

Chris Wright, "A Christian Approach To Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel," P.W.L.Walker, ed., *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*. Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1992. Pbk. ISBN: 0951835610. pp.1-19.

A Christian Approach To Old Testament Prophecy Concerning Israel

Chris Wright

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I. The Universal Context of God's Promises to Israel

The issue of Old Testament prophecy needs to be examined in the light of the total perspective which pervades the Old Testament, namely God's purpose for the whole of humanity and for the whole earth. Genesis 1-11 sets the agenda for the rest of the Bible, presenting us with the basic triangle of relationships within which the whole of the rest of the Bible's story lies: the relationship between God, humanity and the earth. The climax comes in Genesis 11 where the story of the tower of Babel reveals a world of nations, cursed, divided and scattered over the earth. It is into this dismal context that God then declares in Genesis 12 his universal intention: there is still to be a 'blessing for all nations', but it will now come through his covenant with a single individual, Abraham. This covenant reflects exactly the creation triangle, only now on a smaller scale: God, Israel and the land. The election of Israel and the promise of land are thus to be set in the context of God's ultimate purpose for the salvation of humanity and the recreation of all the earth; they were not ends in themselves, but means to a greater end. God's commitment to Israel therefore needs to be seen as derivative from his commitment to humanity, not prior to it or separable from it.¹ Election indeed involves use of particular means, but for a universal goal.

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II. The Universal Thrust of Old Testament Eschatology

Secondly, Old Testament prophecies which specify Israel and/or the land need to be seen in light of the universal thrust of Old Testament eschatology, an emphasis which develops strongly in the Prophets (and Psalms). The Old Testament has a vision of the people of God which will include,

¹ Von Rad made this point in commenting on the Table of Nations in Gen. 10, which significantly does not include Israel. The climax of God's work of creation in the primal history is the spread of the nations of humanity. Israel's arrival and history therefore take place within God's redemptive work on behalf of the nations: see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology I* (Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd 1962), 162f. H.H. Rowley, *The Faith of Israel* (London, SCM 1956) 180 comments on Old Testament eschatology: 'it is to be observed that the pictures of the Golden Age are always of a universal character... There could be no Golden Age for Israel until all men shared it'. This universal dimension of Israel's election and significance has long been expounded by theologians of mission; cf. J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed 1956) 11ff.; J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (New York, McGraw Hill 1962) 18ff., R.R. Ridder, *Discipling the Nations* (Grand Rapids, Baker 1971) ch. 1. The growth of a more holistic canonical reading of the text has also led to a revision of the tendency to read Genesis in the light of Exodus (on the grounds that the Israel who reflect on God as creator already knew him through their history of redemption). See e.g. T. Fretheim, 'The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus', *Interpretation* 45 (1991) 354-65. A similar point with regard to the Zion tradition is made by J.G. McConville below.

[Now on-line at http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jerusalem_mcconville.pdf]

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but not be confined, to ethnic Israelites: 'many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people' (Zech. 2:11).² This was not just an idea developed by the early church to legitimate the inclusion of Gentiles in response to Jewish rejection of Jesus. On the contrary, it was built in to the 'genetic code' of Israel from the outset, as the New Testament's scriptural quotation and argumentation on this point show clearly. Just as the patriarchal family was only a stage in the development of the people of God, so national and territorial Israel in the Old Testament period was a stage toward the development of an international and global people of God. This is not just a 'Christian idea' but intrinsic to the Old Testament itself.

Even in Old Testament times, to make a straight identification between Israel as the 'people of God' and the then nation state in any of its stages was questionable: the idea of a faithful 'remnant' is found as early as the time of Elijah (1 Kings 19:18). In the New Testament the idea that membership of the national community was enough in itself truly to belong to the people of God is denied, by John the Baptist (Lk. 3:8), by

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Jesus (Jn. 8:33-44) and by Paul (Rom. 2:28, 9:6ff.).³ Thus those who today make such a direct identification (either in terms of the whole Jewish ethnic community, or that part of it living in territorial Israel) are open to the charge that they are misunderstanding the Old Testament and short-circuiting the New.

III. The Historically Contingent Nature of Prophetic Language when describing the Future

When prophets spoke about the future, they could only do so meaningfully by using terms and realities that existed in their past or present experience. The realities associated with being Israel in their day included their specific history and such things as the land, the law, Jerusalem, the temple, sacrifices and priesthood. All of these had substantial significance in Israel's relationship with God, and also in Israel's ultimate role in relation to the nations and their relationship with God. Thus, for prophets to speak about God's future dealings with Israel and the nations, they had to speak in terms of these contemporary realities. How else could their hearers have grasped the point?⁴ Thus, for example, Jeremiah's 'Book of Consolation' (Jer. 30-33) looks forward to a total restoration of Israel after the exile, and it does so in terms of restored people, return to the land, covenant renewal, the perfection of monarchy, priesthood and sacrifices-because all these things were the *realia* of Israel's faith and experience. To speak of restoration without recourse to such concrete features of being Israel would have been meaningless, even if it had been possible.

