

O. PALMER ROBERTSON

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# THE ISRAEL

YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

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**R&R**  
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Where the word "LORD" appears in the NIV and the NKJV, the author has  
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*To Joanna,*

*a true daughter of Abraham,*

*a blessing to all the land,*

*my beloved wife*

contents

[Acknowledgments ix](#)

[Introduction 1](#)

1 The Israel of God: Its Land 3

2 The Israel of God: Its People	33
3 The Israel of God: Its Worship	53
4 The Israel of God: Its Lifestyle	85
5 The Israel of God and the Coming of the Kingdom	111
6 The Israel of God in Romans 11	167
7 Concluding Propositions	193
Index of Scripture	197

#### acknowledgments

Over the past several years a little-known, deliberately non-publicized "Consultation on the Theology of the Land" has stimulated healthy interaction among Jewish Messianic Christians, Palestinian and other Near Eastern Christians, and a few Western theologians. A special word of acknowledgment is due to all the various participants who have given of their time and energy to attempt to communicate their perspectives among other Christians with radically different opinions. The present work could not have been done without their willingness to run the risk of making their personal views known in a context in which they could expect vigorous contradiction.

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May the Lord of the land place his richest blessing on all the efforts that have been made to extend the truth of the "good news" into this realm, where conflict continues even among Christians.

ix

introduction

" 'If you abandon Israel, God will never forgive you' ... it is God's will that Israel, the biblical home of the people of Israel, continue for ever and ever." So spoke the President of the United States in a speech delivered before the Israeli Knesset assembled in Jerusalem. He was recalling with apparent approval the words of his desperately ill pastor. He concluded the speech by saying, "Your journey is our journey, and America



will stand with you now and always."<sup>1</sup>

In this historic statement, the President made some striking assertions. First of all, he expressed the view that an abandonment of the people of Israel by the United States would be an unforgivable sin. Second, he asserted that the land of the Bible, according to the will of God, should continue as the possession of the nation of Israel forever. Third, he committed the United States to support the nation of Israel without qualification forever.

As in the case of most speeches made by government officials, some allowance must be made for overstatement for the sake of political expediency. Yet at the heart of these assertions are some strong commitments. On the basis of supposedly Christian principles derived from the pastor of a Christian church, far-reaching political commitments have been made publicly with respect to the people of Israel and the land of the

<sup>1</sup> A speech given by President Bill Clinton on October 27, 1994, as reported in *Vital Speeches* 61, no. 3 (November 15, 1994): 70 (3).

**1**

**2 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

Bible. By these commitments, the course of nations has been set, for good or for ill.

Because of the biblical and theological influences at the root of these significant public policies affecting the world today, it is important to look once more at the question of the Israel of God yesterday, today, and tomorrow. This study will consider the Israel of God in terms of its land, its people, its worship, its lifestyle, and its future.

## ONE THE ISRAEL OF GOD

its land

**It has been rightly observed that the idea of the "land" as a theological concept has been largely overlooked by both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> Except for eschatological speculations concerning the return of Israel to the land, the whole concept of the land as presented in Scripture has been generally neglected. The reasons for this neglect might be variously evaluated.<sup>2</sup> But**

Cf. the comments of W. D. Davies in *The Gospel and the Land: Early Chris-*

*tianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 3-5. One significant effort to remedy this neglect may be

found in Walter Brueggemann's *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

Brueggemann offers many stimulating proposals. But when he uses modern Marxist philosophy to draw a lesson from Israel's loss of land, his sociological perspective has unduly influenced his understanding of the significance of the land. He says, "Must land make its holders apathetic? Have we that to learn from Marx, that being in land without caring for community ends history?" (p. 111). In response to Brueggemann's rhetorical question, it may be noted that the whole history of Israel's exile from the land teaches lessons about the loss and restoration of land related to the saving gospel of God that could never be learned from Karl Marx.

Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 3-4, finds the explanation in Christianity's concentration on abstract ideas about God and the world, rather than its

dealing with the concrete significance of the land to Israel. This explanation is repeated in his more recent work, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), xvii-xviii.

#### **4 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

unquestionably the significance of the land as a theological idea needs fuller exploration.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of a land that belongs to God's people originated in Paradise. This simple fact, so often overlooked, plays

a critical role in evaluating the significance of the land throughout redemptive history and in its consummate fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> Land did not begin to be theologically significant with the promise given to Abraham. Instead, the patriarch's hope of possessing a land arose out of the concept of restoration to the original state from which man had fallen.<sup>5</sup> The original idea of land as paradise significantly shaped the expectations associated with redemption. As the place of blessedness arising from unbroken fellowship and communion with God, the land of paradise became the goal toward which redeemed humanity was returning.

In speaking of Israel's land under the old covenant, it is necessary to think in categories of shadow, type, and prophecy, in contrast to reality, substance, and fulfillment under the new covenant. These contrasting categories come to expression in various ways in the writings of the New Testament. Throughout Matthew's gospel, significant events in the

<sup>3</sup> The significance of the land as a theological concept was pointed out by G. von Rad in a 1943 article, translated as 'The Promised Land and Yah-

weh's Land in the Hexateuch" and printed in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 79-93. Says von Rad, "In the whole of the Hexateuch there is probably no more important idea than that expressed in terms of the land promised and later granted by Yahweh" (p. 79).

4 Cf. the stimulating article of Chris Wright, "Biblical Reflections on Land,"

in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 1993): 153-67. Says Wright, "Reflections on land obviously have to begin with the biblical theme of creation" (p. 153).

5 This point is brought out well by T. Desmond Alexander in *From Paradise*

*to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Main Themes of the Pentateuch*

(Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 25: "Whereas the early chapters of Genesis focus on the loss of land as a result of disobedience, Abraham is portrayed as gaining the land due to obedience and trust in God."

I T S L A N D 5

life of Jesus are explained as having occurred so that old covenant anticipations might be fulfilled (Matt. 2:15, 17, 23; 13:14, 35; 26:54, 56; 27:9). John declares that God now "tabernacles" with his people in a way that far surpasses his

dwelling with Israel in the days of their wilderness wandering (John 1:14), that the angels of God now ascend and descend on the Son of Man rather than on Jacob's visionary ladder (John 1:51), that the lifting up of the Son of God supersedes the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14), and that the manna from heaven given by Moses has been transformed into "living bread" given by Christ (John 6:49-51). Paul speaks of the religious festivals of the old covenant as "a *shadow* of the things that were to come" (Col. 2:17), and the events of Israel's redemptive history as "*types*" for believers during the new covenant age (1 Cor. 10:6). All these authors of new covenant documents develop a significant aspect of their theology by contrasting old covenant shadows with new covenant realities.

It is particularly in the epistle to the Hebrews that this contrast between anticipation and realization, between shadow and reality, finds its fullest and most distinctive expression. According to the writer to the Hebrews, the administration of redemption under the law of the old covenant was "only a shadow" of the good things that were

coming (Heb. 10:1). These shadowy images of redemptive reality did not originate merely in the context of old covenant experiences. Instead, these prophetic shadows originated in the abiding realities of heaven itself. Because Melchizedek the priest-king was made "like" the Son of God in his eternal relationship to the Father, he could anticipate the priestly role of Jesus (Heb. 7:1, 3). Similarly, only because the tabernacle in the wilderness was constructed precisely "according to the pattern" shown to Moses on the mount, could its pattern of worship provide insight into the realities of a proper approach to God under the provisions of the new covenant (Heb. 8:5).

## **6 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

According to all these different documents of the new covenant, the administration of redemption under the old covenant was prophetically typological, anticipating the realities of the new covenant. Other examples may be cited to substantiate the same principle. The sacrifice of animals and foodstuffs anticipated the offering of the body of Jesus under the new covenant. A temporary priesthood antici-

pated the permanent priesthood of Christ. The mobile tabernacle foreshadowed the abiding presence of God's glory in the person of Jesus. As the Israelites journeyed through the desert, God provided them with manna from heaven, water from the rock, and a serpent on a pole. All these images found their new covenant fulfillment, not in more manna and water, or in a larger serpent on a taller pole, but in the redemptive realities that these old covenant forms foreshadowed (see, e.g., John 3:14; 6:51; 7:37; Rom. 15:16). The very nature of the old covenant provisions requires that they be viewed as prophetic shadows, not as permanent realities.

This principle has great significance when it is applied to the idea of land as experienced by Israel under the administration of the old covenant. The promise of land also originated in the heavenly realities and not merely in the temporal experiences of Israel. According to the writer to the Hebrews, Abraham and the patriarchs longed for "a better country—a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16). They understood, though only dimly, that the land promised to them actually had its origins



in the heavenly, eternal reality that yet remained before them.

The possession of a particular tract of land would have significance from a number of perspectives with respect to God's redemptive working in the world. But the land also served as a shadow, a type, a prophecy, anticipating the future working of God with his people.

This relation of prophetic shadow to substantial fulfillment becomes increasingly evident as the theme of the land is traced throughout Scripture—first in the history of Is-

I t s L A N D 7

rael, then in the Psalms and Prophets, and finally in the documents of the new covenant itself. In reviewing this material, it would be helpful to note that the idea of land in Scripture centers particularly on two basic concepts, one broad and one narrow: (1) the totality of the area known as the land of the Bible, and (2) the city of Jerusalem with its center at Mount Zion.<sup>6</sup> Both of these concepts are significantly related to the idea of God's intent to redeem a people to himself. In this regard, the following topics may be considered:

A. The land in the experience of God's people under the old covenant

B. The land in the Psalms and the Prophets

C. The land from a new covenant perspective

### **A. The Land in the Experience of God's People Under the Old Covenant**

Land began with Paradise, but the paradisaical nature of land was lost in the Fall. Sinful humanity was expelled from this land of blessing. But the idea of paradise was renewed in the promise of land made by God in his covenant to redeem a people from his fallen condition. As Adam and Eve had known God's blessing in Eden, so God would bless his people in a new land. This idea of restoration to paradise provides the proper biblical context for understanding God's promise to give land to Abraham (Gen. 12:1). This promise to the patriarch became the basis for all subsequent under-

6 The centrality of Jerusalem in the land of Israel is explained in David E.

Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 96-97, 106-12. For a balanced analysis of the significance of

Jerusalem for New Testament theology, see P. W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

## **8 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

**standing of the role of the land in the unfolding history of redemption.<sup>7</sup>**

**This divine promise was restated to Moses in terms of "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; etc.). As the significance of this land was revealed to Moses, three striking concepts emerged:<sup>8</sup>**

**1. *This land belongs to the Lord of the covenant. According to the legislation in Leviticus, the land was not to be sold, since, as the Covenant Lord declared, "The land is mine, and you are strangers and my tenants" (Lev. 25:23\*). This is the only verse in the Pentateuch in which the land is specifically declared to belong to the Lord, although a number of other ideas support this concept. It is declared that (1) the land was to be divided***

<sup>7</sup> It has become quite fashionable, even in evangelical circles, to appeal to the "final form" of various portions of Scripture, assuming that these texts are the product of a process of redaction. Cf., e.g., Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*. In his six-page preface, no fewer than fifteen references may be found to the "final form," the "received form," the text

"as we now have it," the work of "the final editor," or some such phrase.

In this way it is supposed that one may avoid the thorny questions concerning the origins of the Pentateuch while moving on to the more substantial matter of the theology of the books. The desire to get beyond critical analysis to exegetical and theological substance can be appreciated.

But the far-reaching consequences of this "canonical" approach must not be overlooked. If the dating of the biblical material is left open, little defense remains against negatively critical assessments of its development.

For example, with respect to the origin of the promise concerning the land, W. D. Davies reviews several options. One of them proposes that this idea was a "creation" of the period of the exile, "when Israel felt that its possession of The Land was in jeopardy" (*The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, 5). Allowing for the possible validity of this proposal invariably destroys the integrity of Scripture. In this reconstruction of the biblical testimony, no promise of land was really made to Abraham at all. Rather, the biblical account is reduced to a religious fraud designed to deceive the people into thinking that God had promised something he never did. A smirking Wellhausen, with his proposition that the entire book of Deuteronomy was a "pious fraud," is certainly lurking in the shadows.

8 A number of ideas in this section were stimulated by Davies.

I T S L A N D 9

by lot, allowing God to determine its distribution (cf. Num.

26:55); (2) the law of the tithe indicated that the Lord owned the land and had a right to demand his portion (cf. Deut. 14:22; 26:9-15); (3) the law of the sabbath rest was applied to the land, indicating that it was the Lord's possession, just as were people and cattle (Lev. 25:2, 4).

But the concept that this particular land belonged to the Lord can be understood correctly only if the Lord's claim to the whole earth is recognized. This idea finds expression in the record of God's creation of all things, as well as in a number of subsequent passages:

[Moses promises to stop the hail that has been destroying Pharaoh's crops] so you may know that *the earth belongs to the Covenant LORD*. (EX. 9:29\*)

[The Lord declares to the Israelite people as he confirms his covenant at Sinai:] Although *the whole earth is mine*, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Ex. 19:5)

*To the Covenant LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it* [yet this great God has set his affection on Israel's forefathers and has

chosen this nation above all the nations]. (Deut. 10:14-15)

No idea of a deity restricted to a particular territory may be found in these passages. God's selection of one portion of the earth in which to do a special work of redemption naturally leads to the expectation that through this one people all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

Under the new covenant, this principle that the Lord possesses the whole of heaven and earth has practical application.

Writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul explains that they should have no qualms about eating things offered to idols,

#### **10 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

*"for the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it"* (1 Cor. 10:26).

Since the one true God is Lord of the whole earth, an idol has no claim over any portion of it.

In a similar vein, the covenant promise of land made to Abraham takes on a much greater significance when it is viewed from the perspective of fulfillment in the age of the new covenant. Now the patriarch's promise is understood to imply that he is the heir of *the cosmos*, not merely the land of

the Bible (Rom. 4:13). Because God is the Lord of the whole universe, he will fulfill his covenant promise of redemption by reconstituting the cosmos. In this way, paradise will be restored in all its glory. The blessing of land that humanity first experienced will finally be graciously given back to him.

*2. All blessings flowing from the land come ultimately from the hand of the Lord.* From an alternative perspective, it may be said that the land is specifically "the place where Yahweh abundantly gave material gifts of all kinds to his people."<sup>9</sup> One should not suppose that Israel derived this concept from the Canaanite culture that surrounded it. The universal reign of the Lord of the covenant makes it plain that he is not restricted to blessing only within the land of promise. As he departed from Egypt, Abraham was loaded with the blessings of prosperity, even though he had earned the disgust of the heathen pharaoh on whom he had brought a curse because of his deceit concerning his wife Sarah (Gen. 12:18-13:2).

The fact that the Lord alone could give blessing in the land was underscored even before Israel entered it. This land would

not be like Egypt, watered regularly by the flooding Nile. Instead, in this land God would show his special care by sending the rains in their various seasons. Apart from this blessing, the land would become a curse to the people. Yet they could trust the Covenant Lord's good intentions. As Moses told them, "It

9 Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 11; Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, 2 .

## I T S L A N D 1 1

is a land the LORD your God cares for; the eyes of the LORD your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end" (Deut. 11:12). For this reason and this reason alone, the people could be assured of the blessings of the Lord. It was his land, the place of his special concern.

Yet with all the emphasis on the distinctiveness of this land in comparison with all other lands, the reason for its selection must not be overlooked. From the beginning, it was declared that God had committed himself in covenant oath to Abraham, not that the patriarch might indulge himself with God's blessings, but that Abraham would be a blessing to all the nations of the world. As a narrow land bridge connecting the



continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia, this place and no other was rightly situated for the extension of God's covenant blessing to the entire world. It was for this reason that the prophet Ezekiel later declared that God's people were situated "at the center of the earth" and that Jerusalem was set "in the center of the nations" (Ezek. 38:12\*; 5:5).

3. *This land is uniquely holy.* The holiness of the land is inescapably related to the fact that the holy God dwelt there. As has been stated, "Because Yahweh was near to it, his own holiness radiated throughout its boundaries."<sup>10</sup> It is not that the land itself possessed some special sacredness in and of itself. As a matter of fact, the phrase "holy land" apparently is used only twice in the whole of Scripture, and in each case the word *land* must be supplied by inference (Ps. 78:54; Zech. 2:12). In other words, the holiness of the land is derived from the presence of the holy God. But once his person has been removed, as is implied by the withdrawal of the Shekinah in the days before the captivity of Jerusalem, the land is no longer holy and so becomes subject to human devastation. Even the ground around a bush in the desert be-

comes holy when the Lord manifests his presence in that place (Ex. 3:5). Because of the presence of the Lord, Moses

10 Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*, 12.

## **12 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

must remove his shoes so that he will not defile the ground that has become holy. In a similar way, Israel is charged not to defile the land, "for I dwell in the midst of my people Israel" (Num. 35:34\*).

Yet the holiness of the Lord so penetrates the land that it may be said that it is proactive in maintaining its own sacredness. Because of the pollutions of the Canaanites, *the land* vomited them from its midst (Lev. 18:25). In a similar way, Israel must be careful to keep all the Lord's commandments, or *the land* will vomit them out (Lev. 18:28; 20:22).

One particular circumstance may be noted with respect to the desecration of the land. Because of the total reversal of the order of creation when a man is hanged on a tree, he must not be left overnight or his corpse will "desecrate the land" (Deut. 21:22-23). Trees were created by God specifically to be a blessing to mankind. They provide shade from the heat, fuel for the

fire, and fruit for nourishment. When this benefactor becomes an agent of execution, it must be subjected to strict limits, or else the land itself will be defiled.

So it was enough that a tree was used for the execution of the innocent Son of God (Gal. 3:13). Heaven darkened at that total reversal of the intended order of creation (Matt. 27:45). If his body had been allowed to remain on the tree beyond the time allotted by the law of God, no one could have predicted the consequences. But his prompt removal symbolized the prospect that peace could be restored between an offended God and an offending creation.

The land functioned in significant ways by the appointment of God in accordance with the covenant mediated through Abraham and Moses. In idyllic terms, it was described as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 13:27; etc.). This description of the Promised Land intentionally reflected the nature of Paradise. Yet the real condition of the land as experienced by Israel was quite different, as can be seen in an old Jewish fable. According to this legend, God at creation commissioned two

## I t s L A N D 13

storks to scatter stones all over the face of the earth. These stones were divided into two bags, one for each stork. But the bag being carried by one stork broke over the land of the Bible. As a consequence, half of the stones of the world are located in Israel. It is indeed a glorious land, a land with great diversity and beauty. But many other parts of the world are much more fertile and lack all the stones found so abundantly in this land.

Throughout its history, Israel's experience with the land had the effect of placing the promise of it in the category of an old covenant shadow that would have to wait for the arrival of new covenant realities for its fulfillment. In the time of David and Solomon, the full extent of the land was described as stretching from the Tigris-Euphrates River to the border of Egypt (1 Kings 4:21). In this restored paradise of the kingdom, every man would sit under his own vine and fig tree (1 Kings 4:25; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10). Yet from the beginning, the actual experience of the people was quite different. From Solomon's day onward, the people experienced oppression rather than

paradise, which had the effect of placing this promise firmly within the category of an old covenant shadow that would have to wait for the arrival of new covenant realities for its fulfillment.

The possession of the land under the old covenant was not an end in itself, but fit instead among the shadows, types, and prophecies that were characteristic of the old covenant in its presentation of redemptive truth. Just as the tabernacle was never intended to be a settled item in the plan of redemption but was to point to Christ's tabernacling among his people (cf. John 1:14), and just as the sacrificial system could never atone for sins but could only foreshadow the offering of the Son of God (Heb. 9:23-26), so in a similar manner Abraham received the promise of the land but never experienced the blessing of its full possession. In this way, the patriarch learned to look forward to "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). Because of the promise that was set be-

#### **14 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

fore them, the patriarchs never returned to the land of Ur, since "they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one"

(Heb. 11:16). As a consequence, even the denial of the realization of the promise to the patriarchs served the purposes of God by forcing them to look beyond their present experience to the future reality. According to one analysis, The patriarchs were looking forward, not so much to the day when their descendants would inherit the physical Land, as to the day when they themselves would inherit the heavenly country which the physical Land signified. They "saw through" the promise of the Land, looking beyond it to a deeper, spiritual reality. The promise concerning the Land, whilst real and valid in its own terms, pointed typologically to something greater.<sup>11</sup>

At this early stage, the central role of Jerusalem also came to the fore. Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, the priest-king of (Jeru)Salem (Gen. 14:20). At this place, Abraham also presented his son Isaac as an offering to God (Gen. 22:1-2; 2 Chron. 3:1). In both cases, the shadowy events at Jerusalem pointed to greater realities of the new covenant that would ultimately be realized in the heavenly priesthood of Christ "after

the order of Melchizedek" and in the once-for-all sacrifice of the Son of God, a better offering than Isaac (Heb. 7:15-17\*, 26-27).

After Abraham died, the nation of Israel moved in and out of the land. As a landless people during the bondage instituted by Pharaoh, they suffered the "reproach of Egypt" (Josh. 5:9). This condition prevailed for four hundred years, until the conquest of Joshua. The people actually possessed the land during the period of the kings, but their possession never reached perfection. Proper dominion over the land re-

11 Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 212.

#### I T s L A N D 15

remained as a tantalizing possibility that never came to full realization. Solomon ruined his prospects by importing foreign gods and tolerating the worship assemblies of his heathen wives on the "hill of abominations" just across the valley from **the** temple mount (1 Kings 11:7-8; 2 **Kings** 23:13). During this period, **invading** armies sent by the Lord repeatedly chastised the people for their unfaithfulness in the land (1 Kings 11:14,22-25). Finally, the **people** were removed from the

land altogether (2 **Kings** 17:22-23; 25:21). They were driven out, exiled from the **land** that had been given to their forefathers.

**Of** course, Jerusalem could not possibly be dispossessed so long as **the** Shekinah, **the** visual manifestation of God' s glory, dwelt **in** its midst. **As** prophesied by Ezekiel, the Shekinah had to depart from the **city** before its fall. First the glory of **the** God of Israel rose from above the cherubim in the Most **Holy** Place, where **it** had resided since the day Solomon dedicated the temple, **and** moved **to the** threshold of the temple (Ezek. 9:3; cf. 1 **Kings** 8:10-11). Next, Ezekiel heard the **whirring** wheels of the cherubim that dwelt above the ark, indicating **that** they were on the move (Ezek. 10:13). In a third **step**, the glory of the Lord departed from the threshold of the temple **and** moved, along with the cherubim and the whirring wheels, to the east gate of the Lord's house (Ezek. 10:16-19). **Finally**, the glory of God, along with the cherubim and the **wheels**, rose above the city **of** Jerusalem and stopped at the mountain on the east of it, **the** Mount of Olives (Ezek. 11:22-23).



What **are** these "whirring **wheels**," **and** what is their significance in the book of Ezekiel? **The** key to answering these ques-

tions appears to be found in **the** provisions made **by David** for

Solomon's building of the temple. Among other things, **David**

left for Solomon "the plan for the chariot, **that** is, the cherubim

of gold that spread their wings and shelter the **ark** of the

covenant of the LORD" (1 Chron. 28:18). **In** other **words**, a "chariot" with "wheels" was part of the paraphernalia of the **ark**. **The 16 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

wheels associated with the ark came to symbolize the fact that

God's presence was mobile.<sup>12</sup> It could not be presumed that he

would always remain within the temple. So the chariot with

wheels proved a fitting symbol that anticipated Ezekiel's message.

Once the glory had departed from Jerusalem, the city was

as vulnerable as any other place on the face of the earth. Its

consecration to the Lord was lost, and so the city was no longer

holy. It was neither dedicated to the Lord nor guaranteed his

protection. As a consequence, the exile of Jerusalem's inhabi-

tants could not be avoided.

So the loss of the land was laden with theological signifi-

cance. When the possession of this land is viewed as a sign of

the blessings of the covenant of redemption, then its loss must have equally widespread implications. Dispossession and loss of the land must mean the loss of redemptive blessings. Those who once had been God's people may become *Lo-Ammi*, "not-my-people" (Hos. 1:9).

But the history of God's people under the old covenant did not end with exile. At God's appointed time, the chosen of the Lord were graciously granted the privilege of returning to the land (Ezra 1:1-3). They came back as a small body of only about 50,000, in contrast to the over 600,000 men who had come out of Egypt with Moses almost a thousand years earlier (Ezra 2:64; Num. 2:32). They came to a tiny territory, and were able to rebuild only a small replica of the original temple (Ezra 3:10-12).

But God's prophets were not distracted from their vision of the greatness of the Lord's redemptive work. As a matter of

12 Cf. Martin J. Selman, *I Chronicles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 254: "A chariot (v. 18) is unknown else-

where as part of the temple furniture, but its connection with the winged cherubim suggests the idea of God's mobile throne (cf. Ps. 18:10; Ezk.

1:15ff.)." C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of the Chronicles* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 294, relates the chariot to the cherubim, noting that Ezekiel saw wheels on the throne of God under the cherubim. This interpretation is supported by the rendering of the Septuagint and the Vulgate.

## I T S L A N D 1 7

fact, they painted a picture of land restoration so glorious that it cannot be contained within the boundaries of the old covenant forms of realization. Jerusalem, they declared, would be a city "without walls," with a "wall of fire" about it, and with the glory of the Lord "within" (Zech. 2:1-5). The reconstructed temple would manifest a greater glory than

Solomon's magnificent structure (Hag. 2:9). The language is inspired and inspiring, but once more the reality as experienced under the old covenant remained much less impressive.

In fact, this extravagant picture of a city without walls, but with a wall of fire about it, with Gentile nations streaming into its confines, breaks the bonds of all the old covenant images. How can images such as these find their fulfillment?

Like all old covenant shadows, these glorious prospects have been realized in the days of the new covenant, when people worship neither in Jerusalem nor in Samaria, but wherever

in the world the Spirit of God manifests himself (John 4:21-24). The redemptive reality that the old covenant city could only foreshadow finds its consummate realization in the "Jerusalem above," which is the "mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26 KJV). This "Jerusalem above" is not merely a "spiritual" phenomenon that has no connection with the "real" world in which we live. Its reality injects itself constantly into the lives of God's people. Every time Christians assemble for worship, they join with the host of the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12:22). Once this stage of consummate fulfillment has been reached, never again will the revelation from God suggest that his people should aspire to the old, typological ways of the old covenant. Progression toward consummation in the new covenant cannot allow for a retrogression to the older, shadowy forms.

### **B. The Land in the Psalms and the Prophets**

Both the Psalms and the writings of the prophets give full recognition to the ongoing significance of a land of promise in

**18**

**T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

**redemptive history. Yet the movement toward the new**

**covenant era presses the conception of redemptive land well beyond the geographical limits of Palestine.**

**In the Psalms, the inheritance of the land is celebrated as one of the greatest blessings of redemption. Psalm 37 encourages the people of God not to despair over the prosperity of the wicked, but to trust the Lord's promises that they will "inherit the land." Six times essentially the same phrase is used:**

**Evil men**

**will be cut off,**

**but those who hope in the Covenant LORD<sup>13</sup>**

*will inherit the land. (v. 9)*

**A little while,**

**and the wicked will be no more; . . .**

**But the meek**

*will inherit the land. (vv. 10-11)*

**Those the Covenant LORD blesses**

*will inherit the land,*

**but those he curses**

**will be cut off. (v. 22)**

**Turn from evil and do good;**

**then you will dwell in the land forever, (v. 27)**

13 The precise way of representing the covenant name of God as revealed to

Moses has provided a challenge throughout the ages. The Jews have sought to avoid blasphemy by refusing to pronounce the tetragrammaton at all. They have substituted "Adonai" or "haShem," meaning "the Name." Several English translations render the word with "LORD" (using small capital letters) to distinguish it from "Lord" as representative of Adonai. The hybrid "Jehovah" superimposes the vowels of Adonai on the consonants for Yahveh. The present proposal is to use "Covenant LORD" or "LORD of the Covenant," which represents the actual significance of this specific name for God.

Its LAND

The righteous will *inherit the land*

and dwell in it forever, (v. 29)

Wait for the Covenant LORD

and keep his way.

He will exalt you

to *inherit the land*. (v. 34)

As this psalm was sung in the assembled congregation of

God's people, it must have constantly reinforced the fact that the

land was God's gift to them. Clearly not to the wicked and unbelieving from among Israel, but only to the righteous and faithful was the assurance given that the land of redemption would be theirs. This principle is very important as it relates to the current situation of the land. Never can the promise of the land be properly claimed by those who fail to exercise true faith and faithfulness in the Redeemer provided by the Lord of the Covenant.

In this regard, it is sometimes suggested that God promised unconditionally that Israel would possess the land. According to one analysis, the "Priestly" redaction of the Pentateuchal material that occurred in later Israelite history "changed" the content of the covenant by heightening its promissory character.<sup>14</sup> As a consequence,

Israel's election, and with it the possession of The Land, can never, for P, become conditional on obedience to the Law; that election, resting upon the Abrahamic covenant, cannot be annulled by human disobedience. Israel, it follows, cannot be destroyed, and The Land *will* be hers.<sup>15</sup>

This conclusion can be reached only by ignoring contrary

portions of the biblical witness. A proper treatment of the text

14 Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, 9.

15 Ibid.

## **20 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

in its total context cannot deny the conditional elements of the covenant.<sup>16</sup> Abraham was required from the beginning of God's dealing with him to leave his homeland and family. Subsequently he was told that he had to walk before the Lord and "be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). Now it is quite appropriate to speak of the certainty that the conditions of the covenant would be fulfilled, so that the intended blessings would come. But the covenants of God still had conditions. Recognizing this fact, the student of Scripture must look forward to One who would fulfill the conditions of the covenant perfectly on behalf of his people. But this perspective will lead in a totally different direction than the idea that the land belongs to Israel in perpetuity, no matter how faithless she may be.

Turning to the prophets, we see that a number of passages focus on the significance of land in the expectations for Israel's future. Perhaps the boldest prophetic picture is found



in the prophecy of Isaiah. In a dramatic reversal of roles, the prophet declares that an altar for the Covenant Lord will be raised up in the land, with "a monument to the Covenant LORD at its border" (Isa. 19:19). But in this case, the land of which he speaks is Egypt! The people of this land will cry out because of their oppressors, and the Lord will send them a savior (v. 20). Indeed, the Lord will strike them with a plague, as he did in the days of Moses, but then he will heal them (v. 22). A highway will be built from Egypt to Assyria (v. 23). Although it will pass directly through Israel, travelers will con-

16 The unconditional character of some of the biblical covenants is rightly denied by Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 419-20. But it hardly can be agreed, as Brueggemann proposes, that the blame for this "false dichotomy" lies with Paul's effort to distinguish the Christian gospel from its Jewish counterpart by claiming for Christians the "gospel beforehand" as it was proclaimed to Abraham, while assigning Moses and the law to his Jewish opponents. Paul plainly states that the law could not add a codicil to the promise previously given (Gal. 3:15), and that the law is not in any way opposed to the promises of God (v. 21).

tinue on their way so they can worship the Lord of the Covenant in the lands of Egypt and Assyria. It is almost as though the land of Israel is to be bypassed! Yet Israel's land will not be entirely neglected, for "in that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth" (v. 24).

How amazing is Isaiah's vision of the Lord's plans for the land that shall be his. First is not Israel, but Egypt. Israel is not even second, but Assyria. Israel still has a part in God's plan for the future, but the overall orientation of the lands of nations will be radically altered. In Isaiah's vision, the land as the place of the Covenant Lord's redemptive work will not be the same as it was previously. New lands will also be claimed by the Lord. Ezekiel's message about the land is also vitally important. As previously noted, the first part of his book describes the departing of God's glory from the city of Jerusalem. The end of the book, however, describes the return of the glory. But what will the framework be in which this departed glory of the Lord returns? The circumstance is made plain in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD. (Ezek. 37:12-14)

Clearly Ezekiel is talking about a return to the land. But what exactly does his prophecy anticipate?

Some interpreters have suggested that the prophet is using figurative language that anticipates nothing more than the re-

## **22 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

**turn of Israel to the land.<sup>17</sup> But then the origin of this imagery must be explained. Where did Ezekiel get the idea of describing a return from exile as the opening of graves? Certainly he did not derive it from the cultic enactment of the myth of a dying and rising god, as some have supposed.<sup>18</sup>**

**Biblical references prior to Ezekiel that acknowledge the**

**power of God to raise the dead suggest that the prophet is referring to more than a wondrous return of exiles to the land of promise.<sup>19</sup> As one critical scholar has noted, 'That God by a miracle could restore the dead to life no devout Israelite ever doubted.'<sup>20</sup> The skepticism of the Sadducees during New Testament times regarding the prospect of resurrection from the dead would require at least a modification of this all-embracing assertion (cf. Matt. 22:23-32 and parallels). Yet Jesus' response to their skepticism indicates that testimony to bodily resurrection was a part of Old Testament teaching: 'You are in error *because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God*' (Matt. 22:29). Only a few cases of actual resurrection from the dead are recorded in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; 13:20-21). But additional witness to the possibility of resurrection may be found in the Scriptures. When trying to**

17 Cf. John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 236. Taylor is quite emphatic on this point. Cf.

also Walter Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 509; W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 264.

18 Cf. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 236, citing the theory of H. Riesenfeld.

19 Cf. the extensive treatment of Ezekiel's vision in D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 381-92. Block takes note of Jewish and Christian interpretations that understand Ezekiel as describing an actual resurrection. He discusses several scriptural passages predating Ezekiel that speak in terms of resurrection (pp. 386-87, esp. n. 97), and concludes: "In a new and dramatic way, the conviction that the grave need not be the end provided a powerful vehicle for announcing the full restoration of Israel. The curse would be lifted. Yahweh would bring his people back to life" (p. 387).

20 John Skinner, as cited in Taylor, *Ezekiel*, 236. Taylor and others believe that Skinner is quite wrong in this assessment.

I t s LAND 23

reconcile Isaac's specified role in the covenant with God's command to sacrifice him, Abraham concluded that God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary (Heb. 11:19; cf. Gen. 22:5— "We will worship and then we will come back to you"). Rather than despairing as he grew older without possessing the Promised Land, Abraham began to look for a city "whose architect and builder" was God, and for "a better country" that had heavenly characteristics (Heb. 11:10, 16). Joseph showed his confidence in an eventual exodus by giving in-

structions concerning the disposition of his bones (Gen. 50:25; Heb. 11:22). But why was Joseph so concerned that his bones be transported to the land of promise? Perhaps he had purely sentimental reasons. But his determination may indicate that he expected to participate personally in the possession of the land that had been promised. If Abraham had come to look for a heavenly, eternal realization of the land (Heb. 11:10,16), then this expectation would have been passed down to Joseph (cf. Gen. 18:17-19). Moses may not have fully grasped all the implications of God's self-revelation at the burning bush, but he heard the Covenant Lord—who is not a God of the dead, but of the living—identify himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had been dead for centuries (Ex. 3:6; Matt. 22:32).

The fulfillment of the promise of the land was repeatedly associated with life beyond the grave, and the word from the Lord to Ezekiel fits squarely into this expectation.<sup>21</sup> At a minimum, Ezekiel's prophecy of the return to the land involves God's putting his Spirit in people so that they "come alive" (Ezek. 37:14a\*). This description of new life generated by

21 Although many have questioned the presence of resurrection faith in the Old Testament, additional passages may also be noted: Pss. 16:9-11 (cf. Acts 2:24-32); 17:15 (cf. 1 John 3:2); Isa. 25:6-8 (cf. Rev. 21:4); 26:19; Dan. 12:2-3 (cf. John 5:28-29). Paul's summation of the gospel includes the affirmation that Christ "was raised on the third day *according to the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:4).

## **24 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

God's Spirit is the most likely Scripture that Jesus expected Nicodemus to understand as they discussed the necessity of being "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5,10). But the specificity of Ezekiel's language regarding the uncovering of graves, as well as the context of dry, dead bones coming to life, suggests the anticipation of bodily resurrection. Upon the opening of graves and the coming alive of the dead, a return to the land would be effected.

An emphasis is often placed on the two stages involved in this process of resurrection as described by Ezekiel.<sup>22</sup> First the bones and sinews come together, and then the Spirit of God breathes life into them (Ezek. 37:7-10). It has been proposed that these two phases represent first Israel's return to the land

without the vitality of new spiritual life from God, and then a revival of true faith in the coming Messiah.

But the obvious parallel between this account of the infusion of life in Ezekiel and the creation account in Genesis 2:7 makes it plain that Ezekiel's vision of a return to life refers to a single event. First, God formed man of the dust of the earth, and then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. