

THE FUTURE OF NATIONAL ISRAEL IN DISPENSATIONAL THOUGHT

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I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The existence of the modern state of Israel is nothing short of miraculous. It is a land of slightly under 8,000 square miles,¹ or just 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 it has been invaded multiple times, by armies vastly superior in number, and yet prevailed. It is attacked daily by terrorists bent on destroying by causing as much human suffering as possible, yet when Israel does defend itself it is criticized by many, including the United Nations.³ It is currently the only democracy in the Middle East, even including in its government those who do not entirely support its existence.⁴ Despite all of this, Israel has not only survived, but also prospered.

However, is Israel's creation and prosperity a result of divine intervention? Does the current (secular) state of Israel have some place in God's plans for the future, or is it simply another state among the nations of the world? The question over the future status of Israel continues to be a point of discussion and disagreement among theologians. While there are many views, there are two general positions on this question. This paper

¹ Not counting areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority. Information from: http://www.goisrael.com/Tourism_Eng/Tourist+Information/Discover+Israel/State+of+Israel.htm (last visited on July 21, 2008).

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

³ The U.N. has passed over 60 resolutions against Israel from 1955 until 1992. "A list of UN Resolutions against 'Israel'" Online: <http://www.uscrusade.com/forum/config.pl/noframes/read/1372> (last visited on July 21, 2008).

⁴ Ahmed Tibi, an MP in 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, Nov. 5th, 2007. Online: http://info.jpost.com/C004/QandA/qa_ahitibi.html; While it is false that Palestinians are indigenous to Israel, it does not stop Tibi (a citizen of Israel and a member of parliament) from using this argument to justify his hostility toward Israel.

will discuss the main points of each, distinctions within the positions, and the evidence for them, and finally conclude with a discussion of the author's position.

A. Positions Regarding the Future of Israel

There are two main positions on the future of Israel: that it does not have a national, political future, and that it does. Under these two general themes, there are varying theologies. The four majority positions (and therefore discussed in this paper) are: covenant theology, replacement theology, classical dispensationalism, and progressive dispensationalism. The first view, covenant theology, generally sees two covenants under which God dealt with His people: Law (sometimes called Works and having to do with Adam) and Grace (having to do with humanity as a whole since Adam). Covenant theologians generally see little or no distinction between the Old and New Testaments; they emphasize the continuity of the testaments. Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, most covenant theologians see no place for a physical nation of Israel in God's future plans, interpreting verses speaking of Israel in the Old Testament as allegorically referring to the Church. Covenant theology may be supersessionist, but is not inherently so. The second perspective, replacement theology, or supersessionism, considers that the Church has replaced, or superseded, Israel in God's future plans. Israel as a nation rejected the Messiah, and therefore lost their inheritance. The modern state of Israel, then, is no more special in God's view than any other modern nation. The third and fourth views are dispensationalism and progressive dispensationalism share belief in a national Israel but 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 see the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament that are neither conditional upon Israel's obedience, nor have already been fulfilled, as still in effect. However, there are distinctions between these theologies which will be discussed herein.

B. Covenant Theology

The theological system known as covenant theology has existed in some form in the Church from ancient times until today. However, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) and Zacharius Ursinus (1534-1583) are generally credited with first systematically organizing covenant theology with the Heidelberg Catechism.⁵ The Westminster Confession contains further development of the doctrine.⁶ The basic tenant of covenant theology is that God has operated under systematic theologies called covenants. Theologians disagree over the number, two 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 the Father and the Son, with the Father allowing 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..."⁷ The second covenant 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

⁵ Roger E. Olson *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 163.

⁶ See the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. 7, 8, 19. Online: http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html (last visited Aug 4, 2008).

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941) 269.

