

IS THE CHURCH THE NEW ISRAEL?

Christ and the Israel of God

Introduction

Old Testament prophecy's relationship to the church has been a source of confusion for Christians since Pentecost. The debate intensified during the mid 20th century but now seems to be moving to a more central, unified approach. However, the effects caused by the more extreme positions of the last century are still very evident in the life of the church.

A proper understanding of the role of Israel in redemptive history is a key that unlocks the mysteries of the Bible. The concept of the kingdom of God is "a mystery that points to God's cosmic purpose to sum up the entire cosmos under the rule of one human King, Jesus of Nazareth."¹ This central theme ties the Bible together and gives definition to both Israel and the church. As focus shifts to the ultimate rule of Christ over all things, the roles of Israel and the church in the progression of salvation history are seen more clearly.

Survey of General Positions

While the number of unique positions is too extensive for anyone to know well or effectively explain, three of the camps can be summarized under the titles of classical dispensationalism, progressive dispensationalism, and covenant theology.

Classical dispensationalism developed under the influence of C.I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer. One controlling idea directed their interpretation, the idea that there is an absolute

¹Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 11.

distinction between Israel and the church of Christ.² The difference between the church and Israel is a metaphysical one. They are completely independent in nature. “As such, the two never mix or touch, and one cannot be confused with the other. They are always qualitatively distinct peoples.”³ Working from this theory, classical dispensationalists categorize the promises of God based on their initial recipients. Therefore, it would be inappropriate for a Gentile Christian today to claim Jeremiah 29:11, a promise for the tribe of Judah and Benjamin during the Babylonian captivity.

This process of categorization involves the division of salvation history into dispensations determined by different periods of revelation. Each dispensation is a period in which man’s obedience is tested in regard to the particular form of revelation given by God for that time.⁴ Each dispensation is categorized by a unique revelation of God’s will, but salvation is always dependent on God’s grace and the work of the cross regardless of the dispensation.⁵

Traditionally there are seven dispensations. The *New Scofield Bible* labels the dispensations as Innocence, Conscience or Moral Responsibility, Human Government, Promise, Law, the Church, and the Kingdom.⁶ The present Church Age is viewed as an “intercalation” or a parenthesis in the program of God.⁷ The church, therefore, was neither predicted in the Old

²Michael Williams, *This World is not my Home*, (Glasgow: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 8.

³Ibid., 9.

⁴Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 188.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 861.

Testament nor does it advance the program of events as revealed in the Old Testament.⁸ God's purposes and promises for Israel are for earthly blessings and will yet be fulfilled on this earth at some time in the future. On the other hand, God's purposes and promises for the church are for heavenly blessings and will be fulfilled in heaven.⁹ According to Chafer, the difference between Israel and the church will be clearly seen in the millennium. At that time Israel will reign as God's chosen people on earth and receive the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, but the church will have already been taken up into heaven at the rapture.¹⁰

Progressive dispensationalism is an adaptation of the classical position and is becoming more popular. It has gained momentum as classical dispensationalists wrestle with the continuity of the Old and New Testaments. A significant difference between classical and progressive dispensationalism is the understanding of the church. Progressive dispensationalists do not see the church as a mere parenthesis in God's plan, but as the first step in the progression of the establishment of the kingdom of God which will be shared by Israel and the church.¹¹ The dispensation of the Church Age, like all dispensations, is part of the progression toward God's ultimate rule over Israel and the church. There is, therefore, fulfillment of Old Testament promises in the church but they are only a partial inauguration of the promised blessings. When Christ returns, "he will rule forever over the 'nations' of the redeemed."¹² Christ's rule over the nations will be first and foremost through the ethnic nation of Israel. In other words, progressive dispensationalists acknowledge the continuity of Israel and the church but preserve the

⁸Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 189.

⁹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 860.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹² Stephen J. Wellum, "God's New Humanity: The Doctrine of the Church." (classroom lecture notes, 27080A—*Systematic Theology III*, Spring 2007), 64.

conviction that the ethnic nation will have a special inheritance.

