

Jesus Christ — The Israel of God¹

If we stand within the field of prophetic vision typical of Israel's prophets after the exile, and we look to the future, what do we see? Israel's prophets clearly anticipate a time when Israel will be restored to its former greatness. But will that restoration of Israel to its former glory mirror the former days of the Davidic monarchy—i.e. a restored national kingdom? Or does the prophetic vision of restoration point beyond a monarchy to the ultimate monarch, Jesus the Messiah, who is the descendant of David, YHWH's servant, and the true Israel?

The prophetic vision given the prophets is remarkably comprehensive. The nation had been divided, and the people of both kingdoms (Israel and Judah) were taken into captivity or dispersed as exiles throughout the region. Judah was exiled to Babylon five centuries before the coming of Jesus. Since the magnificent temple of Solomon was destroyed by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar and the Levitical priesthood was in disarray, any prophetic expectation related to Israel's future would naturally speak of a reversal of fortune and the undoing of terrible calamity which had come upon the nation. The restoration to come in the messianic age therefore includes not only the fate of the nation, but also the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (the so-called "second temple"), as well as the long anticipated heir to David's throne—the coming Messiah.

Yet, once Israel's Messiah had come, and the messianic age was a reality, how do the writers of the New Testament understand these Old Testament prophecies associated with Israel's future restoration? With a Spirit-given sense of apostolic hindsight, Peter says . . .

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look." (1 Peter 1:10-12).

According to Peter, Israel's prophets predicted the coming of Jesus and tie the age of restoration to his person and work.

In Isaiah 41:8-9, the prophet spoke of a future restoration of Israel in the following terms. "But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, 'You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off.'" The same promise is reiterated in the next chapter of Isaiah (42:1-7), when the LORD declares of his coming servant, "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations" (v. 6). Isaiah continues to speak of this servant in chapters 44 (vv. 1-2) and 45 (v. 4). Based upon these passages and how they are interpreted in the New Testament (more on that momentarily), we can say with a fair bit of certainty that Jesus

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Christ is the true Israel because Isaiah's Servant Songs are fulfilled in him (i.e., Philippians 2:7).

Furthermore, looking ahead to the "latter days," Israel's prophets speak of Gentiles being identified with Israel (see Isaiah 19:24-25; 56:3, 6-8; 66:18-21; Zechariah 2:11). As the gospel goes out to all the earth (the Gentile nations), all Christians become members of Israel through union with Christ—the true Israel (Isaiah 44:1-5). Those who are of faith are children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7-9, 21). For Paul, every believer in Jesus, Jew or Gentile, is a member of the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). In Philippians 3:2-3, Gentile Christians are said to be "the circumcision." In Romans 9:25-26, the Gentiles are even called "my people." This is a rather impressive list identifying Christ and his people with Israel.

Not everyone agrees with the preceding, however. Given their so-called "literal hermeneutic," our dispensational friends are bound to interpret those passages concerning Israel's future restoration, "literally." Yet, they cannot make good on this assertion while refusing to acknowledge that the New Testament writers re-interpret these prophetic texts in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. Dispensationalists contend that the Old Testament tells us in advance, what the New Testament must mean.[1] Yet, the Apostle Paul does the very thing dispensationalists say cannot be done. In Galatians 4:24, Paul specifically tells his readers that in light of the coming of Christ, he must look at significant elements of the Old Testament drama of redemption allegorically (i.e., the Abraham story, and the giving of the law to Moses). Yet, the dispensational hermeneutic will not allow this and they are thereby forced to assign the fulfillment of these prophecies of Isaiah and the prophets to a future earthly millennium after Jesus returns, in which a reconstituted nation of Israel supposedly co-exists with Gentile nations under the reign of the Davidic king.[2] In effect, this interpretive gambit amounts to the restoration of the Old Covenant Israelite geo-political monarchy as Jesus takes his place on David's royal throne in Jerusalem and rules the nations from a restored national Israel.

So, is this how the New Testament interprets these messianic prophecies regarding the servant of the Lord? Who is this servant of the Lord? Is it the nation of Israel, or is it Jesus, Israel's Messiah? In order to answer these questions, we ask how the gospel writers interpret these prophecies from Isaiah. They see them as fulfilled in the messianic mission of Jesus. There are several examples to consider.

First, in Matthew 12:15-21, when Jesus withdrew from the crowds who had followed him, Matthew reports that this event fulfilled what had been spoken in Isaiah the prophet. This event serves to demonstrate that Jesus is the promised servant of the Lord.

Second, when Jesus cast out demons and healed the sick, Matthew saw in this the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies of a suffering servant who would take upon himself our infirmities and carry our diseases (Matthew 8:17 with Isaiah 53:4).

