

Current Events and God's Plan for Israel

By Timothy L. Dane¹

Introduction

What is God's plan for the nation of Israel? This topic has always evoked passionate responses. To ask a broader but related question, do current events (i.e., events that are post A.D. 70 and up to the present time) have anything to do with biblical prophecies or are they irrelevant to God's wider eschatological (i.e., end-time) purposes for mankind, Israel included?

On the one hand, there are some who think that current events, including something like re-emergence of Israel as a nation in 1948, have nothing to do with biblical prophecies. On the other hand, there are others who believe that God is not finished with the nation Israel and that in the future He is going to work in a direct way with the nation Israel as part of His eschatological purposes. Those who hold this latter position have differing views on whether or not current events should be looked at as being prophetically significant, but they do agree that God's promise for a future restoration of Israel still stand. Those who believe that God has a distinct plan for national Israel typically believe that in the future biblical prophecies about Israel will have a literal fulfillment. This would include events like Israel's permanent restoration to its land, its protection from enemy annihilation during a future seven-year tribulation period, a spiritual renewal and restoration that leads to massive conversions of Jews to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, and the enjoyment of 1,000 years of spiritual and material

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blessings on this present earth as when Jesus exercises a global rule from His capital in Jerusalem. This position would fall under what is called a dispensational, premillennial view of eschatology.²

There are other theologians who do not believe that God is going to work with Israel in this fashion in the days to come. They take the position that God is effectively finished with working with the nation of Israel in a direct way as described above. Many who hold this kind of position say that God actually *does* fulfill His promises to Israel, and presently is, but that He is fulfilling them to a *spiritual* Israel. By this, they mean that the church is a new (spiritual) Israel in whom OT promises have fulfillment (hereafter, OT). With this kind of explanation, such theologians believe that they are upholding the integrity of God's promises, even though this fulfillment certainly does not include a specific restoration to national Israel as previously described.

The fact is that there are multiple kinds of eschatological systems which do not contain a future for Israel. The purpose of this paper is not to give a lengthy explanation or refutation of such positions.³ What is important to note is that the common denominator in those various systems is that they all deny a literal fulfillment of restoration promises for national Israel.

Bruce Waltke provides a good illustration of how covenant theologians (who characteristically deny a future for national Israel and say that the church is a new or

² A dispensational, Premillennial eschatology would be one that (1) believes that there is a distinction between Israel and the church, (2) believes in a future seven-year tribulation period that follows the rapture of the church, (3) believes the millennial kingdom begins with the second coming of Christ, (4) believes that national Israel will experience a realization of all of its OT biblical promises during the millennium, and (5) believes that the restoration of Israel in the millennial kingdom will also usher in an age of perpetual blessing to the entire human race, not only in the millennium but eternally in a new heavens and new earth.

³ Among these positions would be the following: Amillennialism, Postmillennialism, Preterism, and in certain cases Historic Premillennialism.

spiritual Israel) accept the literalness of OT warnings and punishments to Israel, but deny that prophecies of restoration and blessing relate to national Israel.⁴ Waltke is quite candid when explaining the methods and presuppositions of those who deny a premillennial position and believe that OT “kingdom promises are comprehensively fulfilled in the church, not in restored national Israel.”⁵ As he puts it, people need to learn the rules for interpretation, rules that he believes are “self-evident,” ones which he says go “beyond the widely accredited grammatico-historical approach.”⁶ As Waltke puts it, to hold his views of eschatology one has to abandon or, as he puts it, “go beyond,” the very form of hermeneutics which has characterized Protestant Christianity, literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics. To put it bluntly, Waltke is just plain wrong in his

⁴ Bruce Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988), 280. Waltke, appealing to the dubious claims and methods of Form Critics, makes the assertion that the woe proclamations of the OT “were hurled against national Israel,” but the “oracles of weal” (i.e., promises of blessing) are to be seen as referring to “the spiritual kingdom” (i.e., the church). In other words, when the OT proclaims a judgment on Israel it is always literal and refers to the nation; however, if it is a promise for restoration and blessing it must not refer to national Israel but rather to the church. With these kinds of arbitrary, pre-determined conclusions, covenant theologians have made the a-priori theological determination that restoration promises to the nation cannot refer to the nation, but must be referring to the church.

⁵ Ibid., 263.

⁶ Ibid. As Waltke has made clear, his position (which is representative of virtually all who deny a future for Israel) is one which demands a departure from grammatico-historical hermeneutics. In other words, for one to deny a future restoration for Israel, one must approach the Bible with a figurative, allegorical methodology. This was, historically speaking, the kinds of methodological errors that slowly crept into the church in the third and fourth centuries and persisted for many centuries. Eventually a variety of influences caused allegorical methods to dominate theological thinking, e.g., the non-presence of the nation Israel since A.D. 70, widespread anti-semitism, the influence of Greek philosophy with its general opposition to the material realm, the popularity of allegorical methods as a way of making the Bible seem appealing to the non-Christian world, and finally, the impact of certain influential Christian theologians whose writings cemented in allegorical methods which denied a future for Israel. Allegorical methods came to dominate during the Dark Ages and it was not until the Renaissance, and eventually the Reformation, that a literal, grammatical approach finally reclaimed its proper role in popular interpretation. Interestingly, even though the Magisterial Reformers embraced a literal, grammatical approach by and large, they characteristically did not do so in the area of eschatology. The result is that they continued to embrace a Roman Catholic method in their eschatology. Furthermore, those who have followed in the theological footsteps of these same Reformers have held to the same Roman Catholic eschatology which denies a literal future restoration for Israel.

theology and wrong in his methods. To his credit, though, he certainly is candid in telling it like it is.

As a further example of how faulty methods and presuppositions produce erroneous theological conclusions, Waltke goes on to say that there must be a “priority of New Testament interpretation” over the OT.⁷ In other words, says Waltke, one cannot know what the OT means without having the NT tell one what it means. This is an outrageous claim, but again one must applaud Waltke for his frankness in explaining how and why covenant theologians arrive at their conclusions. This kind of assumption is tragic, though, for it essentially means, according to their system, that the OT has no real meaning on its own. The words are there, but the language has no intrinsic meaning by itself. This is a very dangerous view of language and communication.

Rather, a proper theological method is one which should begin with textual exegesis—an exegesis that allows each text to say what it says in its own historical and literary context. Once one has done this with all of the relevant texts, one can then be in a position to show how all these texts fit together in a consistent, systematic theology. This is a proper way for constructing theology. Covenant theologians, unfortunately, have adopted backward methodology when dealing with eschatological issues, for they start with a theological premise and conclusion and then force the exegesis (with allegorical and typological hermeneutical methods) to fit their theology.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 264.

⁸ Ibid., 273. Waltke is once again very candid when he declares that “one’s theology influences one’s interpretation of particular passages, especially in the case of *apocalyptic* literature” (emphasis added). Once again, Waltke, by his present use of the expression “apocalyptic,” introduces a dubious assertion that has originated with liberal theologians. In the expression “apocalyptic,” one has the situation in which Form and Literary critics have invented a label and with it invented a set of interpretive rules to go along with the label. To put it bluntly in terms of practical results, they say that apocalyptic literature cannot have a literal interpretation; therefore, biblical prophecies about Israel’s restoration, to which they

This article will present a short study of God's promises for the nation Israel based on direct statements from the Bible. The approach will be as follows: (1) It will first begin with a discussion about the kinds of current world events that often draw attention and consider the question whether or not one should see significance in these kinds of events. (2) Secondly, it will look at how God has made promises to the nation of Israel throughout the ages and consider whether or not these prophecies should be taken literally as referring to a future restoration of national Israel or whether these prophecies should be seen as having fulfillment in the church. This survey will begin with the earliest promises of the Bible and proceed onward throughout OT redemptive history. (3) The final section will give a brief survey of certain passages in the New Testament (hereafter, NT).

Current Events That Grab Attention

A good beginning place for this discussion is to ask whether or not one should consider any kinds of current events (i.e., anything from A.D. 70 to the present time) significant in terms of eschatology. The answer to this question has to be both "yes" and "no" with a brief explanation to show how this is so. This discussion could include at least two perspectives on current events: (1) current events that have no direct tie to any kind of biblical prophecy, and (2) current events that do have some kind of direct relation to biblical prophecies, but are not necessarily fulfillments.

Current Events That Have No Direct Tie To Biblical Prophecy

would apply the label "apocalyptic," cannot be taken literally. This kind of hermeneutical hopscotch would be laughable if it were not so tragic in its implications.

First of all, one must recognize that to the extent that current events are all going to contribute in one way or another to the shape of this world when prophesied, eschatological events begin to unfold, in this way all world events are significant and tie in together in one way or another. The analogy of a chess match can illustrate this point. Every move in the chess game is ultimately related to that final move that produces a check mate (with check mate representing the beginning of the final seven years of this present age before the start of the millennial kingdom). Likewise, when it comes to current events, one may not be able to discern the particular significance of particular current events that were not prophesied in the Bible, but all of those events will certainly all work together in the end to produce the situations which God did predict in the Bible. For example, there does not appear to be anything in the Bible describing the United States of America. Now, it is quite possible that America may have some kind of significant role in eschatological events (it may not), but at the present time it is difficult to say what that role might be. Theologically speaking, it would be irresponsible for someone to make confident theological assertions about what role America may or may not play in eschatological events. Theologians who commit this kind of error should stop formulating eschatological views on current events which have no biblical support.

Current Events That Do Have Some Kind Of Direct Relation Biblical Prophecies

On the other hand, there are certain events which have a more direct relation to coming eschatological events based on biblical prophecies of what will take place in the last days. Some of these particular events may have a connection to certain biblical prophecies, although one may not necessarily consider such events as directly *fulfilling* the prophecies. One can point to several significant examples to illustrate this point.

Many theologians believe that perhaps the most significant event that has taken place in modern times is the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948. For over 1800 years, Israel did not even exist as a nation. Despite the fact that Rome crushed Israel and drove masses into exile in A.D. 70 and the fact that Rome even banned Jews from their capital city Jerusalem in 132, the Jewish people continued to maintain their identity as a people in a state of dispersion. The very fact that the Jews maintained their identity in this dispersion is an astounding fact of history, for there is no other people group in the history of the world that has maintained its identity over such a long time period without its own land and nation. Furthermore, and even more astounding, is the fact that there is no other nation in history that has ever been without its land in this way only to become a nation again after such a long period of time. For the Christian, the restoration of Israel as a nation to its ancestral land should come as no surprise, though, for this is exactly the kind of thing that God said He would do in the closing days of this age (a point to be supported in the following sections). God said He would restore them to their land, and Israel has, in fact, been returning to her land for the last 60 years.

A word of caution is in order though about how one explains the rebirth of Israel. Hermeneutically speaking, for the sake of precision it probably is best that one hold back from calling 1948 a fulfillment of prophecy. Now, it is true that passages like Ezekiel 37:21-22 say things like this: “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms.’” This prophecy is an

explicit promise from the sixth century B.C. that God would one day bring Israel back to her land and once again make her into a nation. This is, in fact, something that began to take shape in 1948.

In its context, though, this promise also speaks about the restoration of the Davidic dynasty. Verses 24-28 also say that when these things take place, God will bring the nation everlasting peace, and that God Himself will once again make Israel a unique place for His own dwelling. These things have not taken place and will not take place until God begins to fulfill His eschatological promises. These events will have fulfillment at the close of the tribulation period with the second coming of Jesus Christ but at this present time, they have not been fulfilled. True, the nation has come back to its land and has become a nation again, and this all relates to the fulfilling of these prophecies, but for the sake of precision, it may be best to refrain from saying that this restoration to the land was a “fulfillment” of biblical prophecy.⁹ It is probably more precise to look at current events like this as setting the stage for a fulfilling of the prophecies themselves rather than holding them as *the* fulfillment or even a partial fulfillment.¹⁰

⁹ Stallard makes some important observations about how one should view historical events (or current events) in terms of eschatological articulation. First, it is not wrong to have theological thinking that is “culturally enhanced,” as long as the theology has not been “culturally drive.” In other words, historical factors can enhance a view of the Bible (e.g., one can now see very clearly how the destruction of the second temple fits into prophetic events). The relationship between eschatological viewpoints and history can be properly seen as “a reciprocal one.” This concept is closely related to the former. A third idea that Stallard notes is that “evangelicals should never make current events the starting point for eschatology.” See Mike Stallard, “Zeitgeist and the New Millennium: Comparing the Turn of the Century to the Turn o the Previous Century,” a research paper presented at the ETS Eastern Regional, April 7, 2000, 11-12.

¹⁰ This writer is of the firm conviction that God is providentially at work to bring a fulfillment of all He has promised and that the restoration of the nation and migrations back to the land are huge elements of how biblical prophecies will have fulfillment.

This disclaimer must not be taken in a way that diminishes the significance of Israel's restoration in 1948. As noted, the fact is that this kind of restoration has never been seen in human history. In view of the fact that God promised a full restoration of Israel, one should look at these events and realize that God is providentially at work to set the stage for a complete fulfilling of exactly what He said He would do.

