

Response to: Wayne House, “The Future of National Israel in Dispensational Thought”  
Robert L. Saucy, Talbot School of Theology

In general I believe that Prof. House has provided us with a good overall view of the various traditional positions on the future of national Israel. Before moving to my main response to this issue as a progressive dispensationalist, I would only make two brief comments on the expression of the views. I will have more to say about this later, but I was a little surprised at the earthly/heavenly dichotomy between Israel and the church that was still in the classic dispensational position as presented. I also wondered whether the covenant theology that denies a future for national Israel is really distinct from replacement or supersessionist theology. For example, Michael Horton’s explanation in his recent book on covenant theology that Israel’s theocratic status was revoked as result of that nation’s breaking of its covenant with God sounds very similar to the supersessionism of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century church.<sup>1</sup> House acknowledges that this historical supersessionism “continued on into the Reformation in the latter teachings of Luther” and I would suggest that it is this same supersessionism that is part of much covenant theology today.

Turning to the future of Israel in classical and progressive dispensationalism, House rightly says that both “share belief in a national Israel, but see the composition and purpose differently” (2). While I am not certain exactly what is meant by different views on “composition,” I do want to address some of the distinctions between classic and progressive dispensationalism raised by House that impinge on the future of Israel. For me, these differences center around the issues of hermeneutics or interpretational method, and the relationship of the church and Israel. Following a discussion of these two issues, I will then briefly consider how they relate to the understanding of the future of Israel.

#### I. Interpretational method.

A. *A canonical process approach.* House sees the difference between classical and progressive dispensationalism as stemming from a “slightly different” hermeneutical

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 47; cf. also O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), p. 121.

methods. Classical dispensationalists are said to hold to what is called “a strictly ‘historical-grammatical’ method” (p. 7). In response, I would like to note two hermeneutical principles that undergird my progressive dispensational interpretation. In my understanding they both comport with the historical-grammatical method with a slightly different understanding of the “historical” aspect.

According to House, the classic dispensationalist sees the meaning of the text frozen by the original historical setting. There is only one meaning which is presumably the meaning that the author intended his original audience to understand (p. 8). This understanding of historical-grammatical interpretation appears to be the same interpretive method that would be normative for any human writing.

I would suggest, however, that the truth of divine inspiration—that Scripture is both the word of human authors and the God’s word, makes the application of the historical-grammatical method to the Bible more complicated than simply interpreting it as any other book. To speak of the historical meaning raises the question of whether the meaning of the human writer and his immediate historical audience is the same as that of the divine author, and if not, whose meaning is the “historical” meaning?

Scripture makes it clear that the understanding of the human author is not always identical with that of the divine author. That is, the meaning of the text may have a deeper and fuller meaning than the original author and his audience understood. This is surely suggested in Peter’s reference to the Old Testament prophets making “careful searches and inquiries seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Pet. 1:10-11). In response to their search Peter says that these Old Testament prophets were told that they were not serving themselves but those to whom the gospel of Christ would later be preached (v. 12). Their desire to know more about the “person or time” (or with some versions, “the time and circumstances,” NIV), suggests that their knowledge of their prophecy was not complete. As Peter Davids writes, “The data the prophets lacked in particular were time (‘what time’) and context (‘what manner of time’), which were needed to give full understanding of their words for communication

has meaning only in context.”<sup>2</sup> Davids goes on to say, “The prophets could speak about this time which they did not understand because it was ‘the Spirit of Christ’ who was in them giving testimony (or witnessing).”<sup>3</sup>

The dual human-divine authorship of Scripture leads to a hermeneutical method that encompasses the reality of progressive revelation. Bruce Waltke refers to this as “the canonical process approach,” which he explains as “the recognition that the text’s intention became deeper and clearer as the parameters of the canon were expanded. Just as redemption itself has a progressive history, so also older texts in the canon underwent a correlative progressive perception of meaning as they became part of a growing canonical literature.”<sup>4</sup> The later revelation may more fully describe an earlier concept, such as the original mention of blessing that would come to all the nations through Abraham’s seed. Or it may add a referent to the original prediction such as the fact that the seed of woman in Genesis 3 is Jesus of Nazareth, or even multiple referents such as the prophecies concerning the Davidic kings culminating in the Messiah or the fulfillments of the prophecies concerning Israel’s return from exile including from Babylon and a future final restoration.<sup>5</sup>

This “canonical process approach” to hermeneutics thus respects the original grammatical-historical meaning of the text, but sees it developed further through later revelation. According to Waltke, “the canonical process approach holds that the original authorial intention was not changed in the progressive development of the canon but deepened and clarified.” The later revelation provided clearer perceptions of earlier texts, but they constituted “an organic and genetic unity.”<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Martin Pickup says, “A canonical-process approach looks to later revelation for elaboration of what an earlier passage, on a grammatical-historical level, was addressing.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 62.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, eds. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 7.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Jer. 24:4-7; 29:10-14; Ezek. 36:8-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 8, 10.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Pickup, “New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: The Theological Rational of Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 51/2 (June 2008): 362.