² This is discussed more fully in my *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (London, Marshall-Pickering 1992), 34-54. Among the important texts are Isa. 11:1-9, 10, 12; 19:19-25; 25; 42:6; 44:5; 45:22ff.; 49:6; Amos 9:12; Jer. 16:19; Hag. 2:6ff.; Zech. 2:10-13; 8:20-23; Mal. 1:11; Psa. 22:27; 47:8ff.; 72:17; 86:9; 87; 102:13-22.

³ This last reference (Rom. 9:6 ff.) is particularly significant in relation to the view of some scholars that, in Rom. 9-11, when Paul writes of 'Israel' he means nothing more nor less than the Jewish nation. Paul is more subtle than that and does make a distinction between the ethnic community and a true Israel. See further below, section XI.

⁴ This feature of prophecy, and the need to take it into account in proper interpretation of the text, is discussed in most serious books on biblical hermeneutics.

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IV. The Transcendent Nature of Prophetic Use of Familiar Concepts

Moreover, even in the Old Testament itself, there was an awareness that the fulfilment of prophecies that were made in

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terms of the concrete realities of Israel's life and faith would actually go beyond them. The familiar dimensions of Israel's national life are transcended in various ways. For example: the restoration of the exiles would be a reunification of ancient Judah and Israel into one renewed and repentant people, an event which never happened historically (Jer. 50:4f., 33; Ezek. 37:15ff.); the people of God would be restored to the full, perfect and eternal experience of their covenant relationship with Yahweh (Jer. 50:5, Ezek. 36, 39:25-39); the law would not only be perfectly obeyed by Israel, but also be sought out by all the nations of the earth (Jer. 31:33; 32:39-41; Isa. 2:3; 51:4f.); the new Davidic kingdom would be worldwide, and the new king would be perfect in all those respects where the historical kings had failed (Isa. 9:6f., 11:1-5, Jer. 23:1-6, Ezek. 34:1-24, 37:15-28); the new temple would be miraculously filled with the glory of God and the river of life (Ezek. 43:1-5, 47:1-12). In other words, there seems to be an awareness that although the future has to be described in concepts drawn from Israel's historical nationhood, it will in fact ultimately transcend them.⁵

Thus to claim that Old Testament prophecy can have a deeper spiritual meaning than its literal form is not some kind of Christian 'trick'. The dispensationalist's accusation that those who interpret prophecy in terms of a spiritual rather than a literalistic fulfilment are not taking the Old Testament seriously is false. For the Old Testament itself sometimes sees beyond the literal forms of its own eschatology.⁶

V. The Distinction between Promise and Prediction

As a result, it is not always appropriate to handle this prophetic material simply in the category of 'prediction'. Even at the time of their origin, prophecies would probably not have been seen as flat predictions. Rather they have to be handled as part of the 'promise'. Though there are indeed predictions within the Old Testament which have been or will be fulfilled, the Old Testament is not just a box of predictions: it is fundamentally a

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⁵ Cf. ch. 2 below, concerning the Jerusalem/Zion tradition. Cf. also the detailed treatment of the symbolic, theological and ethical functioning of the tradition in B.C. Ollenburger, *Zion the City of the Great King*, (Sheffield, JSOT 1987).

⁶ Failure to recognize this can lead to seriously distorted exegesis of both Old and New Testament texts and theology: see ch. 3 below.

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declaration of promise. That is, it declares God's committed purpose to act in history for the salvation of humanity and creation through the agency of his people Israel.⁷

There is an immense difference between prediction and promise. Promise presupposes, initiates or sustains personal relationship and involves personal commitment (prediction need not). Thus the fulfilment of a promise may, in the event, take a quite different form from the material terms in which it was made, yet still be a true fulfilment inasmuch as its purpose was bound up with the relationship, not the objective form of words used. Thus it must be asked of any prophecy not only, 'what was actually said at the time?' but also 'what was the promise for?' Later circumstances may enable the point and motivation of the promise to be fulfilled quite beyond the terms or expectations of the original words. To illustrate, imagine in the last century a father promises his young son a horse of his own when he 'comes of age'. In the meantime cars are invented. On his twenty-first birthday, his father therefore gives him a car instead. The promise is fulfilled, because the substantive meaning of the promise was a personally owned means of transport. It would be pointless to say that it would only be fulfilled if the son gets a horse as well, or later. That would be to take the original promise as a mere prediction which will have 'failed' unless it is literally honoured. This surely is what literalistic and dispensationalist treatments of Old Testament prophecy do when they argue that Old Testament prophecies still await a literal fulfilment to match their original predictive form, when the New Testament actually declares such prophecies to have been fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ, even though in surprising ways.

This is relevant to the contention that the land was promised to Israel 'for ever'. If this were a simple, historically linear, prediction, then the return of Jews to Palestine in our own day could be fitted into it, though the gap of eighteen hundred years would still look very suspicious. However, what is forgotten is that other features of God's many promises to Old Testament Israel were also explicitly 'for ever', and yet manifestly temporal in duration. The Aaronic Levites as priests (1 Chron. 23:13) and the descendants of David as kings (2 Sam.

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7:12-16) were likewise 'for ever', yet both have come to an end and are unambiguously seen as fulfilled in Christ in the New Testament. The expression 'for ever' (לְעוֹלָם) needs to be seen, not so much in terms of 'everlastingness' in linear time, but rather as an intensive expression within the terms, conditions and context of the promise concerned. 'For ever' is not, in Hebrew, as infinite as it sounds in English. God promised the Rechabites (the obscure and reactionary followers of Jonadab) that they would have descendants 'for ever' (Jer. 35:19). Where are the Rechabites now? If this had been a straight prediction, it has failed. If it is seen as a limited promise within its own historical context in support of the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah, it makes sense. Significantly, exactly the same form of words is used concerning the house of David and the levitical priests in Jeremiah 33:17f. This is not, of course, to suggest that Jeremiah put David and the priests on the same level as the Rechabites, but rather to point out that the expression 'for ever' varies in its significance according to its context, and that it can be limited in its scope when circumstances change or

⁷ For a fuller discussion, see my *Knowing Jesus*, ch. 2 ('Jesus and the Old Testament Promise').

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God's historical purposes move forward to new stages.⁸ When the land, the kings and the priests were declared to be 'for ever', it meant that these dimensions were permanent and guaranteed while Israel as a nation was the limit of God's redemptive work and covenant relationship. Once this national and territorial basis was transcended through the coming of the Messiah and the extension of the gospel of redemption to Gentiles and Jews through him, then the 'forever-ness' of these things resides in Christ himself, the embodiment of Israel. Since, as we saw above at the outset, the whole point of God's promise to Israel was that 'there should be a people of God for the sake of humanity and the earth', and since that promise is now being fulfilled through a multinational people, Jew and Gentile in Christ, then the 'forever' aspects of nation-state, land, king and priests have likewise been transcended, taken up, and fulfilled.⁹

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VI. The Future of Israel and the Nations

Old Testament prophecies concerning the future of Israel are inextricably bound up with the future of the nations also. There is even a comparable 'ambiguity' of judgement and hope. Israel is to be sifted in judgment virtually to extinction; yet Israel will be redeemed and restored. The nations are to be judged and destroyed as enemies of God; yet the nations are to be gathered in to share in the salvation and inheritance of the people of God.¹⁰ In other words, the dividing line between judgement and salvation, between the doomed and the saved, is not a line that runs simply between the nations and Israel, but through both of them. Just as there will be a 'remnant of Israel', so there will be 'survivors of the nations' (Isa. 45:20ff., 66:19ff., Zech. 14:16ff.). It is both of these together (both the purified and obedient remnant of Israel and those of the nations who identify with Yahweh and his people) that the Old Testament sees as the eschatological people of God.

Examination of various prophetic texts about the future of Israel and the nations shows that they did not think in terms of a future two-tiered arrangement, but rather of the nations coming to share in the experiences, the privileges and the hope of Israel. It is a unified vision,

⁸ Cf. ch. 2 below, on the historical conditionality of covenant declaration.

⁹ The language of fulfilment, a properly biblical language, should not be misunderstood and decried as 'replacement' or 'supersession'. To say that the church, as the messianic community of believing Jews and Gentiles, is the fulfilment of God's intention for Old Testament Israel, should not be taken to mean that God simply rejected the Jews and transferred his affections to Christians, even if regrettably this is a common enough misconception. It is certainly true that in Christ the meaning of Israel has been redefined and extended from its national territorial meaning of the Old Testament. Yet this does not imply a replacement that devalues or rejects the vital importance of that stage of God's historical work of redemption, any more than one could say that the growth of the twelve tribes 'replaced' the family of Abraham in that derogatory sense. It needs to be remembered that the existence and blessing of the one 'great nation' and the existence and blessing of people from 'all nations', while chronologically distinct in the sense that one follows the other, are both intrinsic and explicit in the Abrahamic covenant.

¹⁰ On Israel, *e.g.* Isa. 26:9; Amos 9; Mic. 2-3; Isa. 35; Jer. 16; 25:ff.; 30-33. On the nations, *e.g.* Isa. 24; 34; Mic. 4; Joel 3. In Zephaniah, the punishment of the nations is set in parallel to the judgement on Jerusalem and the restoration of Jerusalem also has universal implications (Zeph. 3:9ff.).