“perfect obedience” as a condition to granting to Adam and his descendants eternal life. Adam failed to uphold his end of the covenant, resulting in the physical and spiritual death of man. Because of this God established the covenant of grace. There is some debate regarding who it is with whom God made this final covenant; some say sinners as a whole, other say elect sinners, while still others see it as believers and their successive descendants.⁸ However, for the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to recognize that according to covenant theology, during the vast majority of human history the covenant of grace has been in effect. Covenant theologians do see different dispensations (including Jesus’ new covenant), but they are simply different out-workings of the covenant of grace. This theology also sees a continuity and unity between the Old Testament and the New, something Calvin taught. Calvin argued against the view of some contemporaries that the 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.⁹ Stemming from the belief that God has been operating under one system, the covenant of grace, for most of history, covenant theology only sees one “community” of God through history, that of the elect. Therefore, the faithful among Israel of the Old Testament and the New Testament Church are one in the same community. In fact, Berkhof alludes that the Church was begun with Abraham.¹⁰ From this belief that the Church existed in the Old Testament, any and all promises made to that “church” (i.e. “Israel”) fall on those who are included in the Church today, those who continue to be under the covenant of grace, the faithful in Christ. Covenant theologians employ an allegorical interpretive method to biblical prophecies concerning Israel. Thus for the covenant theologian, the answer to the question first posited in this paper is simple: there is no future for the nation of Israel in the eschaton. The promises of the Old Testament are reserved for all those who have been faithful throughout the ages, not necessarily to one group of people physically descended from Abraham. The national history is not necessarily repeatable and certainly not required under prophetic fulfillment.

C. Replacement or Supersessionist Theology

Distinct from, but similar to covenant theology, is what has been called replacement or supersessionist theology, predating covenant theology by more than thousand years.¹¹ Under this system Israel was God’s chosen people in the Old Testament, and was given promises to be fulfilled in the future. At the advent of Jesus, however, they failed to recognize Him as their Messiah, and put Him to death. Because of their rejection, the promises God made to them were taken away and given to the faithful who do accept Jesus as the Messiah. The Church then, replaced Israel in God’s economy.

This theology began to become widespread in the early church after the final destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 135. Prior to this time the church was largely composed of Jewish believers. However, with their influx into the church, Gentiles began to change

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, c. 1932, 1996), 275-277

⁹ H Wayne House, *Charts on Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2006), 112-116.

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd Ed., 295.

¹¹ H. Wayne House, “The Church’s Appropriation of Israel’s Blessings,” *Israel: The Land and the People*, H. Wayne House, ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

the character of the church. Many saw the devastation and suffering of Israel as a result of 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 millennial reign,¹² by the time of Nicea, the church had come to believe the messianic kingdom was at hand, and associated millennialism with they saw as Jewish influenced heresies; this is particularly true of Eusebius of Caesarea Maritima. Many saw Constantine's acceptance of Christianity after the long period 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." 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.¹³ Supersessionism continued on into the Reformation in the latter teachings of Luther, 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."¹⁴ He called them, "rejected and condemned people."¹⁵ Today there are some who hold to supersessionist theology. As one supersessionist argues,

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.¹⁶

For the replacement theologian, Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19a prove this to be true: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." (NKJV). They interpret this verse as Jesus signaling an end to Israel's inclusion in God's plan for the future. Replacement theologies also use Matt. 21:43 as evidence of God's permanent rejection of Israel. Jesus tells the Pharisees, "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (NKJV).

¹² See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, LXXX (ANF 1.239).

¹³ 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.) Their future purpose is simply to believe. 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." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1.2.2.674.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan and H.T. Lehmann, trans. and eds., (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, and Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955 -1986.) 3:113

¹⁵ Luther's Works, 47:268

¹⁶ Bernhard Kuiper, *When Bad Things Happen to Good Prophecies*, (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2005) 44

D. Dispensationalism

In opposition to covenant and supersessionist theology is the system that has become known as dispensationalism. It is generally acknowledged that the theological doctrine of dispensationalism was first systematically organized by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), and continued on in the writings of Scofield (1843-1921) and Chafer (1871-1952).¹⁷ It must be noted that these early views and those who hold them are now given the designation “classical” or “traditional” dispensationalism, in order to differentiate their views from what has become called “progressive dispensationalism.” Although critics accuse dispensationalism as being a modern phenomenon, dispensationalists themselves have argued that some facets of the doctrine have been in existence since the period of the Fathers.¹⁸