In a similar way, one can also point to things like the unification of Europe (and perhaps the world) and present-day technological advances that can unify economic systems as being current events which will probably be part of eschatological events, but should not properly be called fulfillments of prophecy. To explain further, one can take note of how the Bible gave explicit prophecies that the Mediterranean world would eventually come together in a united condition before the second coming of Christ (e.g., Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 13; 17).¹¹ Likewise, the Bible (cf. Rev. 13) also gave explicit predictions about a mark that all men would be forced to take in the tribulation period if they want to participate in the prevailing economic system. The fact is that in the twentieth century, the world began seeing these two things start to take shape in current events. For one, the unification of Europe may very well represent the kind of unification that Scripture said would exist during the tribulation period. It is hard to say, though, whether or not the present unions will actually be part of the biblical scenario. Likewise, modern technology has already made it possible for commerce to be carried out with things like implanted computer chips. To this extent, Revelation 13 and the mark of the beast could

¹¹ Both Daniel and Revelation speak about a unification of world powers with 10 nations coming together in what appears to be a political, economic and military union. These books also describe another political leader who rises up to seize control over that block of power. This individual is commonly known as the Antichrist, although this particular term is never used until 1 John 2:18. The Antichrist is the one who establishes a seven-year peace covenant between Israel and her adversaries (Dan. 9:27; 1 Thess. 5:1-2). He is also the one who goes back on this agreement half way into this seven year period and sets out to destroy Israel (Dan. 7:25; 9:27; Rev. 13).

become realities at any time as far as technology is concerned. Once again, though, it would be reckless for someone to call these phenomena fulfillments of prophecy. It would be much better for a person to recognize that world events are coming together in a way that is setting the stage for the exact kinds of things that the Bible predicted. The truth is that there may be many other developments and changes in how all these things come together. Nevertheless, based on what the Bible says, and based on what one sees in the present world, it appears that these events could relate to eschatological events as prophesied in the Bible.

A real mistake that some people make about current events is when they try to label current events as fulfillments of biblical prophecy when in fact they are not. For example, sometimes people point to things like present day earthquakes and present day wars (especially wars in the Middle East) as being fulfillments of prophecy. This kind of “newspaper eschatology” is both wrong and harmful and often becomes a source of embarrassment for the church. It certainly is possible that some of these present events may have direct relationship to eschatological events, but it is reckless to call them fulfillments of prophecy. On a final note, though, one must also remember that just because some have been guilty of this erroneous kind of newspaper eschatology, this does not invalidate God’s promises or mean that He will not do exactly what He said He will do. If God said it is going to happen, it will happen.

Biblical Data Concerning God’s Plan For Israel

As noted in the introduction, a sound theological method is one which begins with an exegesis of the text itself before making theological formulations. This may sound elementary and pedantic, but the unfortunate reality is that there is much theological

formulation that does not operate on this premise. This error is especially prevalent among covenant theologians in the area of eschatology. As noted earlier, one of the common errors of covenant theologians in the era of eschatology is to have theological presuppositions determine the exegetical conclusions. A proper method is one which starts from plain declarations and natural exegesis of the biblical text. Theological formulation and systematization should not take place until *after* this preliminary step. Therefore, this paper will focus most heavily upon the biblical text.

This particular section will look at a variety of successive dispensations from the OT, beginning with Genesis, to examine what God has spoken about the nation Israel. This will include promises in (1) the pre-patriarchal era, (2) the patriarchal era, (3) the Mosaic era, (4) the pre-exilic monarchy era, and (5) the post-exilic era.

God's Promises In The Pre-patriarchal Era

Genesis 1-11 make up what one might call the pre-patriarchal era—the age before the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob. This era would also be prior to the existence of the people of Israel. In view of this, one does not find any promises about Israel itself. One can find promises about a coming restoration and age of rest (e.g., Gen. 3:15; 5:29; 9:27), but nothing that directly relates to Israel as a nation.

God's Promises To The Patriarchs

Genesis 12 describes how God called Abraham to himself and how Abraham responded in faith to this call (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Many theologians have noted three key

aspects to the promise that God made to Abraham in the so-called Abrahamic Covenant: land, seed, and blessing.

One of the elements of promise is that God would give Abraham “seed,” that is, children. By this time in life, Abraham and his wife had already become quite old (75 and 65 respectively) and yet they never had brought forth children. Through His repeated promises, God assured this elderly couple that they would one day have a son and, in fact, that their physical descendants would become so numerous that they would be innumerable humanly speaking.¹² Over the ages, this promise has actually seen its literal fulfillment in the expansion of the nation Israel from the one man Abraham.¹³

A second key aspect of this promise is that Abraham would receive a special blessing from Yahweh and that this special blessing to Abraham would also bring about blessing to the whole of the human race (Gen. 12:3). Throughout history, it has been patently clear that God’s favor has upon Israel in a unique way. Even in times of war when others have sought to bring curse and destruction upon Israel (e.g., Num. 22-25), God never reversed His promise to bless the nation. As Paul said to the Romans, “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.” God promised blessing to that nation and He will never revoke that promise. It is not as though God will not also deal with the sin of

¹² In Genesis 15:5 God told Abraham that they would be like the stars of the sky and in Genesis 22:17 God also says that they will become like the sand on the sea shore.

¹³ Progressive revelation of both the Old and New Testaments reveal that God’s promises would ultimately include redemption for all of mankind by the saving work of one particular descendant of Israel, namely Jesus Christ. A theological formulation from the entire canon reveals that the initial promise of a redeemer (Gen. 3:15) has ultimate fulfillment through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham. The job of the theologian is to show how the purpose of God had its progressive unfolding in time and history through His work with the nation Israel. Care must be taken, though, not to deny the reality of God’s promises to the nation on the basis of the fact that Christ was the One who accomplished redemption. To clarify, here is a common error that is made among so-called covenant theologians: they assume that because Jesus is the descendant of Abraham who brought forth redemption, therefore, the promises made to the nation Israel have all been realized in Jesus Christ although, they must say, in a spiritual sense. This reductionistic reasoning can be made only at the expense of the plain meaning of Scripture which made promises to the physical nation and literal descendants of Abraham.

the nation, for the Mosaic Covenant promised punishment for disobedience and punishment they have received. Nevertheless, nothing can alter the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant in which God said He would bless the people of Abraham.

A third key element of God's covenant with Abraham is that God promised Abraham and his descendants that they would have their own land (12:1, 7; 13). This covenantal land grant from God to Abraham is very specific and gets repeated many times throughout the Bible, including the promise that the land will belong to his descendants forever and ever, just as seen in the next chapter where it says, "The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever'" (Gen. 13:14-15). According to this text and many others, the land of Canaan is to forever belong to the nation of Israel.

As the Bible unfolds, God continues to repeat this promise by assuring Abraham and his family that Canaan will belong to them forever. In Genesis 15 when Abraham ponders the certainty of this heretofore unrealized promise, God assures Abraham by performing in a vision a ritual sacrifice that would confirm the certainty of God's promise. The language of Genesis 15 and the historical elements of what God did and said leave no room for uncertainty: God has sworn the land of Israel to the Jews forever and ever (cf. Gen. 17:7-8).¹⁴

¹⁴ As has been noted by many writers, there is great significance in the fact that when God had Abraham cut the animals in two, it was only God Himself who passed through the sacrifices. Ancient Near Eastern studies have shown that to walk between the slain animal was one's way of making an oath that he would fulfill his part of the covenant. The one who did this was saying in effect, "May I die like this sacrifice if I do not fulfill my promise." As Genesis 15 shows, it was God alone who walked through the slain animals. In this covenant ratification, God made an absolute, unilateral promise (a Royal Grant as some have called it based on practices in the Ancient Near East) that the land of Canaan would become a

Over time, this one man Abraham had children and began growing into a family. Throughout this period of familial growth, though, God affirmed many times over that His covenantal promises were still certain. In Genesis 21:12, for example, God tells Sarah that these special covenantal promises will certainly flow to and through her son Isaac and not to the descendant of Hagar. Likewise, later at the birth of Isaac's twins Jacob and Esau, God assures Isaac and Rebekah that this special covenantal promise will flow to and through the child Jacob and not to Esau and his descendants (Gen. 25:23-26; 35:10-12).