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including various great Old Testament themes, such as the kingship of God, the law of God, the salvation of God and the name of God.¹¹ This unified

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vision is then precisely what Paul calls the 'mystery' hidden for ages (Eph. 3:4-6), the mystery being as to how this vision could ever be accomplished; but now he rejoices to see it being brought into tangible reality in the inclusion of the Gentiles, through Christ, into a status from which they had hitherto been excluded, namely membership of the very 'household of God' (a common Old Testament metaphor for the people of Israel). His argument in Ephesians 2:11-22 is saturated with Old Testament imagery and could not be more clear in its portrayal of a unitary people of God in the Messiah, Jesus. This was not some remote future hope, nor merely an ideal by-product of the gospel. It was, he claims, the very content of his gospel and a present reality. He even coins words to describe it, in one emphatic verse (Eph. 3:6): the Gentiles are 'co-heirs, a co-body, and co-sharers' with Israel. Once again it is hard to avoid the conclusion that dispensational schemes of a two-tier covenant and of a continuing duality in God's purpose for Jew and Gentile are frankly unbiblical.

VII. Jewish Hopes at the Time of Jesus

At the time of Jesus there was, within the variety of inter-testamental Jewish hopes, a strong strand of expectation that looked forward to a restoration of Israel that would include the ingathering of the nations.¹² The coming of the king to Jerusalem would mean peace and universal rule for the nations (Zech. 9:9ff.); when God acted to restore Zion and reveal his glory, then the nations would also gather to worship him (Psa. 102:13-22; cf. also Isa. 49:5f., 56:1-8, 60:10-14, 66:18-24). As these hopes continued into the intertestamental period, 'the hope that seems to have been most often repeated was that of the restoration of Israel', within a complex that included also

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the rebuilding of the temple and the entry of the Gentiles.¹³ Restoration and ingathering were seen in eschatological terms as the final great act of God, the Day of the Lord. The two things would be part of the same final event that would usher in the new age, but the restoration of Israel was logically and in a sense chronologically expected first.

¹¹ Cf. also my *Knowing Jesus*, 49-54.

¹² A seminal study of this theme which is enormously helpful in grasping Jesus' own sense of mission and purpose in his historical context is B.F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London, SCM 1979). More recent studies have confirmed and expanded this understanding: see E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1985); C. Rowland, *Christian Origins* (London, SPCK 1985) 87ff.; I.M. Zeitlin, *Jesus and the Judaism of His Time* (Oxford, Polity 1988) ch. 3; J.D.G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways* (London, SCM 1991); G. Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean* (London, SCM 1987).

¹³ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 87; the material is presented in detail in his chs. 2 and 3.

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New Testament scholars set the ministry of John the Baptist within this eschatological framework. His was a winnowing ministry, sifting the nation by his call to repentance, in preparation for their restoration.

The mission of the Baptist belonged to a scenario of fulfilment. His role was to assemble by baptism the remnant of Israel destined for cleansing and acquittal and so, climactically, for restoration.¹⁴

Likewise, Jesus publicly identified himself with the goal of John's ministry and operated within the same eschatological framework. His note of fulfilment in relation to the kingdom of God included the fulfilment of the expectations regarding Israel. He too challenged his contemporaries to respond to what he clearly portrayed as their last chance.

VIII. Jesus' Understanding of his own Mission

Jesus clearly understood his own mission in terms of the fulfilment of the prophetic hope of the restoration of Israel.¹⁵ This was no longer something future, but a present reality through the arrival of the kingdom of God in his own person. Indications of this self-understanding of his mission include:

a) His submission to baptism by John.

Jesus' acceptance of the ministry of John the Baptist is highly significant for understanding his own aims. If John was the one who had come to prepare Israel for its eschatological restoration by God himself, then Jesus had been sent to accomplish it.

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Like the Baptist, he understood his own role in terms of the age-old scriptural promise of the restoration of Israel; and, like the Baptist, he understood this restoration not as a divine act exclusively reserved for post-historical realization (located, that is, on the far side of a still future judgement) but as called for now and already begun!¹⁶

b) His choice and use of scripture in relation to himself.

As is well known, Jesus affirmed that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah 61 (Luke 4:16-21). Yet this is only the 'tip of a very large iceberg': for the dominant motif of Jesus' usage of the scriptures is one of fulfilment, combined with a warning not to miss out on what God was doing in the here and now. R.T. France, who has studied this material exhaustively, observes:

The messianic figures which occur most prominently in the sayings of Jesus are among the least prominent in the Old Testament and those least emphasized in later Jewish thought, particularly the Suffering Servant of Isa. 53 and the mysterious figure who appears,

¹⁴ Meyer, *Aims*, 128. Cf. also Rowland, *Origins*, 131ff.

¹⁵ In addition to the more recent work cited in footnotes below, three earlier works are still profitable: J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, SBT 24 (London, SCM 1958); G.B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation* (London, Athlone 1965); F. Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*, SBT 47 (London, SCM 1965).

¹⁶ Meyer, loc. cit. Cf. also B. Witherington III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis, Fortress 1990) 34-56.

