

THE CHURCH AND THE PRESENT STATE OF ISRAEL:  
A PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

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This paper deals with the church's view of and relationship to the present state of Israel. A fundamental consideration in approaching this question is the basic conviction, common to all forms of dispensationalism, that the church is not the replacement of Israel in the divine plan. The church is an assembly of peoples from any and all nations who are united to Christ by the Holy Spirit. The term Israel refers to a specific people who have a political identity. The Scripture speaks of Israel in the plan of God not only in the past, but also in the eschatological future, and doing so, points to Jewish people constituted as a political entity. Elsewhere, I have addressed the biblical teaching regarding the eschatological future of Israel. Let me just say here that the key New Testament Scriptures that bear on this are the Gospel texts on Christ as the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel, certain texts in Acts in which Christ and his apostles speak of the future restoration of Israel (Acts 1 & 3 especially), Romans 9-11, and the book of Revelation. The fact that Jesus and his apostles expected an eschatological fulfillment of the promises to Israel in a political sense is widely accepted today and so that argument will not be repeated here.

Obviously, the question of whether a political, national Israel exists in the eschatological plan of God has bearing on whether we should think of a present Israel as in any sense related to the divine plan. If there is no future Israel in the plan of God, then we do not have any sure grounds for considering a present day Israel as in any respect

related to the divine plan. However, the fact of an eschatological Israel does not in itself indicate how we are to think of any present political Israel. Rather, we have to turn to several New Testament considerations to properly frame a response to this question.

First, we have to note that the New Testament teaches that the covenant promises which support the identity and reality of Israel have been, are being, and will be fulfilled in and through Jesus Christ. Here we are thinking of the promise of the Patriarchal covenant, “I will bless you and make your name great,” “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you,” and “In you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The Old Testament pointed the way in which these promises would be fulfilled as it related the covenant with David to the Patriarchal and New Covenants. The Davidic King would be the primary mediator of blessing, as well as cursing, for all peoples, both Israel and the Gentiles, as Psalm 72 makes clear: “all peoples will be blessed in him.” The New Testament speaks of blessing “in Christ” for all peoples who trust in him. There are spiritual blessings now being poured out “in him” for Jews and Gentiles, as Ephesians makes clear, and there will be a future dispensation in which all things in heaven and in earth will be blessed “in him.” As the messiah, the Davidic mediator, he mediates the promises to Jews and Gentiles. He also mediates the curse to those who are apart from him, as 2 Thessalonians says, when He comes he will deal out retribution to those who do not obey the gospel. As Galatians 3 points out, He is the seed to whom the promise was made.

The second observation is that along with this teaching on the Christological fulfillment and mediation of the covenant promises, the New Testament still considers the corporate seed, even apart from Christ as holy. Not holy in the sense of new covenant

holiness by the Holy Spirit, but holy in the sense of especially set apart by God for a special purpose. We see this in Romans 9-11 where Paul talks about Israel apart from Christ. There he speaks of an Israel that is not saved, that has missed the righteousness of God, an Israel that has been “broken out” from the Olive tree of covenant blessing. This Israel has entered a condition of “temporary” hardening, which is a condition of judgment. However, even though they are hardened, they are still loved. Even though they are “broken out” of covenant blessing, “they are still loved for the sake of the forefathers” “for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” Of this corporate Israel, God still preserves a remnant (Romans 11) and they will be or will beget an Israel in the eschaton who will be saved at the coming of Messiah, the “all Israel” that will be saved at His coming.

With the above two observations in mind, we can address the question of how a present-day Israel, prior to the eschatological Israel which is constituted by Christ at His coming, might be related to covenant promises, particularly the political and land promises of the patriarchal covenant. The condition of being “broken-out” from the olive tree of blessing in Romans 11 leaves present-day Israel in an ambiguous condition. We have to remember that when Paul wrote this, Israel did exist as a political reality within the covenant land borders, although under the political hegemony of a Gentile power and without occupying all of the promised land. Jesus had already prophesied the destruction of the temple together with a coming national disaster. His apostles, including Paul, anticipated a coming “day of the Lord” judgment. That judgment fell in 70 AD. It left Israel as a people in the land but radically altered as a political entity. However, approximately 70 years later, a further, more extensive judgment fell, not specifically

prophesied although it could certainly be understood within the judgment announced by the New Testament. The devastating consequences of the Bar Kochba revolt were not reversed until the twentieth-century political reemergence of Israel. That political reemergence cannot be considered the fulfillment of the prophecies of eschatological Israel for the simple reason that eschatological Israel is a new covenant entity existing under the rule of Messiah. Rather, the reemergence is an unprophecied event parallel to the unprophecied political destruction which took place in 138. At the same time, the unprophecied destruction can be seen as in accordance with the prophecied judgment of 70 AD and likewise the unprophecied reemergence can be seen as in accordance with the prophecied eschatological restoration. These situations indicate the possibilities of Israel's existence prior to the eschatological fulfillment: pre 70 AD, post 70AD and pre 138, post 138 and pre 1948, post 1948 and pre 1967, and post 1967.

