

THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL ISRAEL

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THE EXISTENCE OF THE MODERN STATE OF ISRAEL is nothing short of miraculous. It is a land of slightly under eight thousand square miles,¹ or slightly smaller than the state of New Jersey,² directly surrounded by six Muslim Arab states, in a region of twenty-two Muslim countries. Since its founding in 1948, Israel has been invaded by armies vastly superior in number, and it has often been attacked by terrorists bent on destroying the nation. Israel was founded and continues as a democracy, even including in its government individuals who do not entirely support its existence.³ Despite all this, Israel has not only survived, but has also prospered. But will the Israel of end-times prophecy differ from the Israel of today?

The question of the future status of Israel—the land and the people⁴—continues to be a point of discussion and disagreement among theologians.

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¹ This does not include areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Discover+Israel/State+of+Israel.htm (accessed July 21, 2008).

² According to <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/usa/states/area.shtml> (accessed July 21, 2008).

³ Ahmed Tibi, a member of the Knesset, a member of several important committees, and a citizen of Israel, has been quoted as saying, “We are the victims. You know, it’s stigmatic to say that Arab MKs are aggressive. We are being accused that we are aggressive because we are talking and struggling against occupation. We cannot be anything other than hostile to occupation. . . . We are the indigenous people. We were here before Israel” (taken from a question and answer session with Tibi in the *Jerusalem Post*, November 5, 2007; online: <http://info.jpost.com/C004/QandA/qa.ahtibi.html>). While it is false that Palestinians are indigenous to Israel, it does not stop Tibi (a citizen of Israel and a member of the Israeli parliament) from using this argument to justify his hostility toward Israel.

⁴ H. Wayne House, ed., *Israel: The Land and the People* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

POSITIONS REGARDING THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

Some say Israel does not have a national, political future, and others say that it does. Under these two general themes, four majority positions are held: covenant theology, replacement theology, classical dispensationalism, and progressive dispensationalism. In the first view, covenant theologians see little or no distinction between the Old and New Testaments; they emphasize the continuity of the two. Most covenant theologians say the physical nation of Israel has no place in God's future plans (though some say Israel's blessings in the land will be experienced in the eternal state).⁵ Thus Old Testament verses about the future of Israel are said to refer to the church.

The second perspective, replacement theology, or supersessionism, teaches that the church has replaced, or superseded, Israel in God's future plans. Supersessionism does not share with covenant theology its understanding of theological covenants whereby the people of God in both testaments are one covenant community. Israel as a nation rejected the Messiah, and therefore lost its inheritance. The modern state of Israel, then, is no more significant in God's view than any other modern nation.⁶

The third and fourth views, traditional dispensationalism and progressive dispensationalism, share belief in a future national Israel, but they see the composition and purpose differently. They both teach that there is a distinction between Israel and the church and that there will be a place for both in the future. They both teach that promises made to Israel in the Old Testament that are neither conditional on Israel's obedience nor already fulfilled are still in effect. Distinctions between these theologies will be discussed later.

COVENANT THEOLOGY

Kaspar Olevianus (1536–1587) and Zacharius Ursinus (1534–1583) are generally credited with first systematically organizing covenant theology in the Heidelberg Catechism.⁷ The Westminster Con-

⁵ Richard L. Pratt Jr., "To the Jew First: A Reformed Perspective," in *To the Jew First*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 183.

⁶ For an excellent and recent rebuttal of replacement theology see Calvin L. Smith, *The Jews, Modern Israel, and the New Supersessionism* (Lampeter, UK: King's Divinity, 2009).

⁷ Roger E. Olson, *Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 163.

fession includes further development of the doctrine.⁸ The basic tenet of covenant theology is that God has operated under several covenants. Theologians disagree on whether there are two covenants or three, with the three-covenant position being dominant. The three covenants are said to be Redemption, Works, and Grace. The first covenant was made in eternity between God the Father and God the Son, with the Father appointing the Son to be the Head and Redeemer of the elect, while the Son agreed to “make amends for the sin of Adam and of those whom the Father had given Him.”⁹ The second covenant, the Covenant of Works, was between God and Adam. God made Adam the representative of all humanity, so that Adam’s actions were on behalf of all his descendants. In this covenant God required “perfect obedience” as a condition for granting eternal life to Adam and his descendants. Adam failed to uphold his end of the covenant, resulting in the physical and spiritual death of humanity. Because of this God then established the Covenant of Grace. Covenant theologians debate with whom God made this final covenant; some say sinners as a whole, other say elect sinners, while still others say it includes believers and their successive descendants.¹⁰ However, for the purposes of this article, it is sufficient to recognize that according to covenant theology during most of human history the Covenant of Grace has been in effect.

Covenant theologians do see different dispensations (including Jesus’ New Covenant), but they say these are simply different outworkings of the Covenant of Grace. This theology also sees a continuity and unity between the Old and New Testaments, something John Calvin taught. Calvin argued against the view of some contemporaries that the Mosaic Law was only negative, as opposed to the grace of the New Covenant. He saw the New Testament as building on the Old as a continuation of the same objective for God’s chosen—spiritual and eternal life.¹¹ Stemming from the belief that God has been operating under one system, the Covenant of

⁸ See the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapters 7, 8, 19. http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html (accessed August 4, 2008).

⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 269.

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 275–77.

¹¹ H. Wayne House, *Charts on Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 1:112–16.

Grace, for most of history, covenant theologians see only one “community” of God throughout history, namely, the elect. Therefore the faithful among Israel in the Old Testament and believers in the New Testament church are in the same community. In fact Berkhof states that the church was begun with Abraham.¹² Duncan describes covenant theology as “the Gospel set in the context of God’s eternal plan of communion with his people, and its historical outworking in the covenants of works and grace.”¹³

From this belief that the church existed in the Old Testament, any and all promises made to that “church” (i.e., Israel) are intended for those who are included in the church today, those who are under the Covenant of Grace. Covenant theologians apply an allegorical or typological interpretive method to biblical prophecies concerning Israel. “The administration of blessings and curses on the nation of Israel points to the eschatological, heavenly blessings and everlasting hell.”¹⁴ In explaining the typological nature of the Old Testament Calvin wrote, “God was pleased to indicate and typify both the gift of future and eternal felicity by terrestrial blessings, as well as the dreadful nature of spiritual death by bodily punishments, at that time when he delivered his covenant to the Israelites as under a kind of veil.”¹⁵

Thus for covenant theologians the answer to the question about Israel’s future is that there is none. The promises of the Old Testament are reserved for all those who have been faithful throughout the ages, not necessarily for one group of people physically descended from Abraham.

REPLACEMENT OR SUPERSESSIONIST THEOLOGY

Replacement or supersessionist theology is distinct from but similar to covenant theology in its view of Israel and the church. Replacement theology predates covenant theology by more than a

¹² “The establishment of the covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of an institutional Church” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed., 295).

¹³ J. Ligon Duncan, “What Is Covenant Theology?” <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resources/apologetics/Covenant%20Theology%20&%20Justification/ligoncovt.htm> (accessed December 18, 2008).

¹⁴ Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 6.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1846; reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 2.11.3.

thousand years.¹⁶ Under this system Israel was God's chosen people in the Old Testament, given promises to be fulfilled in the future. At Jesus' first advent, however, Israel failed to acknowledge Him as their Messiah and they put Him to death. Because of their rejection the promises God made to them were taken away and given to the faithful, those who accept Jesus as the Messiah. The church then replaced Israel in God's economy.

This theology became widespread in the early church after the final destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 135. Prior to this time the church was composed mostly of Jewish believers. However, with the influx of Gentiles into the church, the character of the church began to change. Many said that the devastation and suffering of Israel resulted from the Jews rejecting and ultimately putting to death their Messiah. God was dispensing His final rejection of Israel as a nation. Although the early church held to a literal future millennial reign of Christ,¹⁷ by the time of the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 the church had come to believe that the messianic kingdom was at hand. They viewed millennialism as heretical; this is particularly true of Eusebius of Caesarea Maritima.¹⁸ Many saw Constantine's acceptance of Christianity after decades of persecution as the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. Israel's redemption and the promises of a future were largely forgotten. Throughout the medieval period supersessionism was the dominant view of the church. Church authorities often used it as a pretext to persecute Jews, calling them "Christ-murderers."¹⁹

The Roman Catholic Church, as seen in its catechism, continues to teach supersessionism. The Roman Church is amillennial, teaching that the coming of Christ to His (eternal) kingdom is being "suspended" until "all Israel" recognizes Christ.²⁰ Supersessionism continued on into the Reformation in the teachings of Luther,

¹⁶ H. Wayne House, "The Church's Appropriation of Israel's Blessings," in *Israel: The Land and the People*, 77.

¹⁷ See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 80.