When Waltke claims that the later revelations do not change the original authorial intention, I doubt, that he intends to say that the original human author and his audience fully understood the later elaborations of the text or the full intention of the divine author. Rather as Pickup says, “A canonical process approach affirms that progressive revelation may elaborate on earlier passages so as to provide the full divine meaning of what earlier writers had prophesied. This full meaning may not have been understood by the earlier writers, but neither is it substantially different from, or in contradiction to their understanding and intended meaning.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a hermeneutic that sees deeper and fuller elaboration of an original prophecy in the unfolding of salvation history and its progressive revelation seems to provide the best interpretive method. What Waltke says of the psalms, I would suggest, is applicable throughout Scripture when dealing with the progressive development of salvation and its divinely given canonical revelation, namely, that “both the nonhistorical and undisciplined allegorical method of interpreting . . . and the Antiochian principle of allowing but one historical meaning that may carry with it typical significance are inadequate hermeneutical principles . . . .”<sup>9</sup>

That the meaning of a text is not intended to be limited to the original author’s understanding and that of his audience seems clear from Scripture. A few examples of this phenomenon may be noted. Genesis 3:15 in which God refers to the seed of the woman suffering a bruise on the heel from the serpent, but also afflicting a fatal blow on the serpent’s head, is recorded as God’s direct speech to the serpent. But the record is by a human author with intended meaning for his readers. We cannot know for certain what meaning was in the writer’s mind and in the minds of his original audience. They may have seen beyond an enmity between humans and literal snakes, but there is nothing in the context to suggest that the writer and his immediate readers understood the full reality of the messianic sense that we see in the New Testament allusions to this text (Rev. 12:7-9; cf. Rom. 16:20; Heb. 2:14).

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 354-55, n. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms,” 7.

Similarly Genesis 12:3 records the promise to Abraham, “in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). What this “blessing” meant to Abraham or the original readers of Genesis 12:3 cannot be known. But it is doubtful that they understood it as referring to redemption through Christ becoming a curse for us with the resultant justification and the gift of the Spirit as the apostle explains this blessing in Galatians 3:8-14.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, who of us would want to claim that Isaiah and the original hearers of his prophecy of Jahweh’s Servant in Isaiah 52-53 had the same depth of meaning of this great text as that found in the later New Testament revelation. The same may be said of Isaiah’s word’s concerning the sign of the birth which the New Testament understands as the Virgin Birth of Christ. Now if we acknowledge some difference in fullness of meaning in such texts, what should we say is the correct interpretation—the understanding of the human writer and his original audiences or that of the later New Testament writers?

This is not to say that one should read the fuller New Testament revelation back into the Old Testament as if one were to attribute the full meaning of a fruit to its earlier bud. The bud is still the bud, but even as the bud takes on greater meaning after we have seen the fruit, so the original text takes on fuller meaning in light of its blossom and fruit in the later revelation of the New Testament. It is therefore difficult for me to deny a certain *sensus plenior* of some Old Testament prophecies—by which I mean not multiple meanings as opposed to a single meaning, but, as the term *plenior* suggests, a fuller or deeper understanding of the original meaning. It is therefore also difficult for me and to assert that the true meaning of all texts is frozen to what was understood by the original writer and his audience.

In acknowledging that the meaning of the original writer was not as full or complete as later revelation, I am in a sense moving beyond a strict understanding of “historical” in historical-grammatical hermeneutics. For in many instances there is nothing in the immediate historical context of the writer and his readers—the usual understanding of

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<sup>10</sup> It may also be doubtful that in another statement of this same promise which declares, “in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 22:18) that the writer or his audience would have understood the “seed” as referring to Christ (cf. Gal. 3:16).

*historical*—that would lead to the same fullness of meaning in the original writer’s mind as that found in the later revelation. We could, of course, argue that the full meaning was in the historical context in the mind of the divine author, but this would surely be using *historical* in a different sense.<sup>11</sup>

B. *Partial fulfillment does not change the original meaning.* A second important hermeneutical question related to the fulfillment of Israel’s promises is whether partial fulfillment of prophecy is literal fulfillment. This is vital to the issue of the relation of the church to Israel and her promises which we will consider later. But at this point it will be useful to think briefly about the reality and nature of partial fulfillments.

That there are partial fulfillments of prophecies would seem to be generally accepted by all evangelical interpreters. For example, Jesus’ citation in Luke 4:18-19 of only a portion of Isaiah’s prophecy (61:1-2a) concerning the messianic Servant in which he stops with the positive words of salvation, “to proclaim the favorable year of the LORD,” and does not continue with the words of judgment, “And the day of vengeance of our God,” is generally acknowledged to be a genuine fulfillment of the portion of Isaiah cited. Jesus himself declared, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lu. 4:21). The portion of the prophecy related to the day of vengeance was yet to be fulfilled.