Both classical and progressive dispensationalism teach that God has “dispensed” His rule in differing ways throughout history. The word itself is derived from Latin, meaning, “economical management or superintendence.”¹⁹ The dispensation may, “refer to a dispensing or an administration”²⁰ of God’s rule over all mankind or over only one segment of mankind. There are differing divisions, but generally dispensationalists divide this working of God into several epochs,²¹ including the Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic Law or Israel, Church or Grace, and Millennial or Kingdom.²² In each epoch God is seen as working in unique ways. Most dispensationalists also see these dispensations building upon one another 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 replacing the covenants made under the former, unless it is specifically stated so in the text. For example, the command God gave to Adam to be fruitful, multiply, and subdue the earth is still in effect. Though it is not universal, premillennial rapture is also an important feature of dispensationalism. Ryrie says, “...being a dispensationalist makes one a premillennialist,”²³ though certainly being a premillennialist does not make one a dispensationalist.

In relation to the topic discussed in this paper, both traditional and progressive dispensationalism believe Israel as a nation has a place in the future. Craig 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 some dispensationalists, extends into the eternal state as well.”²⁴ He says this has

¹⁷ Charles Ryrie, “Update on Dispensationalism” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R Willis and John R. Master, gen. eds., (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994)16-18.

¹⁸ See Showers, *There Really is a Difference!*, 113-126

¹⁹Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 93:372, pages 390-449 (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, c.1936), 391.

²⁰ Showers, *There Really is a Difference!*, 32.

²¹ Epochs here referring to the period of the working that, while within the framework of history, are not themselves specific periods of history.

²² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1965) 84.

²³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Updated* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1995) 39

²⁴ Craig A Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint Books, 1993) 21.

resulted in dispensationalists supporting the modern state of Israel. Dispensationalists believe the Abrahamic Covenant was not conditional, that is, governed by certain conditions to be upheld by both parties. They see God promising Abraham an actual, physical land inheritance, populated by a physical nation, descended from Abraham. They do not see the Church fulfilling this promise spiritually. 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.”²⁵ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, illustrating why dispensationalists see this promise as not having been completed yet says 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.”²⁶ They argue that the promise to Abraham was not conditional, but possession of it is. Bigalke says, “Disobedience does, however, affect Israel’s enjoyment of the land.”²⁷

Dispensationalists claim that it is their interpretational method that causes them to hold to a distinction between Israel and the Church, as well as a future for the nation of Israel. Ryrie says, “Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation.”²⁸ He is careful to point out, however, 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.”²⁹ Dispensationalists argue that literal or plain interpretation is essential to the study of Scripture. Again, Ryrie says, “If God be 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.”³⁰ This approach is seen as guarding against the medieval practice of “spiritualizing” a text, giving the text a deeper, spiritual meaning than the words themselves convey. Further, in order to distinguish themselves further from other theological systems, dispensationalists claim to employ this hermeneutic “consistently and in all study of the Bible.”³¹ Thomas 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.”³² Stemming from this hermeneutic, dispensationalists see the

²⁵ Ron J. Bigalke Jr., “The Abrahamic Covenant” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, Ron J. Bigalke, ed. (New York: University Press, 2005) 49.

²⁶ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “The Land Covenant” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, Ron J. Bigalke, ed., (New York: University Press, 2005) 87.

²⁷ Ron J. Bigalke Jr., “The Abrahamic Covenant” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 44-45.

²⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 86.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

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

prophecies made to Israel in the Old Testament (that were not literally fulfilled either in the Old Testament or the New) as being fulfilled in the future. Among these are the promises of a land and a people (Gen. 13:14-16), and the promise to gather the people of Israel to their own land in peace and prosperity (Jer. 23:3-8).