¹⁸ Eusebius's antichilastic disposition is evident in his *Historia ecclesiastica* 3.28.2–5; 3.39.11–13; and 7.24.

¹⁹ The idea that the Jews were the murderers of Jesus Christ began as early as Ignatius. See House, "The Church's Appropriation of Israel's Blessings," 94–95.

²⁰ The Catholic Catechism teaches that Israel was "called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church" from the time of Abraham (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1.1.2.50). The Catechism says, "The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by 'all Israel', for 'a hardening has come upon part of Israel 'in their 'unbelief toward Jesus' (ibid., 1.2.2.674).

who said, “The Jews have lost this promise, no matter how much they boast of their father Abraham. . . . They are no longer the people of God.”²¹ Luther called them a “rejected and condemned people.”²² One supersessionist argues as follows:

It [the period of God’s “plan of salvation” involving Israel] began with the call of God to an imperfect man, Abraham, who, by the grace of God, became a friend of God. This period ended, once and for all, with God’s judgment as manifested by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Having fulfilled its divine purpose, this stage had a very clear beginning and a very anti-climactic end. . . . The modern, physical state of Israel no longer has any more significance than any other nation as far as Christianity is concerned. At risk of being accused of anti-Semitism, let us say that Israel is in the same category, as far as the church is concerned, as America, Bolivia, China, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, Greenland, Holland, India, and the rest of the alphabet, right up to Zimbabwe.²³

For replacement theologians Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,” prove this to be true. They interpret this verse as signaling an end to Israel’s inclusion in God’s plan for the future. Replacement theologians also cite Matthew 21:43 as evidence of God’s permanent rejection of Israel. Jesus told the Pharisees, “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruits of it.”

DISPENSATIONALISM

In contrast to covenant theology and supersessionist theology is the system known as dispensationalism. It is generally acknowledged that dispensationalism was first systematically organized by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and promoted in the writings of C. I. Scofield (1843–1921) and Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871–1952).²⁴ These early views are referred to as “classical” or “traditional” dis-

²¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 15–20*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick, vol. 3 of *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 113.

²² Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society, IV*, ed. Franklin Sherman, vol. 47 of *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 268.

²³ Bernhard Kuiper, *When Bad Things Happen to Good Prophecies* (Longwood, FL: Xulon, 2005), 44.

²⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, “Update on Dispensationalism,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 16–18.

dispensationalism in order to differentiate this position from what is called “progressive dispensationalism.” Although critics accuse dispensationalism of being a modern phenomenon, dispensationalists have argued that some facets of the doctrine have been in existence since the time of the church fathers.²⁵

Both classical and progressive dispensationalists teach that God has “dispensed” His rule in differing ways throughout history. The Latin word for “dispensation” means “economical management or superintendence.”²⁶ A dispensation may “refer to a dispensing or an administration”²⁷ of God’s rule over all humankind or over a segment of humanity. There are differing divisions, but generally dispensationalists divide this work of God into several epochs,²⁸ including the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Church (or Grace), and Millennium (or kingdom).²⁹ In each epoch God is seen as working in unique ways. Most dispensationalists also see these dispensations as building on each other in varying degrees. Parts or the whole of God’s covenantal decrees and promises remain in effect. Dispensationalists do not see covenants made during subsequent dispensations as replacing the covenants made earlier, unless it is specifically so stated in the Scriptures. For example the command God gave to Adam to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth is still in effect.

The premillennial rapture, though not accepted by all dispensationalists, is also an important feature of dispensationalism. As Ryrie says, “Being a dispensationalist makes one a premillennialist,”³⁰ though certainly being a premillennialist does not make one a dispensationalist.

Both traditional and progressive dispensationalists believe Israel as a nation has a place in the future. Progressive dispensationalist Blaising says, “One of the most well-known features of the dispensational tradition is the belief in a future for national Israel. That future includes at least the millennial reign of Christ and for

²⁵ See Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 113–26.

²⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (October–December, 1936): 391.

²⁷ Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!* 32.

²⁸ “Epochs” here refers to the periods of God’s working that, while within the framework of history, are not themselves specific periods of history.

²⁹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 84.

³⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 39.

some dispensationalists, [this] extends into the eternal state as well.”³¹ He says this has resulted in dispensationalists supporting the modern state of Israel.