Here is the eternal promise God made to Israel: Yahweh will be their God and will never take back His gracious covenant. Included in this covenant is the promise that the nation Israel will have the land of Canaan as an eternal possession.

God's Promises To Moses

Earlier in the days of Abraham (cf. Gen. 15), God told Abraham that there would come a point at which his descendants would experience a 400 year exile in the land of Egypt, but that they would also return thereafter to possess the land as God had promised. As Genesis 37-50 indicates, this temporary absence from the land began in the days of Jacob and his sons when a severe famine forced the family to Egypt for sustenance in Egypt.

As the Book of Exodus shows, it was four hundred years later that God raised up Moses to deliver His people and lead back to the land of Canaan that they might take possession of the land as their own. As the text shows, God fulfilled His promises in every way. He delivered them from bondage in Egypt. He established a special

possession to the people of Abraham forever—a promise the is based upon the faithful character of God Himself.

administrative covenant with them through Moses at Mount Sinai (the Law of Moses). This covenant promised blessings to the newly redeemed nation, but it also warned of punishments (curses) for covenant disloyalty.¹⁵

Despite their condemnation-worthy rebellions in the wilderness, God protected His young nation in the wilderness and preserved them as a people so that His purposes might be fulfilled (Book of Numbers). At the end of a forty-year wandering, God then used Joshua as their new leader to take them into the land and gave them possession, just as He had promised. As history showed, God's promises to Israel, and for that matter to anyone, cannot fail.

Immediately before Israel took possession of the land, though, God revealed to Moses a staggering picture of what the future would hold for the nation Israel. The Book of Deuteronomy gives some very panoramic prophecies about God's plan for the ages to come. First, God revealed to Moses that a day would come when Israel would actually turn away from the covenant God had made with them at Sinai. Consequently, God also predicted that He would drive them from the land and scatter them across the face of the earth among the Gentiles (Deut. 28:64). In other words, Israel would once again experience absence from the land just as they had experienced in Egypt (Deut. 28:68).

It is crucial to recognize that this is not all that God said, though. God also told Moses that there would come a time when the nation would at last come to repentance for its sin and rebellion (Deut. 30:2), and that this repentance would also lead to a restoration

¹⁵ Many theologians have recognized that the Mosaic Covenant follows the pattern of the Ancient Near Eastern Suzerainty Covenant. In such covenants, the conquering king calls his subjects to loyalty and obedience, promising favor and blessing for obedience, but also promising punishment for disloyalty. The Mosaic Covenant is a national covenant for Israel that brought about the administration of the oath made to Abraham. The bilateral, conditional nature of the Mosaic Covenant thus differs from the unilateral, unconditional nature of the Abrahamic Covenant.

of covenant relationship with Yahweh and a return to the land of Canaan. The promise is not ambiguous: “then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. The LORD your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers” (Deut. 30:3-5). This promise is not ambiguous; it is very clear and it is very specific: God will one day bring about a full restoration for His disobedient and apostate people.

Not only will God give them back possession of the land, but He says that He also will bring about a spiritual renewal (heart circumcision) that they never before had experienced: “Moreover, the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). Never since the time of the exile under Babylon (605 B.C.) has Israel ever experienced this spiritual renewal as promised by Moses. It is yet future. It is theologically reckless for anyone to claim that God will not fulfill His gracious promises just as He has spoken.

One should also note that the promise of national restoration for Israel includes in context the promise of curse and punishment upon the nations that seek Israel’s harm and destruction. God tells them, “[I] will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you” (Deut. 30:7). Never in history have these promises had their fulfillment as predicted.

A few historical observations are in order. First, Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity in 536 B.C. was not a fulfillment of these promises. Persia did in fact release Israel and give the Jews permission to return to the land, but this was not a fulfilling of the promised, eschatological restoration. As Nehemiah tells the story during the days of post-exilic Israel (from 536 B.C. onward after Israel had begun to migrate back to the land of Israel), the Jews were still under Gentile dominion even though they were actually dwelling on the physical land itself. Nehemiah records these words: "Behold, we are slaves today, and as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, behold, we are slaves in it. Its abundant produce is for the kings whom You have set over us because of our sins; they also rule over our bodies and over our cattle as they please. So we are in great distress" (Neh. 9:36-37). The return from Babylon did not fulfill God's restoration promises given through Moses. The promise of Deuteronomy 30:7 was that Israel's enemies would be destroyed. This did not come upon Israel's enemies in the post-exilic era nor did it come upon Rome some 500 years later when Rome brought further devastation upon the people and the land, thus dispersing the people even further. Deuteronomy 30 awaits a future, eschatological fulfillment.

From the text, here is what kind of conclusion one must draw: (1) God's promises to the nation Israel *must* be fulfilled (God's character assures it), but these promises have not yet been fulfilled. (2) When they do get fulfilled here is what will happen: (a) Israel will be brought back to the land that God swore to Abraham. (b) By God's grace, Israel will experience a spiritual renewal that brings her back into a proper covenant relationship with God. (c) The time of Israel's restoration also will include a

destruction to Israel's enemies—to all who seek her destruction. (d) Israel will begin to possess the land in peace and she will never again be uprooted from it. These promises will be fulfilled just as God has spoken, for the very character of God assures it.

God's Promises Through The Pre-Exilic, Monarchy-Era Prophets¹⁶

God's purpose for Israel always included the fact that one day they would have a king (cf. e.g., Gen. 17:6; 35:11). God's purpose toward this end began taking effect at the close of the age of the Judges as reflected in the Books of 1 and 2 Samuel. In 2 Samuel 7, Nathan the prophet assured David that God's ancient covenant promises would be fulfilled through his descendants. God's promise was not only that He would establish an eternal dynasty through David (the so-called Davidic Covenant), but also that God would choose one special place in which He would make His dwelling among His people, saying, "I will also appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may live in their own place and not be disturbed again, nor will the wicked afflict them any more as formerly, even from the day that I commanded judges to be over My people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you" (2 Sam. 7:10). At the dedication of the first temple in Jerusalem, Solomon made it clear (cf. 1 Kings 8:29, 30, 31, 33, 35, 38, 42, 43, 44) that Jerusalem is the special place which God chose and established as an eternal dwelling place for Himself. In a variety of places, the Psalms confirm quite clearly that Jerusalem is God's chosen city as an eternal dwelling place (Pss. 48; 132).

