

A Revised Hermeneutic of Premillennialism

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In the nineteenth century, the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith was commonly called the "Age to Come" movement, meaning that of the various Adventist groups it alone clearly affirmed the premillennial return of Christ for the purpose of restoring the kingdom to Israel. At times this belief was articulated in the language of the dispensational premillennialism which was gaining popularity at that time. By the middle of this century, the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith had largely adopted a slightly revised dispensationalism. In more recent years, however, some among us have grown dissatisfied with the artificial "literal" hermeneutic traditionally taught by dispensationalists. This development coincides with emerging trends in contemporary dispensational thought, particularly in regard to the sharp dichotomies which have traditionally been drawn between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between Israel and the Church.¹ In this article I intend to present a consistent, "literal" hermeneutic of premillennialism free from the shackles of artificial dispensational distinctions.

¹For a detailed description of these trends, see Craig A. Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September 1988, Vol. 145, No. 3, 254-280.

1. THE DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTIC

Until recently Charles C. Ryrie's book, *Dispensationalism Today*,² has been considered the definitive expression of dispensational theology. Ryrie asserted that the essence of dispensationalism is the clear distinction between Israel and the Church, a principle allegedly based upon a literal interpretation of Scripture.³ Incidentally, as Blaising points out, literal interpretation does not mean literalistic interpretation.⁴ A literal, plain, or normal hermeneutic takes into account symbols, figures of speech, and types. In other words, the quest of the literal interpreter is to determine the original intent of the biblical authors.

Dispensationalists are certainly to be applauded for their insistence on interpreting the Bible in this way, particularly in view of the fact that earlier dispensationalists were reacting against postmillennialists who did not utilize historical exegesis. However, in the late twentieth century, the principle of literal interpretation can no longer be considered a distinguishing principle of dispensationalism, since nondispensationalists also use historical-grammatical exegesis.⁵

Regarding the distinction between Israel and the Church, dispensational interpreters have traditionally insisted that no promise given to Old Testament Israel could include the Church. Lewis Sperry Chafer, for example, wrote:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes; one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.⁶

Charles Ryrie, in the sixties, wrote that "the earthly-heavenly, Israel-Church distinction taught by dispensationalists is true. . . ."⁷ Recently,

²Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1965.

³*Ibid.*, 47.

⁴Blaising, 269ff.

⁵Significantly, a Church of God periodical published an article in 1863 contending that a literal interpretation of the Bible supports the doctrine that the Church has been "added to the commonwealth of Israel." See Alexander Dean, "Were They Literal?" *Millennial Harbinger and Bible Advocate*, August 12, 1863, Vol. 35, No. 11, 164, 165. A literal interpretation of Scripture does not support traditional dispensational distinctions.

⁶Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936, 107.

⁷Ryrie, 147.

however, with developments such as the admission that the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the same as the New Covenant established with the Church, some dispensationalists have admitted that a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church is difficult to maintain.⁸

It has been noted that dispensationalism preserves the distinctiveness of the millennium by ascribing to it a definite place in the plan of God: the fulfillment of God's promises to national Israel.⁹ It is my contention, however, that this distinctiveness can be maintained, and that a literal hermeneutic can be vigorously pursued, without neglecting the spiritual continuity between Old Testament Israel and the Church, the "spiritual Israel." Such a hermeneutic will demonstrate that though the Church is partially a fulfillment of promises made to national Israel, a more complete fulfillment awaits the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom, when national Israel will be restored to God's favor and Gentiles will reign with them over the earth.

II. THE FULFILLMENT OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES

George Eldon Ladd has noted that "the New Testament frequently interprets the Old Testament prophecies in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context."¹⁰ He therefore concludes that the key to understanding Old Testament prophecy is the witness of the New Testament.

Ladd cites Matthew 2:15 as an example.¹¹ According to Matthew, Hosea 11:1 predicted that Jesus Christ, as God's Son, was to be called out of Egypt. However, a cursory reading of Hosea 11:1 will show that Hosea was writing not of an individual, but of the nation of Israel which was called out of Egypt in the exodus. Thus, the meaning of the Old Testament prophecy is made clear in the light of the New Testament.

This principle of interpretation leads one to believe that the Church is the spiritual Israel. The conviction arises not out of a disregard for the literal meaning of Scripture, but on the contrary from taking New Testament claims at face value. For example, Hosea 1:9, 10, a passage about the future salvation of Israel, is applied by Paul to the Church in

⁸Cf. Blaising, 273-279.

⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977, 122.

¹⁰George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977, 20.

¹¹*Ibid.*

Romans 9:25, 26. The Pauline corpus continually affirms that entrance into the Church constitutes participation in the spiritual Israel of God:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (Rom. 2:28, 29).

Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one, and broke down the dividing wall. . . . So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household (Eph. 2:11-14, 19).

Whereas before we were "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel," now we are not. Whereas before we were "strangers and aliens," now we are "fellow citizens" with the true Israelites. In short, we are "Jews inwardly," the "chosen people of God." Paul insists that Gentiles, as well as physical Jews, can be considered children of Abraham: "It is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). The atoning work of Christ has made it possible for Gentiles to share in God's program for Israel and to be joint-heirs of the promises given to Abraham (Gal. 3:14, 29).¹² All of this reinforces the doctrine that the Church, comprised of Gentiles and Jews, is the spiritual Israel of God.

The "spiritual Israel" concept is a part of Lucan theology as well. In Acts 2:16-21, Luke relates how Peter applied the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 to Pentecost. Peter did *not* say "this is *like* what was spoken of through the prophet Joel," but rather "this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). The birth of the Church is in some sense a fulfillment of the eschatological expectation expressed in Joel.

In the same chapter, we are told that the resurrection of Christ is a fulfillment of 2 Samuel 7:12, 13: "And so, because he [David] was a prophet, and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of

¹²Compare Ryrie: "It is quite obvious that Christians are called the spiritual seed of Abraham, but the New Testament nowhere says that they are heirs of the national promises made to the physical descendants" (*Dispensationalism Today*, 149).

his descendants upon his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay" (Acts 2:29, 30). That Jesus is installed *even now* as the Davidic Messiah is also confirmed by Acts 15:14-19, which applies the messianic prophecy of Amos 9:11, 12 to the Church, calling the latter the "tabernacle of David" (v. 16).¹³

In my estimation, however, Ladd takes this principle too far when he pits the New Testament against the Old and pleads ignorance as to the manner of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.¹⁴ I cannot concur with Ladd that Revelation 20:1-6 is the only Scripture that teaches a corporeal Messianic Kingdom on the earth. If Old Testament prophecy is truly so enigmatic, then what good is it? Further, from what source did the New Testament writers develop their eschatology?¹⁵ A balanced hermeneutic, I believe, is one that can take both Testaments at face value and not elevate the witness of one above the other. When the New Testament claims the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy in a way not suggested by the Old Testament context, the new meaning may be appreciated *without doing away with the original sense of the prophecy in question*. For example, Hosea 11:1 may be a prophecy of an event in Jesus' early life (Matt. 2:15), because Jesus represents the true Israel, but it does not cease to be a description of the exodus of Israel. In other words, the New Testament fulfillment is a secondary application or partial fulfillment, not the only application of the Old Testament prophecy. Psalm 2 may be partially fulfilled in the crucifixion and subsequent exaltation of Christ (Acts 4:25-28), but its eschatological meaning is preserved as well (Rev. 2:26, 27; 12:5). This principle is known as the "dual fulfillment of prophecy."

One may argue that this principle opens a can of worms, rendering Old Testament interpretation indeterminate.¹⁶ However, if we do not go beyond the multiple fulfillments recorded in the New Testament, I feel that as interpreters we will be safe. With the dispensationalists, we may affirm the eschatological meaning of the Old Testament prophecies in

¹³Cf. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972, 51ff.

¹⁴Ladd, p. 27.

¹⁵For the Old Testament prophetic influence on the New Testament, see T. Francis Glasson, "Theophany and Parousia," *New Testament Studies*, 1988, Vol. 34, 259-270.

¹⁶See J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973, 121-126.

their plain and normal senses; yet at the same time we may agree, with Ladd and the amillennialists, that the New Testament can *and does* teach fulfillments of these prophecies which are not indicated by the Old Testament context.

At this point it would be helpful for us to recognize that the New Testament does not "spiritualize" all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Age to Come. Acts 3:21, for example, talks about "the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" following the return of Christ (3:18-20). Though Paul presents the Church as the spiritual Israel, he does not present national Israel as being permanently rejected.¹⁷ Romans 11:25-29 depicts a future for national Israel as well as for the Church.

III. THE MILLENNIUM

If this hermeneutic is adopted, it by no means allows one to conclude (as does Ladd) that Revelation 20 is the only scriptural passage that describes an intermediate Messianic Kingdom. A literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies will paint a picture clearly compatible with Revelation 20 and other New Testament passages featuring apocalyptic yearnings for the restoration of all things and the Age to Come. At the same time, a literal interpretation of the New Testament will show that some of these prophecies have secondary and even tertiary meanings *in addition to* their obvious primary meanings. It is true that Jesus is the Anointed One ruling His Davidic Kingdom (the Church) from His throne in heaven, but it is equally true that this Kingdom will be literally manifest in the future with the return of Christ (cf. Matt. 19:28; Luke 19:12). At that time Jesus, who "has the key of David" (Rev. 3:7), will invite his citizens into his Millennial kingdom.

If a historical-grammatical approach is taken to Revelation 20:1-6, I do not see how one could not embrace premillennialism. The passage describes nothing less than a thousand-year reign of the saints upon the earth. Other apocalyptic works provide similar descriptions of the Messianic Kingdom, but I have never seen anyone attempt to interpret the four-hundred-year kingdom of 2 Esdras 7:28 in an amillennial way. A literal hermeneutic of the New Testament, then, authenticates the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament.

¹⁷Cf. Ladd, 27, 28.