The fourth consideration has to do with the responsibility of the church to Israel, to Israel in general, whatever her political condition may be short of the coming of Christ, and to Israel in her particular political situation at the present time. For this, it is important to understand what the church is in relation to political Israel. The church is not the replacement of political Israel in the plan of God. However, its reality does belong to the eschatological kingdom of God, a kingdom which includes both Jews and Gentiles. The church belongs to the present form of the eschatological kingdom, which most evangelicals speak of as the inaugurated form of the kingdom. It is particularly a creation of the ascended Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in anticipation of the kingdom which he will establish when he comes. As a kingdom community, the church is composed of Jews and all kinds of Gentiles who believe in Jesus Christ. The church is a kingdom

community, a kingdom society, but it is not any one political state or even group of states. Its political status is alien, in anticipation of the eschatological political entity of the kingdom of God which will be an empire of peoples in various political states, constituting individual societies which collectively form the global society of the kingdom ruled by Messiah. The church's present existence is that of a witness to the coming kingdom, which comes only with the Messiah's own coming. As a witness, the church is to model the righteousness, justice, and peace of the kingdom in its own corporate identity and from that base testify to righteousness, justice, and peace as based in redeeming, reconciling, saving grace of Jesus Christ. Its testimony to political and social righteousness is a righteousness made possible by Christ, a testimony that never replaces the gospel, but goes hand in hand with the undiluted, unrevised, apostolically preached gospel of Jesus Christ.

With respect to present-day Israel, the church should testify of the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ, a kingdom in which there will be an Israel who hails Jesus Christ as her messiah, and gentile states of peoples who likewise are included in Christ. As such the church should welcome and affirm the political existence of Israel along with the political existence of the various gentile peoples. The church includes within itself both Jewish and Palestinian believers. It therefore has an opportunity to manifest the peace and love that exists between Jews and Palestinians in Christ. Jewish Christians should not treat Palestinians unjustly, seizing and razing their homes, etc., and Palestinians Christians should love Jews and put aside all slander and malice. In this way, the church in Israel and around the world should testify to the coming kingdom of righteousness for Jews and Gentiles in Christ.

The church should recognize that Israel on this side of the coming of Christ is both loved by God and in a state of being “broken-out” of covenant blessings because of unbelief. In that broken-out condition, Israel could exist in a variety of political situations. As we find her today, she exists as a political state. We should not be surprised that she does not enjoy all the covenant blessings, whether they be the full extent of her territorial boundaries or the peace and joy promised by God. It is not that any of these things are begrudged her anymore than we begrudge peace, joy, and well being to any individual human person. But these things are given by God in a full and lasting sense only in Christ. Whatever is granted in the interim period is surely in keeping with the love, grace, and mercy of God. But, we cannot expect that whatever short-term gains Israel may make as a society or a state, will achieve any lasting or full significance until such is granted eschatologically in Christ. In the present time, history as revealed that divine providence allows to Israel any number of possible political conditions. The continuity to all of these conditions is the existence of the people in anticipation of what God will do with Israel eschatologically.

It is important that the church always testify to the righteousness of Jesus Christ. It would be wrong to carte-blanch approve or support the actions of any state, for there is no state that is “Christian” much less the present state of Israel. But to oppose injustice is not in any way to oppose the existence of a people, especially the existence of Israel. What the church must do is support the Jewish and Palestinian Christians as a model of what is possible for both Israel and Gentiles in the kingdom of Christ. From those relationships should be manifested the wisdom of Christ, a wisdom which points the way for the successful coexistence of peoples in the present time.

Finally, the church should be aware that just as is true with our personal walk in Christ, so it is true with the relations of Jews and Gentiles in the church, and it is true with respect to the relations of Jews and Gentile peoples on earth generally: we are not dealing with struggles merely of flesh and blood. The Scripture makes clear that there is a spiritual warfare that conditions the experiences of Israel with Gentile peoples. There is Satanic opposition to Israel in particular among the peoples of the earth, an opposition which manifested itself in the crucifixion of Israel's messiah. At the same time, God works His purposes through all of this, so that his judgment and salvation is worked in and through it. However, the accomplishment of the purposes of God never excuse human sin. Many nations in the ancient world were used by God in his dealing with Israel, but suffered divine judgment because of their sin even when being used as instruments of God. Israel, even in sin is holy, and those who treat holy things profanely will be judged by God. We should not be surprised to see the vilest manifestations of racial hatred and murderous violence aimed at Israel today, anymore than in the past. It is Satanic. But it is only a manifestation, although most pointed, of an evil corrupting all human life and action. It would be wholly inexcusable for the church to participate in the malice and slander aimed at Israel. It would also be inexcusable for the church to sanction actions on the part of Israel that are unjust. Rather, the church must testify to and seek to manifest the righteousness which Christ establishes between Jews and Gentiles who put their faith in him, a righteousness which affirms not just the existence but the full blessing of Israel and the existence and full blessings of Gentile peoples. And in that righteousness, which God makes possible in this interim period, be a peacemaker

and a contributor of wisdom that makes peace in place of the insane violence we find today.