¹⁶ This section will cover only a very small sampling of such prophecies, for there is simply too much prophetic material to cover in a brief survey like this. It must be noted, however, that there are multiplied prophetic declarations in the OT which speak plainly of a future restoration to national Israel.

During this era (i.e., from David to the time of the exile), God raised up many prophets to call His disobedient people back to covenant loyalty. The message they gave was essentially a two-fold kind of message: (1) The people, especially the leadership, needed to repent of covenant disobedience and turn back to God lest He strike them with the curses of which Moses spoke but, in fact, the nation would not turn back to Yahweh in repentance and this would lead to an exile and captivity among the Gentiles (as promised by Moses). (2) One day God will bring a restoration of the nation. He will bring them back to the land. He will bring about a great spiritual renewal. He will destroy those who are seeking Israel's destruction. He will restore a king to the throne of David and this king will rule forever from His throne in Jerusalem. All mankind will obtain blessing through God's kingdom in Israel. This is the oft-repeated, two-fold message of the prophets.

Starting at the earlier stage of this era, one can look to the ninth century B.C. and see how Joel made such promises. For example, Joel promised a great outpouring of God's Spirit upon Israel with salvation for all who respond in repentant faith (2:28-32). He also promised a restoration of all the wealth and blessings that Israel had lost through disobedience (3:1). He also promised that a severe destruction would one day come upon all the nations who are seeking Israel's destruction (3:2ff.). God warns these nations that there is going to be a severe destruction that will utterly annihilate them: "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare a war; rouse the mighty men! Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up! Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, 'I am a mighty man.' Hasten and come, all you surrounding nations, and gather yourselves there. Bring down, O LORD, Your mighty ones. Let the nations be

aroused and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat, for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Come, tread, for the wine press is full; the vats overflow, for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and moon grow dark and the stars lose their brightness. The LORD roars from Zion and utters His voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth tremble. But the LORD is a refuge for His people and a stronghold to the sons of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, dwelling in Zion, My holy mountain. So Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will pass through it no more” (3:9-17).

The historical fact is that this destructive retribution did not come in the days of Babylon or Persia nor did it come in the first century A.D. when Rome crushed Israel. These events have not yet been fulfilled, for they are eschatological. They get fulfilled in the tribulation period at the second coming of Christ. Everything that God said must see a fulfillment. This also includes the promise that (1) Jerusalem will be a special and holy city to the Jews (Joel 3:17), (2) great material blessings will overtake the land of Canaan (3:18), (3) the enemy nations that sought Israel’s destruction will experience retribution (3:19), and (4) the land of Canaan, i.e., Judah and Jerusalem to be precise, will become an eternal possession for Israel and she will never again be driven from it. Clearly, these promises have never been fulfilled. One day during the tribulation period and at the second coming of Jesus Christ, these prophecies will get fulfilled exactly as spoken, for God has said that this is what He is going to do.

These same promises get repeated over and over again through the pre-exilic era. In the eighth century B.C., Hosea says that a long age of spiritual separation between

Israel and God gets restored when Israel returns to God and once again sees a restoration of the Davidic dynasty (3:4-5). God's promise is that (1) Israel will once again see a king rule on David's throne (9:11). (2) Jerusalem will be restored (9:11). (3) Israel will be given dominion over those enemy nations that had previously sought her destruction (9:12). (4) Rich material blessings will come upon the land of Israel (9:13). (5) God will give a restoration of all the wealth that Israel lost in her former disobedience (9:14), and (6) never again will enemy nations bring harm to the restored nation (9:15). These promises have never before been realized, but they surely will for God has promised it.

Also in the eighth century, the prophet Isaiah made numerous promises of restoration just as these other prophets did. These prophecies include the promise that all nations would come to Jerusalem as the place for proper worship (Isa. 2:2-3) and also that the world itself would experience everlasting peace (2:4). The spiritual restoration of national Israel (4:3-4) will usher in a new age when God Himself makes His special dwelling place in Jerusalem (4:2, 5). The promise of an eternal kingdom will be realized through the son of David (*El Gibbor*, the Mighty God) who will rule forever and ever in a kingdom of perfect peace and righteousness (9:6-7). For Israel, this will include a massive revival among the nation when the elect remnant of Israel comes to faith in the messianic king—*El Gibbor*, the Mighty God (10:20-21; cf. Zech. 13:8-9). This kingdom will be one of perfect peace and righteousness upon earth (11:1ff.). This kingdom is one in which all enmity, even enmity between men and animals and animals and animals, is banished forever (11:6-9). Yes, Israel will be brought back to her land to experience this blessing (11:11-16), but it is also clear that Israel's blessing will also mean blessing for all of mankind.

Jeremiah (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.) made these same kinds of promises. Eschatological Israel will experience horrible tribulation (30:4-7), but God will not allow Israel to be destroyed (30:7b). In her restoration, Israel will never again be under Gentile dominion (30:8). God will indeed bring about a great and final chastisement for Israel's sin, but this will only be for the purpose of purging and cleansing (30:11). Messiah, the priestly King will rule over them from Jerusalem (30:21) and Israel will once again have a proper covenant relationship with Yahweh (30:22).

All of this restoration takes place, though, not according to the old Mosaic Covenant. Rather, this restoration comes under a "New Covenant" (31:31ff.). This covenant will include a permanent removal of sins. It will also be an unbreakable covenant (unlike the Mosaic) from which Israel will never again fall away. Once again, it is explicit that this covenant includes a full and eternal restoration to the land of Canaan (32:15).

God knows that some would doubt the certainty of these promises (both among Gentiles and the Jews), so He reminded Jeremiah that none of this is too difficult for the Lord (32:17-18, 27). The promises are certain for they are based on the character of God and His sworn oath, just as He said: "Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them; and I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me. It will be to Me a name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will

fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it. Thus says the LORD, ‘Yet again there will be heard in this place, of which you say, “It is a waste, without man and without beast,” *that is*, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride”’ (33:6-11). Yes, the messianic Son of David will rule from Jerusalem (33:14-15) and Jerusalem will become a city of holiness and righteousness (33:16). Not only will Messiah rule on David’s throne under the New Covenant, but God also says that He will bring about a restoration of His Levitical priesthood (33:18). To rebuke the skeptic, God swears by Himself in verses 19-26 and says that unless someone is able to break the created order that He put in place, these promises will be fulfilled. The language is both clear and emphatic: God will fulfill His promises to Israel.

In view of these multiplied promises, one must wonder how it is that some Christian theologians (who characteristically say they believe in the sovereignty of God) could ever make the audacious claim that God will not do exactly as He said.¹⁷ All theologians would be on much safer ground if they would let God’s promises mean what they say. God will fulfill His promises to Israel.