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sometimes in the roles of suffering and rejection, in Zech. 9-13. Strikingly absent from his selection is the traditional picture of the royal Messiah, son of David, the restorer of Jewish political sovereignty... [Evidently therefore]: a) Jesus saw in his own coming the age of fulfilment of the messianic hopes of the Old Testament, the emphasis being on present, not future, fulfilment; b) His conception of Messiahship had as little as possible to do with the political future of the Jewish nation.

Even where Old Testament prophecies are referred by Jesus to as yet future events (e.g. Dan. 7 and the Son of Man), Jesus himself is the central figure as judge and king. The Son of Man concept furthermore identified him as the corporate, representative figure who embodied the 'saints of the Most High' - i.e. Israel as the eschatological people of God. Thus his use of the Old Testament in his vision of the future was an extension or completion of his own eschatological ministry already begun on earth.

[There is] no instance where Jesus expects a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy other than through his own ministry, and certainly no suggestion of a future restoration of the Jewish nation independent of himself. He himself is the fulfilment to which that prophecy points, the ultimate horizon of the prophetic vision.¹⁷

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c) His choice of twelve disciples.

The number twelve is a stubborn element in the tradition, even though there is some fluidity over the precise names of the disciples: in other words, the intentional symbolism of the embryonic twelve tribes of a restored Israel was clearly remembered. This is strengthened by his reference to them as a 'little flock', which was a term from 'remnant theology' (Luke 12:32; 4. the quotation of Ps. 37:11 in Matt. 5:5), and his saying about their judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).

d) His understanding of the Temple.

Jesus not only predicted its destruction, but symbolized it in his prophetic action, commonly called its 'cleansing'. E.P. Sanders uses this indisputably historical event in the ministry of Jesus as a major clue to discovering Jesus' own understanding of his significance and the reason for his crucifixion.¹⁸ It was a powerful eschatological claim that the end of the old had come and the new temple of the restored Israel was imminent.

e) His 'triumphal entry' into Jerusalem.

For those who had eyes to see, his action was an unquestionable claim to be fulfilling the restorationist hope of Zech. 9:9ff. The crowds may have misunderstood the significance of what was happening, but they evidently did not miss the surface meaning of the action in relation to the prophecy (Matt. 21:5).

f) His 'new covenant' and his sacrificial interpretation of his own death.

¹⁷ R.T. France, 'Old Testament Prophecy and the Future of Israel', *Tyn Bull* 26 (1975) 56, 58. For the fullest treatment of all the material, see R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London, Tyndale 1971).

¹⁸ Cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, chs. 1-2; Rowland, *Origins*, 162ff.; Dunn, *Partings*, ch. 3; Witherington, *Christology*, 107-116.

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In Mark 14:24 (and parallels) Jesus uses the familiar prophecies of a new covenant as the framework to explain his death. In the context of his own 'little flock' of twelve disciples, it meant that in them, the true, believing and obedient remnant of Israel, he had established the new covenant community itself.

g) His prediction and understanding of his resurrection.

In Luke 24 Jesus explained his resurrection to the Emmaus disciples. The significant point lies in verse 21—namely that their primary problem concerned the 'redemption of Israel': this is what they had hoped for from Jesus, but apparently in vain since he was now dead. Jesus leads them through the scriptures, not in order to dismiss their problem, but in order to direct their attention to the mode of its real solution—*i.e.* in the

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suffering, death and resurrection to glory of the Messiah. When they realized who he was and that he was alive, they saw the true answer to their problem: Israel had been redeemed, because Jesus was the Messiah after all. In the later scene of the chapter, back in Jerusalem, Jesus reinforces the point that his resurrection on the third day fulfils the scripture (v. 46); yet the only Old Testament reference to a third day resurrection is Hosea 6:1-2, which clearly refers to the restoration of Israel. If the resurrection of Jesus on the third day was thus declared scriptural, it must have been perceived not merely as relating to the few Old Testament references to resurrection in general, but specifically to the eschatological resurrection of Israel.¹⁹

h) His commissioning of his disciples as 'his witnesses'.

In Acts 1:1-8, the crucial hinge of Luke's two-volume work, Jesus deflected the disciples' question about restoring the kingdom to Israel into the matter of them being witnesses first to Jerusalem and then to the ends of the earth. Again, it is important to see that Jesus was not just dismissing their question (however clouded as yet may have been their grasp of the issue they were raising). Rather Jesus appears to move from the assumption that such matters are fully in the control of God to the practical matter of what the disciples must do next. 'You shall be my witnesses', he says. The phrase deliberately echoes Isaiah 43. There God promises to redeem, gather and restore Israel (vv. 1-7), and then declares, 'You are my witnesses' (vv. 10, 12), which in the context of this whole section of prophecy, especially ch. 45, means a universal witness to the ends of the earth. Jesus thus commissions his disciples to be witnesses to a restoration of Israel with worldwide effects, fully in line with the Isaianic eschatology.

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IX. New Testament Interpretation of Fulfilment in Jesus

Moving from the sayings of Jesus himself to the New Testament authors, it is clear that they likewise interpreted his life, ministry, death and resurrection as being the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel.