Dispensationalists believe that the Abrahamic Covenant was not conditional, that is, its continuance was not dependant on certain conditions to be upheld by both parties. God promised Abraham an actual, physical land inheritance, populated by a physical nation, descended from Abraham. They do not see the church as fulfilling this promise spiritually. As Bigalke comments, “Israel, as a nation, was promised a king, a land, and a throne. By contrast, the church is a spiritual nation with a heavenly promise.”³² Fruchtenbaum writes that the Abrahamic Covenant “promised an eternal seed developing into a nation that will possess the Promised Land with some definite borders. While that nation, the Jews, continues to exist, never in Jewish history have they possessed all the Promised Land. For this promise to be fulfilled, there must be a future kingdom.”³³ Dispensationalists argue that the promise to Abraham was not conditional, but the possession of it is. “Disobedience does, however, affect Israel’s enjoyment of the land.”³⁴

Dispensationalists claim that their interpretational method leads them to maintain a distinction between Israel and the church as well as a future for the nation Israel. “Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation.”³⁵ Ryrie is careful to point out that literal interpretation does not mean misinterpreting figures of speech. Rather, “Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation.”³⁶ Dispensationalists argue that literal or plain interpretation is essen-

³¹ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 21. Genesis 15:18–21 sets forth the extent of the land borders promised to the people of Israel. “On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—the Kerrites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.’” (NKJV).

³² Ron J. Bigalke Jr., “The Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (New York: University Press, 2005), 49.

³³ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “The Land Covenant,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, 87.

³⁴ Bigalke, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” 44–45.

³⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

tial to the study of Scripture. “If God [is] the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to man, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell man.”³⁷ This approach guards against the medieval practice of “spiritualizing” a text, giving the text a deeper, spiritual meaning than the words themselves convey. In order to distinguish themselves further from other theological systems, dispensationalists claim to employ this hermeneutic “consistently and in all study of the Bible.”³⁸ Ice argues, “Israel always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system of interpretation is consistently used because there are no indicators in the text that such is the case.”³⁹ Stemming from this hermeneutic, dispensationalists see the prophecies made to Israel in the Old Testament (that were not literally fulfilled in either the Old or the New Testament) as being fulfilled in the future. Among these are the promises of a land and a people (Gen. 13:14–16), and the promise that the people of Israel will be gathered to their own land in peace and prosperity (Jer. 23:3–8).

Classical dispensationalism. As indicated earlier, distinctions have arisen within dispensationalism, pertaining mainly to hermeneutics and the results of slightly different methods.

Classical dispensationalism is marked by a “sharp” distinction between Israel and the church. Ryrie says, “This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a man is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. A man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will.”⁴⁰ Classical dispensationalism holds to a dualistic view of humanity. Israel is seen as God’s “earthly” people, while the church is His “heavenly” people.⁴¹ Chafer illustrated this distinction as follows. “Every covenant, promise, and provision for Israel is earthly, and they continue as a nation with the earth when it is created new.

³⁷ Ibid., 88.

³⁸ Ibid., 89.

³⁹ Thomas Ice, “Dispensational Hermeneutics,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 32.

⁴⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 45.

⁴¹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Contemporary Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 228.

Every covenant or promise for the church is for a heavenly reality, and she continues in heavenly citizenship when the heavens are recreated.”⁴² Ryrie modified this somewhat, saying that Israel’s earthly promises are to be fulfilled during the millennial kingdom, by Jews living when the kingdom is inaugurated and by those born during this thousand-year reign. “The earthly future for Israel does not concern Israelites who die before the millennium is set up. The destiny of those who die is different. Believing Israelites of the Mosaic age who died in faith have a heavenly destiny. . . . Jews today who believe in Christ are members of the Church, His body, and their destiny is the same as Gentile believers.”⁴³

In reference to hermeneutics classical dispensationalists argue that they interpret the Scriptures from a strictly historical-grammatical method. Regarding the grammatical aspect of this method, an interpreter attempts to “suppress any of his own viewpoints regarding what he thinks the passages should mean so as to allow the exegetical evidence from the passage under investigation to speak for itself.”⁴⁴ Regarding the historical setting of a passage Thomas says, “The original historical setting ‘freezes’ the meaning of the text.”⁴⁵ In this system there can be only one meaning of a given text, determined by an objective reading of the exegetical evidence and the historical context of the passage. This leads classical dispensationalists to see a discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, while still holding to the unity of the two. Thus Israel means the same thing in the Old Testament as it does in the New, but God’s purposes in the Old Testament differ from those of the New.⁴⁶ Flowing from this method of interpretation, classical dispensationalists generally reject *sensus plenior*, or a “fuller meaning” of passages. As Thomas observes, *sensus plenior* “amounts to an allegorical rather than a literal method of interpretation.”⁴⁷ A result of classical dispensationalism’s adherence to grammatical-historical interpretation and single meanings of texts is the unwavering belief in a pretribulational rapture of the church

⁴² Lewis Sperry Chafer, quoted in *ibid.*, 228–29.