Covenant theology separates all of human history into two covenants. The first is a covenant based on works which was established by God with Adam in the garden. The second covenant is initiated after the fall of man and is based on grace. The covenant of grace is manifested differently in the different stages of salvation history, but is “substantially the same in all.”¹³ The traditional covenant position on Israel is the polar opposite of the classical dispensationalist’s position. They would hold that the Church Age is not an “intercalation” from the plan set forth in the Old Testament but is God’s intended continuation of his plan to call a people unto himself. Therefore, the church started with Adam and has continued uninterrupted since. There is no metaphysical difference between the members of the people of God in the Old Testament and New Testament. They hold that there is no distinctive plan for Jewish people to be saved apart from inclusion in the one body of Christ, the church.¹⁴ Support for this position includes the fact that “almost all of the titles used of God’s people in the Old Testament are in one place or another applied to the church in the New Testament.”¹⁵ The promises made to Israel will be fulfilled among the members of the New Israel, which is the covenant community of faith.¹⁶

Christ: the Truest Israel

Each of these three positions shares a common problem, a lack of emphasis on the person and work of Christ. The relationship of Israel and the church should be resolved in the

¹³Wellum, “God’s New Humanity: The Doctrine of the Church,” 65.

¹⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 862.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Most nondispensationalists “hold that there will be a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people (Rom. 11:12, 15, 23-24, 25-26, 28-31), yet that this conversion will only result in Jewish believers becoming part of the one true church of God—will be ‘grafted back into their own olive tree’ (Rom. 11:24).” Ibid., 861.

man, Christ Jesus. The Old Testament purposefully and progressively points to Christ and the new covenant. The triumphant work of Christ ushers in the new covenant era. The purpose of the new covenant is to accomplish what the Mosaic covenant could not, to bring the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant back into the present experience of Israel,¹⁷ and the New Testament writers strive to clarify exactly who Israel is. Throughout the New Testament they explain that Jesus Christ is the true Israel and the authentic seed of Abraham.¹⁸ All the promises find their fulfillment in Christ, and the benefits of the promises are to those who are hidden in Christ.

From Genesis 3:15 on, the hope of a coming redeemer drives the Old Testament. Israel serves as a type of Christ over and over again in both structure and experience. Structurally, the Old Testament people of God recognized three special offices in particular: prophet, priest, and king.¹⁹ These offices guided Israel's social framework and were intended from the beginning to point to Christ. In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses compares himself in type to the future prophet the Lord will raise up from among the Israelites. Psalm 110:4 prophecies the order of priests the Messiah from which the Messiah will come. Finally, Zechariah 9:9 declares that the coming Messiah will be a king. These offices and those who fill them continually point to the coming redeemer.

Israel's experiences also point us to Christ. Peter declares that the prophets were not even serving themselves when they wrote their prophecies, but they were given for the benefit of future new covenant believers.²⁰ The New Testament writers continually draw from events in the life of the nation of Israel and clarify how they point to Christ. Hosea 11:1, for example, recalls God's deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, and Matthew 2:14-15 applies this directly to Christ.

¹⁷Wellum, "God's New Humanity: The Doctrine of the Church," 67.

¹⁸Ibid., 78.

¹⁹Ibid., 6.

²⁰1 Peter 1:12

According to Deuteronomy 8:2, Israel spent forty years in the wilderness for the purpose of testing to know what was in their heart. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness being tested in the exact same ways, during which he responds to Satan's temptation by referencing Deuteronomy 8:3. This verse calls for the nation of Israel to trust in the word of the Lord, which they continually failed to do during their forty years in the wilderness. The truest Israel, however, relied on the word of the Lord perfectly during his period of testing. Another example from the life of Israel that points directly to Christ is the centrality of the temple, the location of God's indwelling presence and the place of sacrifice. "During his earthly residence, Jesus was the locus of God's presence, and sacrificial atonement found its perfect expression at the cross."²¹ God's presence and his provision for atonement through sacrifice now belong to Christ.²²

The New Testament writers hope to establish and support that Christ is the truest Israel. In Galatians 3:16 Paul says that the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his offspring. He clarifies that this does not mean all the ethnic descendants of Abraham, but one specific ethnic descendent, "who is Christ."²³ Paul concludes in verse 29 of the same chapter that Abraham's descendants are those that belong to Christ. Paul sheds further light on this subject in Romans 9. He begins the chapter arguing that the promises God made to Israel have not failed, for "not all the descendants of Israel are Israel." In verse 25 he quotes Hosea 2:23 to show that it is those who are in Christ who now have the privilege of being called "my people" by God. In Ephesians 2:12-16 Paul says that Gentiles, who were formerly excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, have been reconciled together with the Jews into one body. Christ has destroyed the division in his flesh forever and created an unbreakable unity built on the foundation of both the

²¹Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence*, 144.

²²Christ also identifies his body as the temple in John 2:21.