¹⁹ Cf. also Lk. 18:31-33, Mk. 8:31 and 1 Cor. 15:4—probably the earliest evidence of this tradition. On the redefining of Israel around Jesus, cf. ch. 2 below; also Dunn, *Partings*, ch. 6; C.F.D. Moule, 'Jesus, Judaism and Paul', in G.F. Hawthorne and O. Betz, ed., *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1987) 43-53.

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a) Matthew.

The New Testament opens with a genealogy of Jesus in which Matthew is saying in effect: 'If you wish to understand Jesus, you must see him as the completion of this story'. He structures it schematically into three double sevens of generations—the implicit form thus supporting the explicit message of completeness and fulfilment. His name was to be Jesus, because he was to 'save his people' (1:21). He came from Bethlehem, the expected birthplace of the coming ruler of Israel, and his infancy is portrayed with a 'Moses-Egypt' typology that points towards a new exodus. These are only the opening shots in a continuous salvo on the same theme throughout Matthew.²⁰

b) Luke.

The two-volume work of Luke is framed at key points with this theme. Luke 1 and 2 are saturated with the motif of fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies about Israel: John's mission is to bring Israel back to God (1:16f.); Jesus would possess the throne of David 'forever' (1:32f.); Israel's salvation is now being accomplished (1:68ff.); the arrival of Jesus fulfils the hope of Israel and the nations (2:29-32), and thus arouses thanksgiving among those who are 'looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (2:36-38). Moreover, as noted just above, the Gospel ends with the apparent dashing of the same hope, but Jesus himself, no longer a babe in arms but the risen Messiah, restores and explains it; this is closely followed by the same theme at the beginning of volume two, in Acts 1. Finally, Luke ends his work with the same theme. He chooses to conclude with Paul in Rome, assuring his Jewish visitors that his whole ministry had been 'because of the hope of Israel', proving from the scriptures that that hope had been fulfilled by the coming of the Kingdom of God in the person of Jesus the Messiah, and

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that thereby, equally in accordance with the scriptures, 'salvation had been sent to the Gentiles' (Acts 28:20, 23, 28-31).

c) The apostolic preaching.

Since most of the recorded preaching of the apostles in the early part of Acts was to Jews, it is significant to see how they handled Old Testament prophecy. It proves to be entirely consistent with all that has been noted so far.

In his Pentecost sermon Peter identifies what is happening on that day with the prophecy of Joel which, in chapters 2 and 3 had included restoration for Israel in the climactic Day of the Lord (Acts 2:16-21); later he sees the promise to David of an eternal kingdom explicitly fulfilled in Jesus and his resurrection and exaltation (2:29-36). In his Temple sermon he stresses the fulfilment of prophecy and goes on to call for repentance so that the promised restoration may fully come, which he sees as now available to all nations in line with the promise to Abraham (3:18-26); he makes the same point more briefly before the Sanhedrin (5:29-32). Stephen, at the point of his death, claims to see the Son of Man presently at the right hand of God—i.e. in the position of vindication and glory that was to be the destiny of the saints of the Most High whom he represented (7:56, cf. Dan. 7:13f., 18, 27). Paul, preaching to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch, tells them that in Jesus and his resurrection God has

²⁰ An excellent survey of these themes is found in R.T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Exeter, Paternoster 1989). See esp. ch. 6 ('Matthew and Israel'); cf. also at a more popular level my *Knowing Jesus*, ch. 1.

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fulfilled his promises to the patriarchs and prophets (13:32ff.). When some of the Jews reject his affirmation, he turns to the Gentiles, significantly using the servant theology of Isaiah as the scriptural justification for his missiology (v. 47). He applies to himself and his missionary band the mission of the servant in Isa. 49:6, which had been a mission first for the restoration of Israel and then for the extension of salvation to the ends of the earth.²¹

The message therefore seems unanimous. Both Jesus himself and his immediate interpreters tell us that in the events of his arrival, life, death, resurrection and exaltation, God had acted decisively for the redemption and restoration of his people Israel in fulfilment of the whole range of Old Testament prophecy that he would do so. To this they were called urgently

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to respond there and then as a present reality, not as some still future hope. 'The time is fulfilled...'