1. *Classical Dispensationalism*

As indicated above there has arisen distinctions within dispensationalism, mainly having to do with 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.”³³ Classical Dispensationalism holds to a dualistic view of humanity. Israel is seen as God’s “earthly” people, while the Church is His “heavenly” people.³⁴ Chafer illustrated this distinction, “Every covenant, promise, and provision for Israel is earthly, and they continue as a nation with the earth when it is created new. Every covenant or promise for the church is for a heavenly reality, and she continues in heavenly citizenship when the heavens are recreated.”³⁵ Ryrie modified this view somewhat, saying that Israel’s earthly promises are to be fulfilled during the millennial kingdom, by Jews living when the kingdom is inaugurated, and those who are born during this thousand-year reign. He says, “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.”³⁶

Foundationally, as a matter of hermeneutics, classical dispensationalists argue that they interpret the Scriptures from a strictly “historical-grammatical” method. To this end, when encountering a passage, 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.”³⁷ Thus the “grammatical” designation of classical dispensationalism’s hermeneutic. The second designation has to do with the historical setting of the passage. Robert Thomas says, “...the original historical setting ‘freezes’ the meaning of the text.”³⁸ Under this system, there can only be one meaning of a given text, which is 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 Testament and New,

³³ Ibid., 45

³⁴ 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*, Herbert W. Bateman IV, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999) 228.

³⁵ Quoted in Toussaint “Israel and the Church”, 228-229.

³⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 146.

³⁷ Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, Ron J. Bigalke, ed., (New York: University Press, 2005) 4.

³⁸ Thomas, “Hermeneutics”, 6.

while still holding to a 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.³⁹ Flowing from this method of interpretation, classical dispensationalists generally reject *sensus plenior*, or “fuller meaning” of passages. Again, Thomas argues that *sensus plenior* “amounts to an allegorical rather than a literal method of interpretation.”⁴⁰ The result of classical dispensationalism’s adherence to grammatical-historical interpretation and single meanings of the texts is the unwavering belief in a pretribulational rapture of the Church, and the rejection of the contention that the Messianic Kingdom of God now presently exists in any form, and that Jesus is now sitting on David’s throne. Frederick Howe of Dallas Theological Seminary 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.⁴¹

Most importantly 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.”⁴² 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.⁴³ They do not see the Church participating in the blessing or rule of future Israel. Modern classical dispensationalists see themselves as carrying on this tradition, while they argue progressives are blurring the line between Israel and the Church, and even of attempting to “bridge the gap with covenant premillennialists.”⁴⁴

2. *Progressive Dispensationalism*

Craig Blaising, in discussing the rise of progressive dispensationalism, says, “...dispensationalism has not been a static tradition.”⁴⁵ Rather, there has been a continuous development of the theological system. However, Blaising argues that by 1991, certain developments in dispensationalism were unique enough that the term “progressive dispensationalism” was put forth at the national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society that year.⁴⁶ 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

³⁹ House, *Prolegomena*, 114-15.

⁴⁰ Thomas, “Hermeneutics”, 8.

⁴¹ Frederick R Howe, “Does Christ Occupy Christ’s Throne Now?” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 19:36 (2006): 65-70, 70.

⁴² Toussaint “Israel and the Church”, 228

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 228-230. Toussaint illustrates that there is some variation among classical dispensationalists regarding the millennial kingdom, but that all share in the clear distinction between Israel and the Church.

⁴⁴ Sam A. Smith, *What the Bible Says About the Future*, (USA: Biblical Reader Communications, 2005) 51.

⁴⁵ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

redemption.”⁴⁷ While continuing to stress the 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.”⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹

Consequently, progressive dispensationalism has a different view of the coming millennium and Israel’s place in it than classical dispensationalism. 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. Robert Saucy says this is based on God’s election of the nation to be distinct among the nations. He asserts,

“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.”⁵⁰

Progressives deny that the earthly millennial kingdom has already begun, despite teaching that Jesus sits on the Davidic throne now. This is a result of seeing a diversity of meaning in 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. Craig Blaising notes,

... the New Testament presents Jesus’ present position and activity as a fulfillment of promises of the Davidic covenant. This has been necessary because earlier forms of dispensationalism tended to deny it. They were concerned to underscore the future fulfillment of the political 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.*⁵¹

Saucy shares the belief that Jesus fulfilled the promise of a Davidic King, but cautions, But we must be careful not to read more into this inauguration [of Jesus as the Davidic king at the time of His first coming] than what is actually said... The fact that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁰ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) 300.

⁵¹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 179-180.