⁴³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 146.

⁴⁴ Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, 4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁶ House, *Charts on Systematic Theology*, 1:114–15.

⁴⁷ Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” 8.

and the rejection of the contention that God's messianic kingdom exists now in any form and that Jesus is now sitting on David's throne. Howe wrote, "The Lord Jesus is currently seated at the right hand of the Father on a throne. In this writer's opinion, He is seated *as the Son of God ascended and glorified*. He now awaits the triumph of His being seated on David's throne in the millennial kingdom. The Lord is in no sense sitting on the throne of David today. He is not currently ruling as the promised Davidic King."⁴⁸

Important for the discussion here is classical dispensationalism's view on Israel. Toussaint says, "In the original form of Darby's dispensationalism, the line drawn between Israel and the church was heavy, dark, and broad."⁴⁹ Classical dispensationalists assert that the promises made to the nation of Israel are *only* for Israel, and that they are to be fulfilled in the millennium.⁵⁰ They do not see the church participating in the blessings of future Israel. Modern classical dispensationalists see themselves as carrying on this tradition, while they argue that progressive dispensationalists are blurring the line between Israel and the church and are even attempting to "bridge the gap with covenant premillennialists."⁵¹

Progressive dispensationalism. In discussing the rise of progressive dispensationalism, Blaising says, "Dispensationalism has not been a static tradition."⁵² Rather there has been a continuous development of the theological system. He then notes that by 1991 certain developments in dispensationalism were unique enough that the term "progressive dispensationalism" was presented at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that year.⁵³ The term itself is meant to convey the belief that the dispensations are not simply "different arrangements between God and mankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption."⁵⁴ While continuing to stress the

⁴⁸ Frederick R. Howe, "Does Christ Occupy David's Throne Now?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19 (2006): 70 (italics his).

⁴⁹ Toussaint "Israel and the Church," 228.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 228–30. Toussaint notes that there is some variation among classical dispensationalists regarding the millennial kingdom, but that all share in holding a clear distinction between Israel and the church.

⁵¹ Sam A. Smith, *What the Bible Says about the Future* (N.p.: Biblical Reader Communications, 2005), 51.

⁵² Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

division of Israel and the church, progressive dispensationalism also stresses that “these dispensations point to a future culmination in which God will both politically administer Israel and Gentile nations and indwell all of them equally (without ethnic distinctions) by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵ Progressive dispensationalists hold that there is a distinction between Israel and the church, but also that the church is distinct from “Gentile nations, Jews, and Gentile people. The church is neither a separate race of humanity (in contrast to Jews and Gentiles) nor a competing nation (alongside Israel and Gentile nations), nor is it a group of angel-like humans destined for the heavens in contrast to the rest of redeemed humanity on the earth.”⁵⁶

Consequently progressive dispensationalism has a different view of the coming millennium and Israel’s place in it. Rather than Israel being God’s earthly kingdom while the church rules in heaven, as in the classical view, progressives see Israel being the preeminent nation among many other (Gentile) nations in the millennium. Saucy says this is based on God’s electing Israel to be distinct among the nations. “According to the prophets, this elective distinction of Israel was destined to bring a certain prominence to that nation among the other nations of the world in eschatological times. Israel and the city of Jerusalem were to have a central place in the messianic kingdom. God was to dwell there in a special way. Because the nations, too, would come to recognize and worship the God of Israel as the true God, they would serve and enrich God’s peculiar treasure, Israel.”⁵⁷

Progressive dispensationalists deny that the earthly millennial kingdom has already begun, despite their view that Jesus is on the Davidic throne now. This is a result of seeing a diversity of meaning in the words “Davidic throne” and the word “kingdom.” Progressive dispensationalists argue that classical dispensationalism tends to view the kingdom in an exclusively futuristic, material way, even when that meaning may not be the “clear and plain” reading of the text.