X. The Significance of the Gentile Mission

In the light of the three major sections above, the gentile mission of the church is especially significant. In fact, it is as important for an understanding of the meaning of Jesus' own ministry as was the work of John the Baptist. There is a strong linkage between the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the work of the Baptist for the restoration of Israel and its outcome in the birth of a movement committed (soon) to gentile mission. This convergence of what preceded and what followed him points to the eschatological decisiveness of Jesus himself as the initiator of the End, the expected Day of the Lord, with all it would mean for Israel and for the nations.²²

There are definite indications in the ministry of Jesus that he had a universal vision of the gospel, in line with his scriptural understanding at other points.²³ Indeed, the surprising and presumably shocking fact is that he used texts that in their Old Testament context referred to the ingathering of Israel and applied them to the ingathering of the Gentiles instead. Thus, for example, Matthew. 8:11f. is an allusion to texts such as Isaiah 43:5f., 49:12 and Psalm 107:3, while Mark 13:27 picks up Deuteronomy 30:4 and Zechariah 2:6. In this way Jesus actually appears to redefine and extend the very meaning of the 'restoration of Israel' in terms of the Gentiles. Paul does the same thing in Romans 9:24f., when he takes Hosea 1:10 and 2:23, which clearly referred to Israel in context, and applies them to gentile believers.

It seems therefore, that, far from looking for some future regathering of the Jewish people to Palestine, Jesus actually took Old Testament passages which originally had that connotation and

²¹ Cf. F.F. Bruce, 'Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Acts', *Tradition and Interpretation*, 71-9. On the nature of the developing split between early Christians and other Jews over the new theological critique and construction reflected in Acts, see Dunn, *Partings*, ch. 4.

²² Cf. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, ch. 3.

²³ E.g. Lk. 4:25-27; Mt. 8:11ff.; 22:1-4; 21:43; Mk. 11:17; 13:10, 27; cf. B. Witherington III, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World* (Downers Grove, IVP; Exeter, Paternoster 1992), ch. 14; also F. Hahn, *Mission*, ch. 2 ('Jesus' Attitude to the Gentiles').

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applied them to the gathering of the Christian community from all nations, even, in one case, to the exclusion of some Jews! [Matt. 8:12].²⁴

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Yet it remains true that, with a few exceptional cases which underline the general rule, he insisted that his own mission was first to the 'lost sheep of Israel' (Matt. 10:6); this was fully in line with the shape of the mission of the Servant (Isa. 49:5).²⁵

After his resurrection the apostles did not immediately set about a gentile mission. However, this may be due, not to the fact that Jesus never taught it, but rather to the same kind of misunderstanding and surprise that surrounded his teaching about the Kingdom of God. It was 'already but not yet'. Likewise, according to Jewish expectation, if the ingathering of the Gentiles were to take place, Israel had first to be restored. Even after the resurrection and ascension, and the eager preaching of the apostles as witnesses, Israel had apparently not yet responded and experienced the 'times of refreshing' and redemption that were promised. So the ingathering of the nations could hardly happen yet, could it? God then surprised them through Cornelius: he did in fact 'grant repentance and life' to the Gentiles (Acts 11:15-18), and as events progressed, they began to flood into the new community. What could have happened? Nothing less than that in some sense the prophesied restoration of Israel must have happened already, and was being demonstrated precisely in the success of the gentile mission (as an eschatological act of God). This is precisely the point of James' interpretation of events in Acts 15. He sees in the success of the gentile mission the fulfilment of prophecy concerning Israel as well as the nations: the house of David is being restored and the nations are seeking the Lord (Acts 15:12-18, Amos 9:11f.). This is vitally important. At a council of the church convened to resolve this issue, the considered apostolic interpretation of events was that the inclusion of Gentiles into the new messianic community was the eschatological act of God in granting them repentance and salvation, and this was taken as proving the necessary fulfilment of the prophesied restoration of Israel and the Davidic kingdom.

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XI. Paul's Eschatology for Jew and Gentile²⁶

This is the most helpful framework into which to fit Paul's paradoxical teaching on the current relationship between believing Jews and Gentiles on the one hand, and the still unbelieving Jews on the other. It has to be put in the same kind of dual eschatological setting as the kingdom of God in the Gospels. The restoration of Israel both has taken place, and is yet to take place; and it is the ingathering of the Gentiles which fills the tension.

Romans 9-11 are obviously crucial to this issue, but are discussed more fully below in chapter 3.²⁷ Here it need simply be said that they must be interpreted in coherence first with Galatians 3

²⁴ France, 'O.T. Prophecy', 73.

²⁵ Cf. *Knowing Jesus*, ch. 4 ('Jesus and his Old Testament Mission').

²⁶ In addition to the Pauline sections in works cited already, see A.J. Hultgren, *Paul's Gospel and Mission* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1985), ch. 5; J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London, SCM 1959).

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and 4, where Gentiles are included in the seed of Abraham through faith in the Messiah Jesus (and where unbelieving Jews are astonishingly likened to Ishmael, in the amazing reversal of types in his allegory in 4:21-31); then secondly, with Ephesians 2, where Paul insists on one new humanity in the Messiah, with no further distinction between Jew and Gentile in Christ. Certainly Paul does envisage a future salvation for 'all Israel' (Rom 11:25f.) but this cannot be understood in such a way as to concede to the whole ethnic Jewish community which remains unbelieving in Messiah Jesus more than Paul does here in Ephesians. It is not salvation for Jews as Jews, but for Israel in Christ. Paul has already made that distinction twice in his letter (Rom. 2:28f., 9:6-8).