Zechariah’s prophecy of the king who would come humbly riding on a donkey and accomplish peace for the nations provides another example with the first part fulfilled in the triumphal entry and the second yet to take place (Zech. 9:9-10; Matt. 21:4-5). So also John the Baptist’s prediction that the one coming after him would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11) is understood by many interpreters to refer to the baptism of the Spirit fulfilled at Pentecost and the baptism of fire that will be fulfilled in the future eschatological judgment. Such instances could be multiplied.

But what about those prophecies that are cited as an interpretation of New Testament events that seem to suggest that these New Testament events are the

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<sup>11</sup> For an interesting discussion of the limitation of the historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture in light of the divine author see, Vern S. Poythress, “The Presence of God Qualifying our Notions of Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Genesis 3:15 as a Test Case,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 50/1 (March 2007): 87-103. On the same subject see also, Martin Pickup, “New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: The Theological Rational of Midrashic Exegesis.”

fulfillment of these prophecies when it is difficult to see how the events do, in fact, fulfill the prophecies—or at least everything mentioned in the citation of the prophecies—in their original meaning? Peter’s citation of the of Joel 2:28-32 to explain the phenomena of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:17-21 provides an example of such a prophecy.

Although Peter doesn’t use the word “fulfillment,” his statement that “this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel” (v. 16) clearly indicates that he understood what had just happened as a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy of the eschatological pouring out of the Spirit. Joel’s original prophecy, however, is set within the context of Israel’s restoration to the land with God’s abundant blessing (cf. Joel 2:18-27 and 3:1), which is a considerably different context than that of Peter where the nation Israel has yet to receive its Messiah.<sup>12</sup>

Now the question is whether Peter was declaring that Pentecost was the fulfillment of all of the Joel prophecy that he cited, or whether it was only partially fulfilled at Pentecost with some of the prophecy yet to be fulfilled in the future? A natural interpretation of both the prophecy and the events of Pentecost leads easily to the conclusion that the first part of the prophecy concerning the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit had been inaugurated (Acts 2:17-18). It is more difficult, however, to see the events of Pentecost as the fulfillment of Joel’s prediction of the great cosmic wonders in heaven and signs on the earth predicted before coming of the day of the Lord (vv. 19-20). Granting that a normal understanding of the language would not require that it all be taken literally—e.g. turning the moon into blood, there is still an awesome magnitude to the prophesied phenomena that transcends the events of Pentecost. Perhaps even more importantly, similar descriptions of such great cosmic events are found several times in the New Testament associated with the time of the return of Christ in glory (cf. Matt. 24:29; Mk. 13:24, 25; Luke 21:25-26) with effects of dismay and fear on the part of the people of the world that are not seen at Pentecost.

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<sup>12</sup> This different context may account for Peter’s change from Joel’s words “It will come about after this” (Joel 2:28) to “And it shall be in the last days” (Acts 2:17). The words in Joel suggested a chronological relationship between the Spirit’s outpouring and the blessing of Israel in the previous verses. By saying “in the last days” Peter simply indicates that it is a prophecy of the Spirit related to messianic times.

Thus on the basis of these two facts derived through natural interpretation, namely, that (1) the language of the prophecy is not in accord with the reality of Pentecost, and (2) the Scriptures clearly apply the same prophecy to a different situation, we conclude that Joel's prophecy dealing with great cosmic phenomena was not fulfilled on Pentecost, but awaits a future fulfillment.<sup>13</sup> Thus there is no reason to see Peter's use of Joel 2 as indicating either that the entire context of Joel's prophecy has been fulfilled and thus the church is the fulfillment of the prophecy of the restoration of Israel, or, on the other hand, because Israel has not been restored as a nation, to deny that any fulfillment of Joel's prophecy has taken place at Pentecost.

In sum, the possibility of a partial fulfillment of many messianic prophecies should be expected in that the Old Testament prophecies are generally associated simply with the coming of the Messiah whereas their fulfillment in the New Testament clearly involves two advents. Progressive dispensationalism thus sees many Old Testament prophecies as having an inaugurated fulfillment with the first coming of the Messiah. But it insists that this partial fulfillment is a partial fulfillment of the normal meaning of the original prophecy.<sup>14</sup> The future completion of the fulfillment is also understood to be in accord with the original meaning of the prophecy so that ultimately the prophecy is entirely fulfilled according to its original meaning.