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.”⁵² The previous discussion alludes to the reason for progressive dispensational theology’s shift in interpretation. Progressive dispensationalism uses modified methods of interpreting prophecy. Darrell Bock says,

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.⁵³

Under this multi-tiered system of hermeneutics, prophecies are not bound to one fulfillment but, as Bock argues, can be “already-not yet”⁵⁴ fulfilled. In other words, progressive dispensationalism might see certain prophecies as being partially fulfilled at one point, but not fully “realized” until a future date. Hence, the kingdom of God was inaugurated with 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 history and the forming of the modern state of Israel are seen as partial fulfillments of the promise to Abraham of a continuing people and of a land. Bock concludes,

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 regathering of Jews to Palestine in modern times and their political reconstitution 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.⁵⁵

This perspective is in many respects consistent with the classical understanding of the establishment of the Messianic kingdom in the millennium, though classical dispensationalists would generally understand that at least all Jews surviving the tribulation would embrace Jesus as the Messiah (Zech 13:9), and enter alive into kingdom ruled by David’s Son. All Israel, after the fullness of the Gentiles embraced Jesus, would then be saved.

II. ROMANS 11: A CASE STUDY OF INTERPRETATIONAL METHODS

As a way of illustrating the varying hermeneutics of the theologies described above, as it pertains to the subject of this paper, Romans 11:25-26 will be used as a case study. This passage is a watershed for revealing how a particular hermeneutical system sees Israel and its future. Barry Horner calls it a “crucial passage with regard to the NT

⁵² Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 74.

⁵³ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 104

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 297.

teaching concerning the present nature and destiny of national Israel.”⁵⁶ An example of interpretation will be given for each of the theological systems discussed above.

A. Covenant Theology

Although John Calvin does not seem to have formally taught covenant theology,⁵⁷ his views were the basis for the system. In his commentary on Romans, he says concerning verses 25 and 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 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.”⁵⁸

The view of the one “people of God” found in latter covenant theology is clearly illustrated here. For Calvin “Israel” as used here by Paul actually 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 “Israel” in Romans 11:25 means ethnic Israel, Louis DeCaro, a reformed minister and covenant theologian, nonetheless sees this passage not teaching 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, it is “a reference to unbelieving national Israel” while verse 26 speaks of “a reference to the elect remnant from whom ungodliness is turned away by the Redeemer whom they have embraced.”⁵⁹ The “Israel” of verse 25 has all been blinded, so that they must be saved in the same way Gentiles are, through faith in Jesus. This is justified, in DeCaro’s view, by Paul’s earlier statement that “For they *are* not all Israel who *are* of Israel...” (Romans 9:6). So for DeCaro, the Israel of verse 26 is a faithful remnant of the whole in verse 25. Further, he says this passage “does not, in the remotest manner, indicate futurity.”⁶⁰ 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.”⁶¹ He also argues that dispensationalism teaches that Israel “will be saved by sight at the Lord’s return”⁶² rather than through faith.

B. Replacement/Supersessionist Theology

The Roman Catholic Church, even today, regards itself as the new Israel, and heirs to the promises made to Israel. Martin Barrack, himself a Jewish convert to Roman

⁵⁶ Barry E Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, n.d.) 253.

⁵⁷ See above discussion on the systemization of covenant theology.

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, John Owen, trans. and ed., electronic version, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library) 238, 239.

⁵⁹ Louis A. DeCaro, *Israel Today: Fulfillment of Prophecy?* (USA, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974) 116.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 109.

Catholicism, comments that, “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 Israel will be saved’ (Rom 11:26) because ‘The gifts and the call of God are irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29).”⁶³ He interprets Rom 11:26 through a definite 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.⁶⁴