Taking a glance into the New Testament, yes, it is true that the church age ushered in an era in which Jew and Gentile share equally in salvific blessings in the body of Christ in a way that does not include national Israel. Nevertheless, there is nothing (absolutely nothing) in the New Testament to suggest that God’s present work in the church has brought about an annulment of God’s promises to the nation Israel. As a

¹⁷ Theological systems which deny a future for Israel must then create a dubious hermeneutical system in its attempt to justify the wholesale reinterpretation of passages which plainly promise a full restoration for the nation Israel.

matter of fact, the New Testament explicitly says that God has *not* broken His promises to the nation Israel (e.g., Rom. 11:1-2). No, Israel will see the restoration that God promised (Rom. 11:12), a restoration that will be like “life from the dead” (Rom. 11:15; cf. Ezek. 37). The present hardness of Israel will be removed and that nation will experience all the promises of spiritual renewal and restoration which God has spoken (Rom. 11:25-27; cf. Zech. 13:8-9 where God tells this post-exilic prophet that a massive revival will bring about a conversion of one third of Israel). The nation must receive this future merciful restoration (Rom. 11:31), for “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). God swore this restoration, so it must be fulfilled.

Going back to the OT and the fifth century B.C., Daniel says that this messianic restoration will also include an utter destruction of all hostility to Israel (cf. e.g., Dan. 2:35, 45). The eschatological world powers that are going to seek Israel’s annihilation will themselves suffer a devastating destruction (Dan. 7:10-11, 26). This certainly has never taken place up to the present time, but according to God’s promises, it will! Daniel later reveals that there is a final seven-year period that must first precede the establishment of this coming kingdom (Dan. 9:27). That final seven-year period is the period that theologians sometimes call Daniel’s “seventieth week.” This period is also known by the expression the tribulation period, with the last three and a half years often called “the great tribulation” (cf. Matt. 24:21-22).

According to Daniel 9:27, this final seven-year period begins when a non-Israeli, world political leader establishes a seven-year peace covenant between Israel and her adversaries. As the text shows, this leader breaks the covenant half way through the seven-year period and comes against Israel with his armies for the last three and a half

years (cf. Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Matt. 24:15-31; Rev. 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5). During these three and a half years, Israel is invaded by a coalition of world forces intent on destroying Israel.¹⁸ As Daniel, Revelation and other eschatological texts make clear, God will not permit these nations to destroy Israel. By His providential grace and by the direct return of the Son of God to earth, God delivers His battered people from total destruction, and in this process brings a devastating defeat to all who sought her destruction (cf. Zech. 14; Rev. 19:11-21).

God's Promises To Post-Exilic Israel

The study of post-exilic eschatological prophecy is very fascinating.¹⁹ One of the factors that makes this body of literature (Haggai, Malachi, and Zechariah) so interesting is the fact that it cannot be said to refer to the events of the Babylonian invasion and captivity. These texts must refer to something from 520 B.C. onward.²⁰ There are some who try to equate eschatological promises in the pre-exilic prophets with events of the Babylonian invasion, the Babylonian exile, and the release from Babylonian captivity, but the post-exilic prophets cannot refer to those events for they were already in the past.

¹⁸ This is exactly what repeatedly God said to Israel in the prophets of the OT, many prophecies of which have been noted in this paper.

¹⁹ "Post-exilic" is an expression which relates to the era of the Old Testament after Israel was released from Babylon by the newly dominant Persian Empire. In 605 B.C. Israel went into exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. The era prior to this would be called the "pre-exilic" era. The vision of Daniel 2 shows how the overthrow Judah in 605 (with a successive large invasion in 597 and a final overthrow in 586 that brought ruin to Jerusalem the destruction of Solomon's temple) brought about the beginning of the so-called times of the Gentiles (an expression used by Jesus in Luke 21:24). After the Persians overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C., King Cyrus gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland (ca. 538). This was the beginning of the post-exilic era (with the first wave of emigrants probably leaving Persia in about 536).

²⁰ Haggai can be dated to 520 B.C.; Zechariah to 520-518 and perhaps later; Malachi to probably between 430 and 424 B.C. Historical books like Ezra, Nehemiah, 2 Chronicles and Esther supply valuable background for the contemporary events of that time period, but do not really contribute to eschatological issues.

Though there is much in these books that could be highlighted, this section will emphasize only a small sampling of certain notable issues.

One of the promises in the Book of Haggai speaks about the fact that the arrival of the messianic kingdom will result in the wealth of Gentile nations coming to Jerusalem and a restored temple from which the Messiah will rule (2:7-9). As God says, “‘I will shake all the nations and they will come with the wealth of all nations, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘The silver is mine and the gold is mine,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ‘The latter glory of this house will be greater than the former,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘and in this place I will give peace,’ declares the LORD of hosts.”

This promise of wealth from all nations coming to Jerusalem has never been fulfilled. It is true that Herod the Great did expand and beautify the second temple that was put in place by Zerubbabel (completed in 516 B.C.), but those events cannot be said to fulfill this prophecy.

Furthermore, God also promised here—as He did in many pre-exilic prophecies—that He would bring peace to Jerusalem. Never in the history of Israel since the time of the Babylonian exile has Israel enjoyed peace as a sovereign nation under a restored Davidic dynasty. Post-exilic Israel was always under Gentile dominion. The nation exists today as a sovereign state, but still there is no messianic king ruling on David’s throne, nor is there even a restored temple. Finally, it is certainly true that Jerusalem is not experiencing peace as God said they will. These prophecies all relate to an eschatological restoration that has not yet taken place—a restoration that will see fulfillment at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The last prophecy that Haggai gave (2:20-23) is one which foretells a universal and global overthrow of all powers that are hostile to Israel. Verse 22 says, “I will overthrow the thrones of kingdoms and destroy the power of the kingdoms of the nations; and I will overthrow the chariots and their riders, and the horses and their riders will go down, everyone by the sword of another.” These powerful words promise a very violent overthrow to Gentile powers—in particular, those who are hostile to Israel. These words, spoken in 518 B.C. have never been fulfilled.²¹ The reason why is because they are referring to eschatological events of the tribulation period. God said it will happen, and it will.

Non-premillennial writers sometimes suggest that such passages (i.e., passages that foretell a violent overthrow) are being fulfilled as the gospel goes out through the church to conquer evil spiritual forces through salvation. This kind of allegorizing does severe injustice to the plain meaning of the language. It is a theological view that is being forcefully imposed on the text. There is no reason for not taking the promises at face value.²²

The Book of Zechariah, especially chapters 12-14, is replete with promises to Israel for a future restoration. For a more thorough study of Zechariah, the reader is encouraged to consult a separate research paper by this author titled *Yahweh Remembers His People: An Exposition of Zechariah 12-14 With Special Emphasis On Its*

²¹ They certainly did not see fulfillment with the Roman invasions of A.D. 70 nor can they be made to refer to the eventual decline and dissolution of the Roman Empire. As indicated in other passages (e.g., Dan. 2; 7; Rev. 17), they are a reference to an eschatological overthrow of a 10 nation power block that comes against Israel in the last half of Daniel’s seventieth week.

²² New Testament prophecies affirm the literal reality of these future events, too as will be noted in a later section (cf. e.g., Matt. 24:7, 21-22; 1 Thess. 5:1ff.; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; Jude 14; Rev. 6:3ff.; 11:2ff.; 13:4ff.; 16:12ff.; 19:11f.).

Theological Themes. For the sake of brevity, this present section will highlight only a few particular portions in chapters 1-11.

In Zechariah 2:10-12, God promises Jerusalem (which historically was also known by the expression Zion) that the day is coming when Yahweh once again “*will dwell in her midst*” (10) and that “*many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day*” (11) and that “*the Lord will possess Judah as His portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem*” (12). The first point to observe is that God’s promises involve real estate. His promise is that Jerusalem and the entire land (i.e., Judah) will once again have the special covenant status that it did in pre-exilic times. No amount of allegorizing can be tolerated which says that this is fulfilled in the church age. This is a promise about Israel living in the land, possessing the land, and God bringing that land (because of a repentant and restored nation) back into a proper covenant relationship with Himself.

The second aspect that needs consideration is perhaps even more crucial. God has promised that He will once again dwell in her midst. There is an expression (extra-biblical, but biblical in concept) that many have used for describing this kind of special dwelling of Yahweh; it is the expression the “*shekinah*” glory.²³ The *shekinah* glory is that glorious manifestation of God’s presence that led the children of Israel in the wilderness wanderings (Ex. 14:21; Num. 12:5; Neh. 9:19). It was a literal, physical manifestation of shining glory of God’s own presence in the midst of His people. With the construction of the tabernacle, that glory localized itself with Israel, especially within the tabernacle that Moses had built. Later, as 1 Kings 8 shows, this glory began to dwell within the temple of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, and it then remained in that temple until the time of the Babylonian exile.

²³ The Hebrew tri-consonantal root behind this word is the verb *shakan*, “to dwell.”

The Book of Ezekiel records a fascinating account of the *shekinah* glory and how it departed from Israel in the sixth century B.C. The historical context was the days which immediately preceded the temple destruction by Babylon and the final overthrow of Judah. In Ezekiel 10:4, Ezekiel saw in a vision (from his home in Babylon) that the glory of the Lord had begun to rise up from the temple where it had been for the past four centuries (i.e., from the holy of holies). It began rising up from the temple and then finally in 11:22ff., Ezekiel saw the glory leave the temple, go out eastward to hover over the Mount of Olives, and then finally depart from Jerusalem. This was a most horrifying event: God had just removed His dwelling from His people. It is not until later in Ezekiel's prophecy that one finds the hope of a restoration of this dwelling.

In terms of the flow of this prophecy, the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel (perhaps up to 33:20) are strongly focused on the idea of condemnation and punishment for the covenant disloyalty and idolatry of the nation. These chapters certainly do contain promises of restoration (e.g., 11:19-20; 17:22-24), but the main thrust of this first portion of Ezekiel is on the theme of punishment.

It was in 33:21 that Ezekiel received the news that Jerusalem had been destroyed and that Solomon's temple had also been destroyed in the process. From this point on, the major thrust of Ezekiel shifts from one of condemnation to that of consolation and restoration. In chapter 34 God tells Ezekiel that He will "search for His sheep" (11) and "bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries and bring them to their own land" (13). Once again, it is an explicit promise of restoration to the land in a restored relationship. God also promised that one day they would enjoy a unified kingdom with a king once again ruling on David's throne (23-24). He also promised

them that they would begin to experience perpetual peace that He had spoken of in so many other prophecies and that they would “live securely” in their land (25). This certainly has never been fulfilled, and the reason why is because it has yet to be fulfilled. It gets fulfilled at the second coming of the Messiah when Jesus Christ brings the kingdom of God to earth and restores Israel to a proper covenant relationship with Himself.

The second coming of Christ will also include severe judgments on all nations who seek the destruction of Israel (cf. ch. 35) at that same time when He also brings about the corporate redemption of Israel by His gracious salvation to an elect remnant within the nation.²⁴ As Ezekiel says in 36:16.ff., the covenant disloyalty and exile of Israel resulted in God’s name being profaned and mocked. The promise, though, is that God will reverse that condition by not only bringing them back to their land, but more importantly, by bringing spiritual regeneration to the nation (36:22-38). Israel’s spiritual restoration will also cause all the Gentiles to recognize that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the only true God. In chapter 37, this restoration to the land and spiritual renewal is reflected in a vision of dry bones coming back to life. Chapters 38-39 describe the events of the great tribulation when world military forces invade Israel for the purpose of destroying her.²⁵ Ezekiel shows that even though the days will be horrible and Israel will be severely afflicted, nevertheless, God will intervene and deliver her from destruction. Never in history have these things ever happened, but they will, for God has foretold it!

²⁴ Both covenants make it clear that God also brings salvation to a significant number of elect Gentiles all throughout the earth.

²⁵ This would be the same invasion such as one sees in Isaiah 26:21, Jeremiah 30:4-7, Joel 3:1-17 and Zechariah 12:2ff. and 14:1ff.

All of these things will come to pass in the final seven years of this age immediately before the kingdom of God comes to this earth.

With all of this as a background to Zechariah 2:10 and the fact that God promises that He will once again dwell in Jerusalem, the reader is now directed to Ezekiel chapters 40-48 for a discussion about how Yahweh will once again come to Israel to dwell within her midst. The flow of chapters 33-39 all center on events in the tribulation period. It is no surprise, then, that chapters 40-48 describe the inception of the messianic kingdom of God (a natural flow of Ezekiel describing the succession of eschatological events).²⁶ From chapter 40 onward, God begins to give very precise instructions about a restored land and a newly restored temple. In chapter 43, Ezekiel then sees how God brings about a reversal from what he witnessed years earlier in chapters 10-11: he sees the *shekinah* glory of God coming back to once again dwell within the temple of God in Jerusalem. In 43:2, Ezekiel sees the glory of the God of Israel “coming from the way of the east” (the direction to which it had earlier departed) and coming “into the house” by the way of the eastern gate (43:4). Ezekiel then saw in prophetic vision that “the glory of the Lord filled the house” (43:5). Never in history has this taken place, but one day it will, for God has foretold it.²⁷

This restoration of Israel will also include the literal restoration of a king to sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. This is none other than the glorified Son of God, Jesus Christ, who will bring together the office of king and priest in one person (Zech. 6:9-15).

²⁶ It is not until Revelation 20-22 that progressive revelation makes it clear that the eternal kingdom of God includes 1,000 years on this present earth, but then merges into eternity with the creation of a new heavens and new earth.

²⁷ This is exactly what God also promised to the prophet Zechariah in post-exilic Israel (2:10; cf. 8:3).

This national restoration for Israel will also bring about an age when peace and prosperity and long life will overtake Israel with blessing (Zech. 8:1-23). Children and elderly will dwell safely in Jerusalem (8:3-6) for, says God, “Behold, I am going to save My people from the land of the east and from the land of the west; and I will bring them back and they will live in the midst of my Jerusalem, and they will be My people and I will be their God in truth and righteousness” (8:7-8). No longer will there be endless war and conflict, but rather it will be a time of peace for Israel (8:9-12). No longer will Israel be a despised nation, for God says they will “become a blessing” (8:13). God assures them that even though in former times He “purposed to do harm” as punishment for their sin (8:14), the day is coming when He has purposed “to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah,” so therefore, they should not fear (8:15). At long last, national Israel will properly become that priestly nation that God had always intended her to be (8:21-23), for God says that the nations of the world (“many peoples and mighty nations”) will come to Israel “to seek the Lord of Hosts *in Jerusalem* and to entreat the favor of the Lord” (8:22), and they say to the Jews we know that “God is with you” (8:23).

Certainly these promises have never been realized up to this very time. However, no one should ever doubt or wonder that these words will not be fulfilled. God has spoken it. It will happen! The OT is not ambiguous and unclear as some assert on these issues. Those who make these kinds of claims do so only because of the sad fact that they have an a-priori commitment that refuses to allow a literal future for national Israel. Nevertheless, just as the rains come down from the heavens and accomplish their purpose, so too, God’s Word has gone forth and it too will accomplish its purpose (Isa. 55:10-13).

God's Promises In The New Testament

As a starting point, it should be noted that in the NT never, anywhere, does the Bible say anything to change God's gracious promises as spoken to Israel in the OT. For that matter, it would be impossible for this kind of thing to happen, for God says of Himself that He cannot lie (Titus 1:2), and that His promises are absolutely unbreakable (Heb. 6:18). As Paul put it when writing about Israel's restoration, "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29).

In view of this, it truly is astounding the way that some people teach that God will not restore Israel as He has promised. The gospels, to start with, plainly speak about the restoration of Israel and the salvation of an elect remnant (e.g., Matt. 24:31).²⁸ The Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15ff.) makes it clear that prophesied events about the desecration of a tribulation temple will be fulfilled, too (cf. Dan. 9:27; cf. 7:25; 12:7). Paul goes to great lengths in Romans 11 to remind the reader that God most certainly will restore the nation. There is nothing in the NT that speaks of any change of God's promises to Israel. Those who deny the natural interpretation of such promises strain the limits of credulity for the sake of their theological system.

Going to the last book of the Bible, one can see that the Book of Revelation speaks with utmost clarity that God is going to restore Israel (just as the rest of the Bible repeatedly affirms as has been shown). Chapter seven, for example, makes this explicit statement about the future salvation of Jews by speaking about 12,000 Jews from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. At the risk of sounding overly harsh, one has to ask why some

²⁸ These words of Jesus go directly back to promises of Jewish restoration in Isaiah 27:12-13 (cf. Isa. 10:20-21; 11:11-16; 26:20-21).

theologians act with such intellectual dishonesty by trying to deny that Revelation 7:1-8 is speaking about literal Jews. The language of the text could not be any more explicit in saying that these are literal Jews.

Further in the book, Revelation 12 shows a very clear picture of how it is that hostile Gentile nations persecute the nation Israel in the tribulation period, events that were repeatedly predicted in the Old Testament as a background.²⁹ Specifically, this chapter highlights the fact that persecution will be against Israel (the woman who in verse 1 is pictured as clothed with the sun and moon and with 12 stars under her feet and on her head), the nation from whom came the Christ child (12:4-5). In harmony with every other prophecy about the tribulation period, God protects Israel from total annihilation (12:14-17). As chapter 20 makes clear, the destruction of these hostile Gentile forces (cf. 19:11-21) will result in the establishing of God's kingdom on this present earth (ch. 20). With reference to a 1,000 year millennium, six times in six consecutive verses (20:2-7) God declares that there will be a period of 1,000 years as the first portion of this eternal kingdom. It will be after the final judgment of the unsaved at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15) at the end of these 1,000 years that God brings forth a new heavens and a new earth for the realization of an eternal kingdom in a purified universe (21-22).

In terms of individual identity, Revelation 21-22 suggests that personal identity will still exist even in eternity in the new heavens and new earth.³⁰ Thus, although

²⁹ This persecution of Israel by Gentile powers is particularly acute in the last three and a half years (Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5; cf. Dan. 7:25; 12:7; Matt. 24:15).

³⁰ There is a new Jerusalem (21:2, 10; 22:14, 19); the 12 gates of the new Jerusalem contain the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (21:12); the foundations of the city wall contain the names of the 12 apostles (21:14); the non-Jewish Gentile nations still have their identity as Gentile nations (21:24, 26).

certain kinds of realities that characterize our present age will no longer be true (i.e., a world with mortal human beings, sin, evil, calamity, death, the need for suppression of sin, etc.), personal identity will still remain into eternity future in the new heavens and new earth. It is an unbiblical, theological error for theologians to argue that the church is a new or spiritual Israel.³¹ From beginning to end, Israel is Israel and the church is not Israel. True, the church is realizing redemptive blessings in Christ at the present time, but the nation Israel will itself also experience the redemptive promises that God has made to her, too.

Summary And Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to trace God's promises through the Old and New Testaments to see what the text of Scripture actually says about the future for Israel. As this paper has shown, God has a plan for Israel that embraces a complete and permanent restoration of the nation. The nation will be brought back to the land of Israel. The nation will experience a period of extreme tribulation during a future tribulation period, but will also be delivered from annihilation by the intervention of God's gracious deliverance. The nation will experience a spiritual conversion through faith in the Messiah. The nation will enter into an age of eternal peace and blessing. In fulfillment of God's priestly purposes, the nation will at long last become the center of worldwide worship of the Messiah. These kinds of national promises will be fulfilled just as the

³¹ This is the common assertion that some use to say that national Israel will not have a literal restoration for, they argue, those promises which speak about restoration for Israel are all fulfilled in the church. The fact of the matter is that the New Testament always maintains a distinction between Israel and Gentiles. Jews will always be Jews and Gentiles will never be Jews. Gentiles who come to faith in Christ share in the redemptive blessings that were promised to Abraham and realized through the messianic seed of Abraham, but salvific blessings in the Messiah do not make one into a Jew. Those who try to argue that the church is a new or spiritual Israel do so without any exegetical support of the New Testament text.

Bible as spoken, for the God who promised these things is faithful. He has spoken it. It will be done just as He promised.

In closing, the reader should remember that just as God's gracious promises are true for Israel, so too are they true for every individual. God has promised eternal life to all who trust in His Son. Jesus said that He will never cast aside the one who has come to Him. These are certain promises. The faithfulness of God and sovereignty of God assure that He will do exactly as He said He will do. His power and character guarantee that His Word will not fail and this is what gives us a certain hope to know that in Christ we will be blessed with eternal life.