## II. The relationship of Israel and the church.

The distinction between Israel and the church is a major point for all dispensationalists. But House rightly sees a significant difference in the understanding of this distinction between classical and progressive dispensationalists. This difference does

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<sup>13</sup> Two thoughts may be offered as to why Peter continued his citation of Joel to include things that were not fulfilled on Pentecost: (1) He sought to proclaim the opportunity for his hearers to be saved before the judgment of the "Day of the Lord" and thus wanted to include the content of Joel cited in Acts 2:21; (2) All of the events of Joel's prophecy was anticipated for the "last days." Peter did not know that some of the events in Joel's prophecy would not occur for more than 2000 years, thus they were always imminent the New Testament believers.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that some aspects of the original prophecy may be described in terms appropriate for the understanding of the hearers of its time. For example, it is possible that prophesied warfare is described in terms of the weapons of the time of the prophecy—horses and swords, rather than future weapons totally unknown at the time of writing. Such adaptations to the understanding of the original hearers, however, do not change the essential meaning of the original prophecy. In our example of warfare, if there is not clear indication that the writer is speaking symbolically, but is rather speaking in terms of concrete realities—such as people, nations, and geographical places, the prophecy is to be understood as a prediction of real warfare even though the actual weapons may be different in the future fulfillment.

not ultimately affect the reality of a future for Israel as both forms of dispensationalism clearly affirm a future for national Israel in accord with biblical prophecies. The difference does, however, as House suggests, have some bearing on the question of Israel's future as a nation. More than simply the hermeneutics of how one arrives at a national future for Israel, I would suggest that the relationship of Israel and the Church also impacts one's understanding of Israel's place in the salvation program of God and consequently the issue of its future.

As I noted earlier, I found House's expression of the distinction of Israel and the church as "a dualist view of humanity" quite strong. The modifications that have taken place since Chafer's position of two peoples with two destinies—one earthly and the other heavenly—would appear to require some qualification of a straightforward dualist view of humanity. That being said, however, the statements of classical dispensationalists mentioned by House do support a more radical distinction between the church and Israel—with a significant heavenly-earthly aspect—than that held within progressive dispensationalism. The citation from Bigalke still seems to carry tones of an earthly/heavenly dichotomy: "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" (6). Many recent classical dispensationalists appear to desire to drop the heavenly/earthly distinction.<sup>15</sup> But whether described in terms of earthly/heavenly or not, it is clear that classic dispensationalism holds to a distinction between Israel and the Church which entails little if any direct interrelationship in the historical plan of salvation.

In contrast, although Israel is always Israel and not the church, the progressive dispensationalist understands Scripture to teach one grand plan of salvation accomplished through the Davidic Messiah in which both Israel and the church participate. As a consequence, Israel and the church are not related simply by both being people of God through Christ and both ultimately bringing glory to God as would seem to be the position of classic dispensationalism. Rather they are interrelated by both being involved in the same historical salvation program of God.

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<sup>15</sup> E.g. Stanley D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), p. 229.

To attempt to develop this understanding fully, which would essentially involve a complete biblical theology, is beyond the scope of this occasion. But I would like to briefly outline two thoughts that undergird my progressive dispensational understanding of the relationship of Israel and the church by briefly touching on the issues of the relationship of the church to the messianic kingdom, and to Israel's promises.

*A. The church and the messianic kingdom.*

1. The nature of the messianic kingdom. House sees progressive dispensationalism's concept of the presence of the messianic kingdom today as resting on "a diversity of meaning in the word 'kingdom'" (9). This is apparently in contrast to classic dispensationalism which tends to see the kingdom primarily in terms of the political and earthly. Perhaps better than "diversity of meaning," progressive dispensationalism would argue for a *comprehensive* meaning of the messianic kingdom, that is, the rule of the messiah over every element of human life including the spiritual, material, and political dimensions.

From the beginning under the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, Scripture makes it clear that the political-material elements are always associated with the spiritual. Such is also the case with the prophecies of the messianic salvation where the inward spiritual blessings of the new covenant, including a new heart and the indwelling of the Spirit, are associated with material and political blessings of a restored national Israel. As Walter Kaiser says with regard to the new covenant in Jeremiah 31, "The whole context meticulously connects the new covenant strophe with a literal restoration of the Jewish nation."<sup>16</sup>

This comprehensive nature of the kingdom is carried over into the New Testament. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), which she obviously connected to the promised Davidic kingdom on the basis of the angel Gabriel's words to her concerning her son sitting on the throne of his father David (1:32-33), clearly reveals an expectation of both spiritual and material effects as a result of the coming of David's promised son. The prophecy of Zacharias likewise expects a redemption that includes forgiveness of sins,

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<sup>16</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Old Promise and the New Covenant," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15/1 (Winter 1972), 15.

and serving the Lord in holiness and righteousness, as well as deliverance from the enemies of the nation (Luke 1:68-79). Similarly, in relation to the teaching of Jesus, J. Ramsey Michaels says, “Jesus’ expectation is well within the framework of contemporary Jewish messianic and apocalyptic expectations” and this involved a kingdom that was “*both* spiritual and national, *both* universal and ethnic.”<sup>17</sup> On the basis of this biblical testimony, the progressive dispensationalists feels that he is simply following Scripture in seeing the prophesied Davidic-messianic kingdom as having a comprehensive meaning. The question is whether the church is related to his kingdom.