The New Testament presents Jesus’ present position and activity as a fulfillment of promises of the Davidic covenant. This [view] has been necessary because earlier forms of dispensationalism tended to deny it. They were concerned to underscore the future fulfillment of the po-

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 300.

litical and earthly aspects of the Davidic promise as that promise interfaces with the political and earthly promises of other covenants. We need to note that the New Testament does indicate that the political aspects of Jesus' Davidic kingship will be fulfilled in the future. But earlier dispensationalists tended to miss the fact that in biblical theology, *the Davidic nature of Christ's present activity guarantees the fulfillment of all of the Davidic promise in the future, including the national and political dimensions of that promise.*⁵⁸

Saucy shares the belief that Jesus fulfilled the promise of a Davidic King. Based on the phrase "the right hand of God" in Psalm 110:1 and Peter's interpretation of it in Acts 2:33 Saucy says the Davidic throne is this "symbol of authority."⁵⁹ However, he cautions, "We must be careful not to read more into this inauguration [of Jesus as the Davidic king at His first coming] than what is actually said. . . . The fact that Christ has this position of kingly authority in heaven, therefore, in no way denies that he will have this same position when he returns to establish his kingdom on earth."⁶⁰ This alludes to the reason for progressive dispensational theology's shift in interpretation.

Progressive dispensationalism uses modified methods of interpreting prophecy. As Bock notes, "To sort out whether fulfillment is inaugurated, realized, or still anticipated, one must study each passage with sensitivity to the various aspects that contribute to the textual message: historical, grammatical, literary, and theological. Each passage should be allowed to speak on its own terms and be studied with sensitivity to the various angles from which the text can be read. One must also be aware of the various ways texts can be associated with one another."⁶¹

Under this multitiered system of hermeneutics, prophecies are not bound to one fulfillment, but, as Bock argues, they can be "already but not yet" fulfilled.⁶² In other words progressive dispensationalism sees certain prophecies as being partially fulfilled at one point but not fully "realized" until a future date. Hence the kingdom of God was inaugurated at the first coming of Jesus, but will be ultimately fulfilled in the future. This also extends to promises made to Israel. The survival of the Jewish people throughout his-

⁵⁸ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 179–80 (italics theirs).

⁵⁹ Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 104.

⁶² *Ibid.*

tory and the forming of the modern state of Israel are seen as partial fulfillments of the promise to Abraham of a continuing people and a land.

On the basis of biblical prophecy, we expect a time when many Jews turn to the Son of David as a remnant of Jews have done through the centuries. The prophecies regarding the future glory of Israel will find their fulfillment in this remnant of faith constituted as the holy nation under the reign of Messiah, Son of David. The progressive re-gathering of Jews to Palestine in modern times and their political re-constitution is certainly consistent with this expectation, but it is not yet the fulfillment of the prophesied kingdom of glory. That kingdom comes with the Messiah's return and is anticipated by His present blessings on the Jews and Gentiles who trust Him.⁶³

In many respects this perspective is consistent with the classical understanding of the establishment of the messianic kingdom in the millennium, though classical dispensationalists believe that all Jews surviving the Tribulation will embrace Jesus as the Messiah (Zech. 12:10; 13:9) and enter alive into the kingdom ruled by David's Son. After the fullness of the Gentiles is complete, all Israel will then be saved (Rom. 11:25–26).

ROMANS 11:25–26—A CASE STUDY OF INTERPRETATIONAL METHODS

As a way of illustrating the varying hermeneutics of the theological positions described above, Romans 11:25–26 can be used as a case study. This passage is a watershed for revealing how a particular hermeneutical system sees Israel and its future. Horner calls it a “crucial passage with regard to the NT teaching concerning the present nature and destiny of national Israel.”⁶⁴ An example of interpretation will be given for each of the four systems discussed earlier.

COVENANT THEOLOGY

Although John Calvin does not seem to have taught covenant theology formally, his views were the basis for the system. In his commentary on Romans, Calvin writes concerning verses 25–26, “I extend the word *Israel* to all the people of God, according to this meaning—When the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall

⁶³ Ibid., 297.

⁶⁴ Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville: B&H Academic, n.d.), 253.

return from their defection to the obedience of faith.' . . . The Israel of God is what he calls the Church, gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles; and he sets the people, thus collected from their dispersion, in opposition to the carnal children of Abraham, who had departed from his faith."⁶⁵

The view of the one "people of God" found in the writings of later covenant theologians is clearly illustrated here. For Calvin "Israel" as used here by Paul means faithful Jews *and* Gentiles. When applied consistently, "Israel" mentioned in the Old Testament also means the church. Consequently national Israel's future is limited to Jews who come into the church through faith in Jesus.