²³All quotations use the English Standard Version of the Bible unless noted.

apostles and the prophets.²⁴ The covenant language of Israel, therefore, is used throughout the New Testament referring to the church because the church is the body of Christ, and Christ is the truest version Israel to ever live.²⁵

Objections to this Position

Most objections to this position come as a result of approaching the biblical text with a predetermined interpretive method. Classical dispensationalists would argue that the Scriptures must be interpreted in light of the period of revelation in which they were received from God. All the promises that are not fulfilled within the dispensation, therefore, are naturally to be understood entirely eschatologically. Specifically, the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 applies to the nation of Israel, for the promise was entrusted to them during a particular dispensation. The Old Testament promises are literal in the sense that they are tied directly to the people to whom they were given. A classical dispensationalist, therefore, would say any attempt to apply a promise to the church that was given to Israel would violate the proper approach to interpreting Scripture.

Progressive dispensationalists deal more thoroughly with the New Testament texts and offer a more satisfying treatment of the continuity between the covenants. Their objection to the position set forth in this paper is that Christ is only identified as Israel, but is never meant to replace the ethnic nation in the position of receiving the promises. They would say that eliminating the future inheritance of ethnic Israel is unwarranted. Beginning at Pentecost, the church is a major step toward the arrival of the kingdom of God, but it is only the beginning of the fulfillment of prophecy. Ultimately the promises made to Israel will still be fulfilled among the physical descendants of Abraham, for ethnic nationality will be upheld during Christ's millennial reign and Israel will serve as a model nation. Progressive dispensationalists, therefore,

²⁴Ephesians 2:20

²⁵James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1; 1 Peter 2:4-10

hold a “progressive, unified view of the covenants, culminating in the eternal, earthly state,” but maintain the conviction that the promises made to Israel are to be reserved for the physical nation as the kingdom of God is revealed.²⁶ This is certainly possible, but may not be necessary because of who Christ is.

Finally, covenant theologians would start from the interpretive system that all of Scripture from Genesis 3:15 and following is revealed under one covenant of grace. Therefore, there is one people of God from Adam to Revelation. The terms Israel and Church could be used interchangeably at times due to the level of continuity. The two covenant system is a predetermined interpretive method that is not outlined in Scripture. For the system to hold up, many of the key themes of the New Testament have to function the exact same way in the Old Testament. For example, the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation is assumed to be the same for Adam as it is for Peter. This method reduces the importance of key events, such as ethnic Israel receiving the covenants and the radical changes of Pentecost.

Defense of Position

In response to the classical dispensationalist objection that Scripture is divided into separate autonomous dispensations, it is crucial to look at the extensive number of passages that show Old Testament promises are fulfilled in Christ. Hebrews 8 directly applies the new covenant promise made with Judah and Israel in Jeremiah 31 to the church. 1 Peter 2:4-10 details how the body of Christ is being built up into a spiritual house to function as the holy temple. The Gentiles, who were formerly alienated from the people of God, have together with the Jews become a “holy nation” for possession by God. Throughout the New Testament the writers employ Old Testament language and draw direct connections to the progressive nature of salvation history. In addition to the fact that the dispensations are not defined in the Bible, the hermeneutic of classical dispensationalism fails to recognize Christ for who he really is, the most

²⁶Wellum, “God’s New Humanity: The Doctrine of the Church,” 64.

ethnically Jewish person in history.

Progressive dispensationalist's conviction to preserve the elevated status of the nation of Israel is absolutely right. This is the message of the Bible, and a lot of bad things have happened when people failed to do so. However, it must be done in a manner consistent with the New Testament. Christ, as Prophet, Priest, and King, is Israel, and those who are members of his body by faith are co-heirs in the kingdom of God. If God keeps his promises to Christ, he keeps them to Israel.

Like progressive dispensationalism, covenant theology gets a lot of things right. However, there is too much focus on the church and not enough on Christ. Many covenant theologians would say the church replaces Israel or the church is the new Israel. If Christ is Israel, this statement does not make sense. The two covenant system limits the ability of the Bible to shine as the world's most amazing and complicated piece of literature.

Hebrews 8 says the new covenant initiated by Christ has made the old covenant obsolete.²⁷ The New Testament affirms that believers who are members of the body of Christ by faith share equally in the coming kingdom. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile in the new covenant. With the old covenant made obsolete, there is now no reason to look outside of Christ for the fulfillment of biblical promises. In Christ, the promises are and will always be for ethnic Israel.

²⁷Hebrews 8:13