2. The relationship of the church to the messianic kingdom. House asserts that classic dispensationalism rejects the Davidic-messianic kingdom as present now in the age of the church. Presumably the references that appear to relate a kingdom to the believer in this age refer to a kingdom of God other than the prophesied messianic kingdom (e.g. Matt. 16:19; 21:31; Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20; Col. 1:13). The progressive dispensationalist sees no biblical evidence for such a change of kingdoms from the one initially announced by John the Baptist, Jesus and his disciples. To be sure, in the mysteries of the kingdom, Jesus reveals something new about the manner in which the kingdom would be present during this inter-advent period. But there is no indication that when he uses the term “kingdom” in these parables he is no longer talking about the same kingdom that he had previously proclaimed and continued to talk about throughout his ministry.

To attempt to set forth all of the evidence that the kingdom to which the church is presently related is the Davidic-messianic kingdom is beyond the scope of this response. A few texts, however, may be noted in addition to the parables of the mysteries of the kingdom which most interpreters apply to the present age. The parable of the ten minas in Luke 19:11-17, according to the gospel writer, was given by Jesus in response to the expectation of the immediate appearance of the kingdom of God which is surely the Davidic-messianic kingdom that Jesus and his disciples have been proclaiming. The parable tells of a nobleman, who obviously represents Jesus, going away to receive a kingdom or kingly rule for himself. Again, there is no reason not to see this as a

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<sup>17</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Kingdom of God and the Historical Jesus,” in *The Kingdom of God in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Interpretation*. Ed. Wendell Willis (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 114, 116.

reference to Jesus departure to obtain the Davidic-messianic kingdom or kingship prophesied in the Old Testament (cf. Dan. 7:13-14). According to the parable there were servants who acknowledged the legitimacy of the kingship of the one who had gone to receive it, and thus faithfully served him during his absence. If these servants represent believers today, which is difficult to deny, then the only logical conclusion is that we serve Christ today in relation to his Davidic-messianic kingship and not some other form of the kingdom of God.

The New Testament use of Psalm 110:1 also affirms the present relationship of believers in the church to the Davidic-messianic kingdom. While some see this prophecy of David's lord being enthroned at the right hand of God as including a historical reference, such as the coronation of Solomon, Jewish and early Christian commentators clearly see the Messiah as its ultimate referent.<sup>18</sup> Moreover the description of the conquering activity of the one at God's right hand is obviously related to the Davidic covenant promise (cf. 110:2, 5-7). Although the New Testament does not see all of this as presently fulfilled, it does associate the position of Jesus at the right hand of God with several facets of present church experience. We find this text used to vindicate Jesus' messiahship. For example, in Acts 5:31 Peter and the apostles declare, "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (cf. Mark 12:35-37; 14:62; Acts 2:33-36). Jesus' present power and authority which relate to the church and its great commission is ascribed to his being seated in the right hand position of God's power (Eph. 1:20; 2:6; cf. Matt. 28:18). Finally, his present ministry of intercession is associated with his position at the right hand of God according to Psalm 110:1 and therefore the Davidic messianic kingship (Rom. 8:34; cf. Heb. 8:1).

A specific connection to a presence of the Davidic covenant today is likewise given in Paul's declaration that the "blessings promised to David" (Isa. 55:3), which the apostle said included forgiveness of sins and freedom from the Law of Moses, had been fulfilled through the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:34-39, NIV). We will come back to this later, but it is important to note that these blessings promised to David are linked in

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<sup>18</sup> For a survey of the Jewish and early Christian interpretation, see David H. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 19-51.

Isaiah's original prophecy to the making of "an everlasting covenant" (cf. Isa. 55:3) which can be nothing other than the "new covenant" of Jeremiah (31:31) who also called it "an everlasting covenant" (32:40; 50:5). The new covenant which believers are presently in is thus intrinsically related to the fulfillment of the Davidic-messianic covenant. This is not to say that the present fulfillment of the blessings promised to David in the forgiveness of sin and the new covenant is the complete fulfillment of the Davidic promises. But it does clearly indicate that aspects of the Davidic covenant are present today.