While admitting that "Israel" in Romans 11:25 means ethnic Israel, DeCaro, a Reformed minister and covenant theologian, nonetheless says that this passage does *not* teach that national Israel will be saved in the future. He sees a distinction between the "Israel" of verse 25 and the "Israel" of verse 26. In verse 25 Israel, he says, is "a reference to unbelieving national Israel," while Israel in verse 26 speaks of "the elect remnant from whom ungodliness is turned away by the Redeemer whom they have embraced."⁶⁶ The Israel of verse 25 has been blinded, so that they must be saved in the same way Gentiles are saved, that is, through faith in Jesus. This is justified, in DeCaro's view, by Paul's earlier statement that "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (9:6). So for DeCaro the Israel of 11:26 is a faithful remnant of the whole in verse 25. Further he says this passage "does not, in the remotest manner, indicate futurity."⁶⁷ Rather, Paul "relates the redemption in Christ to the present age of grace and mercy, not to any moment or period of time following that era."⁶⁸

REPLACEMENT OR SUPERSESSIONIST THEOLOGY

The Roman Catholic Church regards itself as the new Israel, and heirs to the promises made to Israel. Barrack, a Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism, comments, "St. Paul's Letter to the Romans foretold that one day great numbers of Jews would return. 'If [the Jews] rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?' (Rom 11:15). 'All

⁶⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), electronic version, 238–39.

⁶⁶ Louis A. DeCaro, *Israel Today: Fulfillment of Prophecy?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 116.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Israel will be saved' (Rom 11:26) because 'The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29)."⁶⁹ He interprets verse 26 through a supersessionist grid.

The Catholic Church is the new and true Israel. Many faithful Catholics believe the time is fast approaching when great numbers of Jews will stream into the Church, the Synagogue transformed by the Messiah, and fulfill their election as God's Chosen People. The new and true Israel can only be the Church. . . . The Catholic Church teaches, "The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment until his recognition by all Israel." We cannot know when the Jewish people will come into the Church. But many who observe that the spiritual war is approaching some sort of climax wonder whether it may be soon. Our work is to prepare, and to show Jews who have expressed some interest in Jesus that baptism into His death and resurrection completes what they have already begun.⁷⁰

DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theologians agree that Romans 11:26 refers to future, national Israel. They contend that in Romans Paul consistently uses the term to describe national Israel in contrast to Gentiles, and that Paul *always* uses the term to mean national Israel.⁷¹ According to grammatical-historical interpretation, there is no contextual reason to say that the term "Israel" refers to anything but national, physical Israel. Dispensationalists then discuss when this national salvation will occur and to whom among the nations "all Israel" refers. Chafer and others hold that this term refers to Israel throughout all history, and that they will be resurrected just before Jesus' second coming.⁷² Ryrie takes a different view. He says "all Israel" refers to those who survive the Tribulation and "turn in faith" to Jesus (Zech. 13:8).⁷³ Others, such as Fruchtenbaum, say that Romans 11:26 teaches that "all Israel will be saved" after the Tribulation when the national leaders of Israel realize their error

⁶⁹ Martin K. Barrack, "Why Jews Are Better Off in the Catholic Church Than in the Jews for Jesus" (<http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Faith/2000-12/barrack.html> [accessed July 23, 2008]).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Even Douglas Moo, who apparently is not a dispensationalist, says each of Paul's uses of "Israel" in Romans refers to "ethnic Israel" and not the church (*Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 721).

⁷² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary, 1947), 3:105–8.

⁷³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986; reprint, Chicago: Moody, 1999), 514.

of rejecting Messiah Jesus and will lead the nation in a multi-day event of national confession, regeneration, and subsequent salvation.⁷⁴ Fruchtenbaum concludes, “God, being the covenant-keeper, for His sake, will fulfill His covenants; and part of that covenant promise is the national salvation of Israel.”⁷⁵ Hoehner links the timing of Israel’s salvation to the “time of forgiveness” in Zechariah 12:10, when Israel will “look upon [Him] whom they pierced; and they will mourn for Him.” There will be an “outpouring of the Spirit of grace and supplication on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” which will take place when Jesus returns to earth.⁷⁶ Though these views differ slightly, they all see Paul’s use of “all Israel” as referring to a future, national Israel.

CONCLUSIONS

The author’s opinion is that dispensationalism properly represents the biblical view of the future of national Israel.