Paul is adamant on God's faithfulness to Israel. But he argues that it is to be seen precisely in two facts: first, that there is a believing remnant among the Jews, to which he himself belongs and which fulfills scripture; secondly, the ingathering of Gentiles is taking place, which is eschatologically and scripturally significant because this was the

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original divine purpose for the existence of Israel.²⁸ Paul wants to affirm two inseparable truths: the ingathering of Gentiles will not be at the expense of God's promises to Israel; nor will God's fulfilment of promise to Israel fail to extend his mercy to the Gentiles. In any case, nothing in the passages cited requires or supports a national or territorial restoration of the Jews as being necessary in order to fulfil prophecy which is explicitly seen as already fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

XII. Hebrews and what we already 'have' in Christ

The book of Hebrews is often sadly absent from discussion of this issue, but it has vital perspectives which complement the Gospel and Pauline material. Basic to its argument is that in Jesus Christ we have in reality all that was equally reality for Old Testament Israel. The reference to 'shadows' (8:5 *etc.*) does not imply that all the great phenomena of Israel's life (such as land, law, temple, priesthood, monarchy) were unreal or only a kind of pretence.²⁹ They were indeed real factors in the relationship which then obtained between God and his people. Moreover, they were filled, by the promise and the prophecies, with extended meaning in the light of what God would do in the future for and through Israel. Hence, to talk of what we have in Christ being 'better' (as Hebrews repeatedly does), is not just 'replacement theology', disparagingly so-called. It is more like 'extension theology'. In the same way the new humanity in the Messiah must be understood not as a radically new Israel, but rather as Israel redefined and expanded.

²⁷ In addition to the major commentaries on Rom. 9-11 and the outstanding recent exegesis of these chapters in N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark 1991) ch. 13, see also B. Witherington III, *End of the World*, 99-128, and at a more popular level, S. Motyer, *Israel in the Plan of God* (Leicester, IVP 1989).

²⁸ As argued above, section I.

²⁹ The 'Platonic' reading of these texts is inadequate; cf. N.T. Wright below. [Now online at: http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jerusalem_New_Testament.pdf]

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Hebrews' affirmations of what 'we have' are surprisingly comprehensive. We have the land, described as the 'rest' into which we have entered through Christ, in a way which even Joshua did not achieve for Israel (3:12-4:11); we have a High Priest (4:14, 8:1, 10:21) and an altar (13:10); we have a hope, which in the context refers to the reality of the covenant made with Abraham (6:13-20). We enter into the Holy Place, so we have the reality of tabernacle and temple (10:19). We have come to Mt. Zion (12:22) and we are receiving a kingdom, in line with Haggai 2:6 (12:28). Indeed, according to

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Hebrews (13:14), the only thing which we do *not* have is an earthly, territorial city!³⁰

All this is consistent other teaching within the New Testament: with Paul, who argues that we have the reality of the law by being released from legalism in the power of the Spirit, so that the true righteousness of the law is fulfilled in us (Rom. 8:1-4); with Peter, who affirms that we have the reality of the inheritance by being released from the material, territorial land with its vulnerability to robbery and destruction (1 Pet. 1:4); indeed with Jesus himself, who gives us the reality of the Davidic kingdom through our membership of the inaugurated kingdom of God which it had always represented.

In all of this, then, it is not a case of abolishing and 'replacing' the realities of Israel and the Old Testament, but of taking them up into a greater reality in the Messiah. Christ does not *deprive* the believing Jew of anything that belonged to Israel as God's people; nor does he give to the believing Gentile anything *less* than the full covenantal blessing and promise that was Israel's. On the contrary, we share together in all of it and more-in him, and for ever.³¹

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<http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁰ Cf. Dunn, *Partings*, 86-91.

³¹ In addition to the works cited above, the following were consulted in preparation of this chapter: J. Green, *How to Read Prophecy* (Downers Grove, IVP 1984); F.F. Bruce, *This is That: New Testament Development of Old Testament Themes* (Exeter, Paternoster 1968); D.W. Torrance, *The Witness of the Jews to God* (Edinburgh, Handsel 1982); C. Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Tring, Lion 1983); J. Goldingay, 'The Jews, the Land and the Kingdom', *Anvil* 4 (1987) 9-22; A. Kirk, 'The Middle East Dilemma: A Personal Reflection', *Anvil* 3 (1986) 231-258; O.C.M. Kvarme: 'The Theological Implications of the State of Israel' (unpublished paper, 1981); B.K. Waltke: 'An Evangelical Christian View of the Hebrew Scriptures', in Tannenbaum, Wilson and Rudin, ed., *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Baker 1984); A.J. Rudin and M.R. Wilson, *A Time to Speak: The Evangelical-Jewish Encounter* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1987); M. Hooker, *Continuity and Discontinuity: Early Christianity in its Jewish Setting* (London, Epworth 1986); R. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (New York, Seabury 1982).