That Christ's present position in which he is Lord of the church is that of the messianic-David king is also seen in several references in the book of Revelation. His promise to the overcomers that they will receive authority over the nations, an authority that he declares is presently his, is described in terms of the Messiah's rule in Psalm 2:9—"he shall rule them with a rod of iron" (2:26-27). To the church of Philadelphia, Jesus describes himself as the one "who has the key of David," signifying full authority over the Davidic messianic kingdom (3:7). Finally, Jesus overcoming work in salvation in which we today share and which makes him worthy to open the scroll of God's redemptive history, signifying his sovereign authority to bring it to a triumphant conclusion, is tied to his being the "Root of David" (5:5; cf. also 22:161). Thus Revelation along with a number of other specific New Testament texts link the present work of Christ in and for the church to the fulfillment of the Davidic-messianic covenant. In fact, the very name, Christ, the Messiah, was surely itself a strong identification of Jesus with the Davidic covenant and his work as its fulfillment.

A final evidence of our relationship to the Davidic-messianic kingdom is that of the new covenant. While some classic dispensationalists have denied that we are members of the new covenant prophesied in the Old Testament, arguing either that the church has another new covenant or that we only receive the blessing of the new covenant, it does not seem to me possible to see the New Testament as teaching anything other than that the new covenant of the Old Testament has been inaugurated through the work of Christ and that the members of the church receive blessings from that covenant. We can only mention some of the most pertinent evidence. Surely it was the prophesied covenant that Jesus had in mind when he instituted what we know as the Lord's Supper with his

disciples and referred to the cup as “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 20:22; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25). Without anything to the contrary his disciples would certainly have understood his words as referring to the new covenant of the prophets. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the mediator of a better covenant, citing Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant and declares that the old covenant is now obsolete (Heb. 8:6-13; cf. 7:22; 9:15-18; 12:24). Finally, the apostle Paul describes himself and those with him proclaiming the gospel of Christ as “servants of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6).

Many scholars have also pointed out that the concept of covenant and kingdom are two ways of expressing the same reality. Whereas the kingdom idea portrays God as the divine sovereign, covenant is the expression of the order that determines the relationship between God and man in the kingdom. Thus the new covenant is the divine ordering of the Messianic kingdom through which final salvation comes. This thought is aptly expressed by William Dumbrell when he says,

The kingship of God sought expression through a whole web of relationships which successive covenants both pointed towards and also exercised over the people of God and their world. But this kingship presupposed a return within history to the beginning of history. As we have repeatedly noted, nothing less than a new creation—and thus a new covenant—would achieve this goal. In that sense, the notion of the kingdom of God, controlling as it does the whole of biblical thinking, was always a theological assertion pointing towards a future reality—the new covenant.<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to classical dispensationalism, therefore, and on the basis of a grammatical-historical exegesis of the Old Testament texts which we have considered, especially Psalm 110:1 and references to the new covenant, and the New Testament texts referring to these Old Testament references, it seems impossible to reject any presence of the Davidic-messianic kingdom in the work of God today.

*B. The Church Shares in Israel’s Promises.* According to the Scriptures, Israel is established to be a channel of blessing to the world. This is evident from her original call of Israel as a “kingdom of priests” or a priestly kingdom which signifies, as Brevard

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<sup>19</sup> William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 206; cf. also C. S. Mann: “There is every reason to understand the term [covenant] in the New Testament as carrying with it implicitly the expression ‘the Reign of God’” (*Mark*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986], 418; and William VanGemeren, “For Jeremiah as for the deuteronomist, the covenant expresses God’s kingdom on earth,” (The New Covenant Before Christ?” [Unpublished paper, n.d.], 2-3).

Childs explains, that “Israel as a people is . . . dedicated to God’s service among the nations as priests function with a society.”<sup>20</sup> This same mission is clear in the prophetic picture of Israel as a light to the nations (e.g. Isa. 51:4-5; 60:1-3; and Israel’s involvement in the Servant Songs of Isaiah).

The present blessing of the nations through the church is not the fulfillment of the blessing through restored Israel which is the prominent prophetic picture. This awaits Israel’s return to their Messiah and his millennial reign. The apostle Paul, however, sees his ministry of bringing the gospel and salvation to the Gentiles as a fulfillment of another strain of prophecy that saw God’s blessing going to Gentiles when Israel is in disobedience. Based on Old Testament Scripture Paul sought to bring Israel to repentance through provoking them to jealousy by bringing God’s salvation to Gentiles (see Rom. 10:19-21, citing Deut. 32:21 and Isa. 65:1-2; Romans 11:11-14). The fact that salvation is presently going to the Gentiles while Israel is disobedient, however, should not cause us to deny the truth of Israel’s role as God’s channel of blessing, or most significantly Jesus’ statement that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22), as applicable to the salvation of the church.

The church began at Pentecost with the people of Israel. The apostles who represented the remnant of Israel of which Paul claimed to be a part (Rom. 11:1-5) were foundational for the church (Eph. 2:20). That the apostles were connected to Israel is evident in Jesus’ prophecy that they would some day rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).<sup>21</sup> The church existed around 10 years as essentially a Jewish church until Peter’s experience with Cornelius in Acts 10, and the Jerusalem council which recognized the salvation of Gentile as Gentiles (Acts 11). Despite the outreach to Gentiles, the apostles continued to minister to Jews (cf. Acts 20:21; 28:17) and there was a remnant of Jewish believers all through the record of Acts (e.g. Acts 13:43; 14:1; 17:4;

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<sup>20</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974)*, 367.