C. Dispensational Theology

Dispensational theologians are in basic agreement that Rom. 11:26 is referring to future, national, Israel. They contend that all throughout Romans Paul uses the term to describe national Israel in contrast to Gentiles, and that Paul *always* uses the term to mean national Israel.⁶⁵ According to grammatical-historical interpretation, there is no contextual reason to see the term “Israel” as referring to anything but national, physical Israel. The discussion among dispensationalists, then, is over when this national salvation will occur and whom among the nation “all Israel” refers to. Some, such as Chafer, hold that it is all of Israel throughout all history, and that they will be resurrected just prior to the second coming of Jesus.⁶⁶ Ryrie takes a different view. He sees “all Israel” as referring to one third of those who survive the Tribulation and “turn in faith” to Jesus.⁶⁷ Others, such as Fruchtenbaum see Romans 11:26 occurring after the Tribulation when the national leaders of Israel realize their error of rejecting Messiah Jesus and lead the nation in a multi-day event of national confession, regeneration, and subsequent salvation.⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ Harold 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 will mourn for Him.” There will be an “outpouring of the Spirit of grace and supplication on the house of

⁶³ Martin K. Barrack, “Why Jews Are Better Off in the Catholic Church Than in the Jews for Jesus” Online: <http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Faith/2000-12/barrack.html> (Last visited July 23, 2008).

⁶⁴ Barrack, “Why Jews Are Better Off...”

⁶⁵ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 721.

⁶⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols., (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947) 3:105-108.

⁶⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986) 514.

⁶⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries Press, c. 1989, 1992), 784.

⁶⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 786.

David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” This will take place at the second coming of Jesus to earth.⁷⁰ What is clear among these views is that they all see Paul’s use of “all Israel” as referring to a future, national Israel.

CONCLUSIONS

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

Covenant theology looks at passages promising unconditional physical, material blessings allegorically, as well as allegorizing Israel. 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.” John 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.”⁷¹ DeCaro’s conclusion that “Israel” of verse 25 and 26 are different, and that “all Israel will be saved” is a present reality, is not exegetically sound. Paul clearly differentiates a group (believing Jews) within the whole (all Jews) in Romans 9:6,⁷² but not in the same way as 11:25-26. In fact, Paul indicates the exact opposite of what DeCaro argues. In verse 25 Paul 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, he adds “in part” to designate that the nation’s blindness is not on every individual. However, he uses “all” in verse 26 to mean just that, the entire nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus at a time in the future. There is no reason to see “all” meaning just a part of the nation, the group of individuals who come to faith in Jesus as Messiah through history. Even though Paul does sometimes use “all” to indicate many or all types rather than every individual (see I Tim. 2:4), it is clear that the majority of Jews through history have rejected Jesus, and it makes little sense to see it as “all types of Israel.” Thus “all Israel” of verse 26 can only mean the entire nation of Israel will be saved at some point. As that has not happened yet, this passage *must* occur in 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 theology, while recognizing the literal nature of some Old Testament promises, fails to recognize that many are unconditional, forcing God to either have misled Israel in times past, or 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. To this end, 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 absent. The Church is nowhere mentioned to be part of Israel’s national salvation in Romans 11:25, rather it is specifically absent.

⁷⁰ Harold Hoener, “Israel in Romans 9-11” in *Israel: The Land and the People*, H. Wayne House, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998) 156-57.

⁷¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT. F. F. Bruce, gen. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, c. 1959, 1975), 96.

⁷² Paul seems to be saying in 9:6 that during the *present* age, there is a remnant from among Israel who are faithful through belief in Jesus as Messiah, and in this way distinguishes a group within the whole.

Both covenant and supersessionist theologies miss another key point, 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 properly interpret Paul's message. Again and again in chapters 9 through 11 Paul affirms 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."⁷³ He concludes, "In other words, to speak merely nominally of the Jews in Romans 9-11 is to fly in the face of the Jewishness that Paul there upholds, especially in Rom. 9:1-5, 11:1-2, 28-29. Paul's ongoing 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."⁷⁴

Finally, it is the author's view that both classical and progressive dispensationalism 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 literally fulfilled for the nation of Israel. God promised Israel would be gathered to her own land, live in peace in that land, and be ruled over by Messiah. None of these things have happened yet, and must therefore take place in the future. However, it is classical dispensationalism that 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, though He is the anointed King waiting to rule on David's throne. This will only take place during the millennial reign of Jesus over a physical, national, Israel.

⁷³ Horner, *Future Israel*, 262

⁷⁴ Horner, *Future Israel*, 233