead of making Jew and Gentile one, Philippians 3:3 continues the distinction even though they are one in Christ.

Other passages are often cited but are just as arbitrary in their interpretation as those previously examined. In James 1:1 reference is made to the twelve tribes scattered abroad, and 1 Peter 1:1 refers to the sojourners. It is perfectly natural to take both passages as referring to Jewish Christians, not Gentiles, and to read in them anything more is imposing on the texts what they do not say. More important, however, is the argument related to Hebrews 8.

The Argument concerning the New Covenant in Hebrews 8

From the very fact that the Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament, or the Old covenant and the New covenant, it is clear that Christianity fundamentally is based on a New covenant brought in by Jesus Christ. While the history of Christianity has revealed many attempts to return to the Law as illustrated in Paul's dealing with the Galatians, and while other groups like the Seventh-day Adventists go back to the Law for some of their basic theology, the whole point of the New Testament is to present the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ. John states it very simply, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

It was exceedingly difficult for many Hebrew Christians to accept the fact that the Law was actually finished and that a new covenant had been introduced. Accordingly the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews offered several contrasts between the New covenant and the old covenant in relation to salvation, the priesthood, and God's promises. One such contrast is developed in Hebrews 8:7–13 where the author presents an extended quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34. Exponents of the idea that the church fulfills Israel's promises put heavy emphasis on this passage as proving their contention.

It is true that the entire passage from Jeremiah is quoted. The interpretation of the passage in Hebrews 8:13 is limited, however, to one phrase, "a new covenant," and the interpretation given is that "He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear." Exponents of the idea that Israel is the church are quick to point to this passage as proof of their contention. Allis, for instance, states:

The passage speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact that it is called "new" it has made the one which it is replacing "old"

and the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah; and the writer of Hebrews obviously appeals to it as such.

But is Jeremiah's New covenant actually being fulfilled today?

Scholars in all classifications have struggled to understand completely the concept of the New covenant. Even among premillenarians, several different views have been advanced: (a) the New covenant belongs only to Israel but the blood of the covenant is applied to the church; (b) the New covenant is expressly Israel's covenant but is applied in general to the church; or (c) there are two New covenants—one for Israel and one for the church. Those who affirm that Israel and the church are one interpret the covenant as expressly made to the church, including both Old Testament and New Testament saints.

Some of the problems are semantic, and the various views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The problem with claiming explicit fulfillment of the promises in the New covenant

for the present age is the simple fact that all the promises of the New covenant are not being currently fulfilled. While the church has experienced many spiritual blessings, it is not true (as is clear from Heb 8:11) that evangelism and missionary activity are no longer necessary because everyone knows the Lord. The world has not yet reached the stage where God has declared, "I will remember their sins no more." A literal fulfillment of this passage requires the millennial kingdom with Christ reigning and bringing in the spiritual blessings that attend His reign.

A further problem for those who use this passage to support the concept that Israel and the church are one is that the explanation or exegesis limits itself to the one word *new*. The writer of Hebrews does not claim that the New covenant is now being fulfilled. All he claims is that a New covenant has been established. What is the true explanation?

The fact that all conservative expositors accept is that Christ, through his death on the Cross, has established a covenant of grace under which those who are sinners can be justified, forgiven, and made new creatures in Christ. This is new because it provides something the Law did not provide. A solution to the thorny problem of the interpretation of the New covenant is relatively simple.

Christ in His death on the Cross made it possible for God to extend grace to anyone who believes, whether Jew or Gentile.

This attitude of grace, based on the death of Christ, is stated in Romans 3:23–26. It is also the basis of grace to the church in the present age and is the legal background for salvation, justification, and all the blessings that belong to the church. The grace accomplished by Christ is also the basis for millennial blessing and the fulfillment of the many promises of an age in which there will be righteousness and peace and universal knowledge of the Lord. A solution to the problem then is that there is one covenant with application to Israel and to the church and to anyone saved by the death of Christ. In Scripture the application of the New covenant is explicitly to the church in the present age and to Israel as a nation in the future as far as millennial blessings are concerned. The New covenant is also the basis for a new rule of life according to the dispensational setting of those involved.

Accordingly the writer of Hebrews is proving that the Law is dead because even the Old Testament predicted that a New covenant would replace the Law, and a faithful Jew should recognize that the Mosaic law was temporary and would be supplanted by a New covenant of grace. Such a New covenant has already been brought in by the death and resurrection of Christ. That the application to Israel is full and complete as anticipated in Jeremiah 31 and other similar passages, however, is not stated in the text nor is it actually true. Accordingly the proof that Israel and the church are identical is not supported by this passage. What is taught is that both Israel and the church derive their salvation and spiritual blessing from the same covenant, that is, the covenant of grace made possible by the death of Christ.

Conclusion

Dispensational interpretation holds that the term *Israel* is never inclusive of Gentile Christians and that while both enjoy the same privileges in the church in the present age, the fulfilment of the special promise given to Israel of a golden age of grace and blessing is yet to be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. This is based on a literal interpretation of prophecy.

In taking all references to Israel literally, dispensationalists have the support of such a postmillenarian as Hodge. Accordingly it is not simply dispensational theology that dictates that

Israel always means Israel. Correct exegesis also supports the same concept. The fact that so many scholars have spiritualized the

Scriptures, including those relating to Israel, is of course evident. Amillennialism, which often takes this view, has been predominant since the days of Augustine. But the concept that the term *Israel* includes Gentile believers is read into the text of Scripture. It is determined by theological presuppositions rather than proper exegesis.

The implication that Israel always means Israel is important because it supports not only premillennialism, but the whole concept of the literal interpretation of prophecy in general. It leads to the conclusion that God has a special program for the nation of Israel as a nation. In the present age Jew and Gentile can become one in Christ without losing their racial or national characteristics. In the future the distinction between Jew and Gentile will again become more distinct as Israel receives special blessings promised to her in the millennial kingdom while the Gentiles receive other blessings during the same time period. Even in the new heavens and the new earth the ethnic distinctions continue though all believers share the same blessings. The new Jerusalem will have the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates; and the names of the twelve Apostles, representing the church, will be on the foundation. Individual and corporate identity will be preserved throughout eternity, even though the blessings of grace may be shared equally in the eternal state. The answer to the question, "Is Israel's prophetic program fulfilled by the New Testament church?" is no. Israel still has a glorious future which will be fulfilled literally. Wilkinson has expressed this clearly.

Nevertheless, facts are stubborn things. It is a fact that God has declared that Israel is not to cease from being a nation before Him for ever. It is a fact that the Jewish nation, still in unbelief, survivor of all others, alone retains its national identity.... It is a fact that the promise of a land (the territorial limits of which were defined) to the posterity of Abraham, as also the promise of a son of David's own line to occupy David's throne for ever, were *unconditional* promises, ratified by covenant and oath. It is a fact that the posterity of Abraham has never yet fully possessed and enjoyed the whole land so granted and that no son of David occupies David's throne.... The O.T. promises are all as certain of fulfilment in their O.T. sense and meaning and purpose to Israel, as are the N.T. promises certain of fulfilment to the Church.