<sup>21</sup> The connection of the Twelve to the future (see also the reference to the Twelve in Rev. 21:14) is the rationale for the necessity of replacing unbelieving Judas with Matthias and not doing so with other apostles when they pass from the scene. There was a necessity for twelve (Acts 1:21-26).

28:24). Moreover, the Jews continued to play the primary role of doctrinal teachers in the post-apostolic churches composed of both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>22</sup>

That the salvation enjoyed by the church is connected to Israel (and not just to the single person of Christ) is noted by the apostle Paul in his caution to the Roman believers: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches [i.e. the Jews]; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you” (Rom. 11:18). The verb translated “supports” is in the present tense indicating as James Dunn notes that “Gentile Christians are the beneficiaries of the rich spiritual heritage which stems from Abraham through the Jews . . . and that relationship continues unbroken . . . .”<sup>23</sup> This connection between the church and Israel is also recognized in the apostle’s commendation of the Gentiles for their material contribution for the saints at Jerusalem. “They were pleased to do it,” Paul says, “and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (Rom. 15:27 NIV).

The mention of the Gentiles sharing in the Jew’s spiritual blessing supports the important truth that the blessings of the church are obtained through sharing in the covenants of Israel. This is distinct from the position of classic dispensationalism as expressed by House that “the promises made to the nation of Israel are *only* for Israel”(8). Prior to the coming of Christ the apostle Paul describes Gentiles as “strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph. 2:12). But now Gentiles in the church, in addition to being “fellow members of the same body,” Paul says, are “fellow heirs” and “fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). This promise in Christ in which the church partakes is none other than the “promise” described earlier as the “covenants of promise”—which with Harold Hoehner, I take to be the unconditional covenants that belonged to Israel—the Abrahamic, Davidic and new covenants.<sup>24</sup> These covenants of promise, including the new covenant and its spiritual salvation were all

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<sup>22</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, on the basis of his examination of the Apostolic Fathers, says, “These documents are best understood against the background of mixed communities, in which a minority of Jewish believers acted as the teachers and theological experts for the greater Gentile majority” (*In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002], p. 222).

<sup>23</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, p. 662.

<sup>24</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 359, 447,

related to the messianic kingdom. In fact, it is through the new covenant that the Abrahamic and Davidic promises receive their fulfillment.

The Old Testament looked forward to the messianic salvation which would come to Israel and the nations. The promises, of course, also included the restoration and exaltation of the nation of Israel and material and physical blessings both to Israel and the nations which await the return of the Messiah and his righteous reign. But it is clear that the New Testament writers already saw the present salvation in Christ as a fulfillment of these Old Testament promises related to Israel. Paul saw his ministry of proclaiming “light for the Gentiles” and bringing “salvation to the end of the earth”(Acts 13:46-47) as a fulfillment of the Prophets and Moses (26:22-23). This would make it possible for the Gentiles to “receive . . . an inheritance among those who have been sanctified [i.e. the people of God including the Jews] (Acts 26:17-18; cf. Col. 1:12, “to share in the inheritance of the saints”). Paul always saw Christ and the gospel of his salvation as based on the testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures (Rom. 16:25-26; cf. 1:2; 3:21).

In sum, in distinction from classical dispensationalism which grounds the distinction of the church and Israel on the understanding that the church is not participating in any of Israel’s promises and is therefore unrelated to the Davidic-messianic kingdom, progressive dispensationalism see the church as the beginning of the promised eschatological messianic salvation in which Gentiles were to share along with Israel.

Again, this does not entail the church as becoming the “new Israel,” thereby leading to any kind of supersessionism. The New Testament teaching of the relationship of the church to Israel’s promises never suggests that the church is Israel, but rather continues to teach a future for that nation. Moreover the covenants made with Abraham and his later descendants, as well as all of the messianic prophecies, always included salvation not only for Israel, but for Gentiles as Gentiles (cf. Is. 19:23-25). This progressive dispensational understanding of the relationship of the church and Israel does, however, lead to a somewhat different coloring and, for me at least, a richer meaning of the prophecies of the restoration of national Israel.

III. The Future of National Israel.

According to classic dispensationalism as expressed by House, a future for national Israel, in addition to clear biblical prophecies, entails a fundamental dichotomy, or as it is stated, “a ‘sharp’ distinction between Israel and the Church” which has some heavenly and earthly difference (7). The church age is essentially a parenthesis in an earthly historical salvation of the Jewish Davidic-messianic kingdom. As such there is no unified historical salvation program for all peoples, and no integration of the Church and Israel in such a plan.

In distinction, progressive dispensationalism, as we have seen, does see a unified historical program of salvation entailed in the biblical picture of the anticipation and fulfillment of the messianic kingdom promised in the promise covenants of Israel. The present church age is the inauguration of the messianic kingdom salvation through the finished work and exaltation of Christ to the Davidic throne. The salvation of this age focuses on the spiritual aspects of the new covenant which as we have seen is a dimension of the messianic kingdom promises, and the next millennium age will add the other dimensions of the promised comprehensive kingdom blessings.

In this understanding of salvation history, the future of national Israel is not only affirmed because Scripture teaches it, but also because a restored Israel is vital to the completion of God’s salvation. The blessing of Israel has never been an end in itself. Rather, as we have seen, Israel was created to be the channel through which blessing would flow to all peoples. Thus to simply say that Israel was promised earthly blessing while the church has heavenly blessings, almost as if in both cases these blessings are the ultimate goal for each people, is to overlook this function of Israel in biblical salvation.

A great theme of prophetic Scripture is that God will manifest his glory to the nations through restored Israel. For example, the Psalmist, after declaring that God “will arise and have compassion on Zion” and “be gracious to her,” adds, “so that the nations will fear the name of the LORD and all the kings of the earth Your glory. For the LORD has built up Zion; He has appeared in His glory” (Ps. 102:13, 15-16; cf. Ezek. 36:22ff; 39:27).

God’s glory will not only radiate to the nations through the historical act of restoration, but also through Israel’s subsequent life as a national community of God’s people. Moses had already spoken of this in Deuteronomy when he encouraged the

people to keep the commandments, declaring, “for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (4:6). No doubt Isaiah later picks up this thought when he says of restored Israel, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. . . . the LORD will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (60:1-3).

It is this manifestation of the glory of God through restored Israel that brings the completion of the messianic salvation. Today, as we have said, it is the spiritual salvation of the new covenant that is manifest in the world. But the salvation of the Davidic Messiah was to be all comprehensive of every facet of human life, including the socio-economic-political dimensions which are now related to Caesar’s realm of human government. Israel will display God’s glory and salvation to the world by being a people where justice and righteousness rules in all realms of human life. Commenting on God’s exhortation to Israel in Amos 5:24—“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream,” Kraus explains, “Justice and righteousness . . . are the foundations, the basic ordinances for the life of Israel. . . . Israel has been chosen to live according to the law of God, that is to say, to live under the sovereignty of God, as sovereignty that is intended to cover every aspect of the whole of life.”<sup>25</sup>

God will use this manifestation of his saving justice and righteousness in Israel to bring the same salvation to the nations. Through Isaiah, God calls his people Israel to pay attention to him because he is going to use them in sending forth his justice and righteousness as salvation for all peoples (Isa. 50:4-5).<sup>26</sup> The going of the nations to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God, predicted by Isaiah (2:2-4) and Micah (4:1-3), was not, therefore, just to receive verbal instructions, but to see the ways of God incarnate in

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<sup>25</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *The People of God in the Old Testament* (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Oswalt explains the connection between God’s salvation of Israel and that of the nations in Isaiah’s prophecy: The “for” “that begins the second bicolon of v. 4 suggests the reasons why God’s people should pay close attention to what he (and his Servant) are saying. Far from there being some question about God’s ability and willingness to save his own people from their sin, what he is about to do will be the means of the *tora*, instruction, that they have received from God now reaching out to all the peoples of the world, just as stated in ch. 2” (John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 335-36.

the society of the nation of Israel and thus be motivated to worship Israel's God and receive his societal salvation in their own lands. In short, the future of national Israel is more than the fulfillment of her promised blessing. It is also the fulfillment of the biblical teaching of Israel's purpose as a channel of God's salvation to the world.

#### IV. Conclusion

As a progressive dispensationalist, I strongly affirm with all dispensationalists a future for national Israel. This is in fulfillment of the covenant promises of restoration and blessing through the prophesied Davidic-messianic kingdom, and the fulfillment of the scriptural teaching of the role of Israel in God's salvation for all peoples through this same Davidic-messianic kingdom. Contrary to the classic dispensationalism presented in House's paper which denies the present salvation as a fulfillment of the Davidic-messianic prophecies, I see Scripture clearly teaching our salvation as a participation in the Old Testament promise covenants of Abraham, David, and the new covenant. As participants in Israel's covenants of promise the church participates in the salvation of the messianic kingdom. Not as a new Israel, but as Gentiles and a remnant of Israel enjoying the spiritual blessings of the messianic kingdom before Israel as a nation is restored to fulfill its role in the completion of the messianic kingdom salvation for the world. This understanding is based on a hermeneutic that seeks the historical-grammatical meaning of the promise covenants throughout the progressive revelation of Scripture and the historical development of God's salvation program

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