Covenant theology requires that passages that promise unconditional physical, material blessings on Israel must be viewed allegorically. Regarding Romans 11:25, however, even some Reformed theologians see Israel as the ethnic people of Israel and not simply the spiritual “people of God.” Murray said, “It should be apparent from both the proximate and less proximate contexts in this portion of the epistle that it is exegetically impossible to give ‘Israel’ in this verse any other denotation than that which belongs to the term throughout the chapter. . . . It is of ethnic Israel Paul is speaking and Israel could not possibly include Gentiles.”⁷⁷

DeCaro’s conclusion that “Israel” in verses 25 and 26 has two different meanings and that the statement that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26) describes Israel in the present age is not exegetically sound. In 9:6 Paul clearly differentiated a group (believing Jews) within the whole (all Jews),⁷⁸ but he did not make the same dis-

⁷⁴ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1992), 784.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 786.

⁷⁶ Harold W. Hoehner, “Israel in Romans 9–11,” in *Israel: The Land and the People*, 156–57.

⁷⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 96.

⁷⁸ Romans 9:6 seems to be saying that in the present age a remnant from among Israel will believe in Jesus as Savior and Messiah, thus distinguishing a group within the whole.

inction in 11:25–26. In fact Paul indicated the exact opposite of what DeCaro argues. Verse 25 cannot possibly be referring to Israel as a whole, as history shows that there has been a “faithful remnant” of Jews who have accepted Jesus as Messiah. Also Paul added “in part” to designate that the nation’s blindness is not on every individual. However, “all” in verse 26 means that the entire nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus at a time in the future. There is no reason to say that “all” means just a part of the nation, the group of individuals who come to faith in Jesus as Messiah throughout history. Even though Paul did sometimes use “all” to indicate many or all types rather than every individual (e.g., 1 Tim. 2:4), clearly the majority of Jews throughout history have rejected Jesus, and it makes little sense to say that “all Israel” means “all types of Israel.” Thus “all Israel” of Romans 11:26 can only mean the entire nation of Israel will be saved at some point. As that has not yet happened, this passage must refer to the future, rather than the present. This view in no way argues that Israel will be saved by anything other than faith in Jesus, so DeCaro’s accusation that dispensationalism teaches that Israel will be saved simply by Jesus coming to them is erroneous.

Replacement or supersessionist theologians, while recognizing the literal nature of some Old Testament promises, fail to recognize that many promises are unconditional. They thereby say God either misled Israel in times past or He changed His mind when Jesus was rejected by Israel. They too must allegorize New Testament references to Israel’s future place in God’s plan. They say that Romans 11:25 means that all Israel will one day believe, *and join the church* in the eternal kingdom. This interpretation reads elements into the passage that are simply not there. In verse 25 the church is nowhere mentioned as part of Israel’s national salvation.

Both covenant and supersessionist theologies miss another key point, namely, Paul’s Jewishness. Paul was a Jewish rabbi, trained in one of the preeminent schools in Judaism under a well-respected rabbi. Reading the Epistle to the Romans without this in view severely restricts one’s ability to interpret Paul’s message properly. Repeatedly in chapters 9–11 Paul affirmed his Jewish heritage. Horner argues, “Paul obviously wrote Romans 11 with the passion of a Jewish Christian having unrelenting love for his Jewish brethren in the flesh.”⁷⁹ He concludes, “In other words, to speak merely nominally of the Jews in Romans 9–11 is to fly in the face of the

⁷⁹ Horner, *Future Israel*, 262.

Jewishness that Paul there upholds, especially in Rom. 9:1–5, 11:1–2, 28–29. Paul’s Jewishness would find it quite unthinkable for him to uphold his Jewish national status and at the same time deny continuity with its territorial foundation.”⁸⁰

It is the author’s view that both classical and progressive dispensationalists are correct in seeing a future national kingdom of Israel, ruled by Jesus in Jerusalem. God’s unconditional covenants and promises in the Old Testament are to be fulfilled literally for the nation Israel. God promised Israel that they would be gathered to their own land, live in peace in that land, and be ruled by the Messiah. None of these things has happened yet and must therefore take place in the future.

However, classical dispensationalism is more correct in holding that the Davidic kingdom is not now present in any form, and that Jesus is not now sitting on David’s throne. The manifestation of the kingdom of God under the Messiah is not a present reality. Jesus is now Lord of the cosmos and Savior of the church, but He is not King reigning in the Davidic kingdom. Jesus is the anointed King waiting to rule on David’s throne, and this will take place only during the millennial reign of Jesus over a physical, national Israel.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 233.