Third, in his gospel, Luke speaks of both Israel (cf. Luke 1:54) and David as the servant of God (Luke 1:69). Yet in Acts, Luke pointedly speaks of Jesus as the servant of God (Acts 3:13). After his crucifixion, God raised Jesus from the dead so that people everywhere might be called

to repentance (Acts 3:26). The conclusion is obvious—Jesus is the servant of YHWH and the true obedient son of God, Israel.

Fourth, when the Ethiopian eunuch hears a reading from Isaiah 53:7-8 (the suffering servant) and asks Philip about whom this prophecy refers, Luke tells us that Philip informed the Ethiopian that this passage does indeed refer to Jesus (Acts 8:34-35).

Finally, in Hosea 11:1, Hosea predicted a time when “Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” But in Matthew 2:15, the evangelist tells us that Hosea’s prophecy was fulfilled when his parents took Jesus to Egypt to protect him from Herod’s “slaughter of the innocents” (Matthew 2:3-18). Yet, after Herod had died, God called Jesus and his family to return to Nazareth. Matthew takes a passage from Hosea (11:1), which clearly refers to national Israel (as YHWH’s son). Yet, he informs his reader that this passage is fulfilled in Jesus Christ! Jesus is Israel, YHWH’s son. Matthew’s goal is to prove to his largely Jewish audience that Jesus is the servant of the Lord, foretold throughout the Old Testament (especially Isaiah).

According to the New Testament writers, then, Jesus is the true servant, and the true Israel of God. Recall too, that it was Isaiah who spoke of Israel and the descendants of Abraham as the people of God. It is through the seed of Abraham that the nations of the earth will be blessed. This is Paul’s point in Galatians 3:7-8, when he says “know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’” All the promises made by the prophets to Israel of a great future restoration are tied to salvation going out to the Gentiles, which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s words are important for several reasons. For one thing, Paul tells us that Abraham believed the very same gospel which the apostle preached to the Gentile Galatians. There has only been one plan of salvation and one gospel from the very beginning. This, of course, raises very serious questions about the dispensational notion of dual redemptive purposes for national Israel and the Gentiles,[3] as is evident when Paul goes on to say in Galatians 3:29, that “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Believing Gentiles are said to be children of Abraham.

Then, in Ephesians 2:11-14, Paul tells us that at one time the Gentiles were without Christ and excluded from the “commonwealth of Israel” and “covenants of promise.” But now “in Christ” they have been “brought near.” Christ “has made us both one,” breaking down “the dividing wall of hostility” between Jew and Gentile. This one new unit is “the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” now identified as the “dwelling place for God” (2:19-22). The whole point of Christ’s mission to Israel is to unite them and the Gentiles into one people, under one head, Christ. To be in Christ is to be a member of Israel.

Finally, an important word of clarification is in order. As Robert Strimple points out, “We [amillennarians] say: ‘Yes, the nation of Israel was the people of God in the old covenant. Now in the new covenant the believing church is the people of God.’ And thus we quickly run past (or

we miss the blessed point entirely) the fact that we Christians are the Israel of God, Abraham's seed, and the heirs to the promises, only because by faith, we are united to him who alone is the true Israel, Abraham's one seed." [4] There has always been one people of God, Israel in the old covenant era, and the church in the new. [5] As South African theologian J. A. Heyns, put it, "The Church is this new people, the new community of the Lord . . . [But] this does not mean that the covenant with Israel is thereby terminated; it has been extended continuing with other nations. Salvation is not denied to Israel but proclaimed to other nations. The old covenant has not been exchanged for another one, but is perpetuated in a new covenant." [6] This is important given the dispensational accusation that amillennarians contend that the church "replaces" Israel. The covenant of grace of which Christ is mediator was promised to Adam (Genesis 3:15), commenced with Abraham (Genesis 15, 17, 22), and in light of the texts considered above, is fulfilled in him (Galatians 3-4). To be in Christ is to be a child of Abraham. To be in Christ is to be a member of Israel. And Jesus is the true Israel. There is only one people of God, elect members of the covenant of grace.

According to the New Testament writers (in this case, Paul), the prophecies of Israel's future restoration are not fulfilled in a reconstituted national Israel, which appears after Jesus returns—as dispensationalists claim. The ramifications for this upon one's millennial view should now be obvious. If Jesus is the true Israel of God, and if the New Testament writers apply to Jesus those Old Testament prophecies referring to Israel as God's son or servant, then what remains of the dispensationalist's case that these prophecies remain yet to be fulfilled in a future millennium? These prophecies vanish in Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled them!

[1] John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Christ's Prophetic Plans* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012), 10-11.

[2] John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 302-304; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 503-508; Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2010), 91 ff.

[3] MacArthur and Mayhue, *Christ's Prophetic Plans*, 10.

[4] Robert B. Strimple, "Amillennialism," in Bock, ed., *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 89.

[5] No "replacement theology" here. There is one covenant of grace with one covenant mediator and one gospel from Genesis 3:15 to the closing promise in Revelation 22:20; "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

[6] J. A. Heyns, *The Church* (Pretoria, NGKT, 1980), 39-40.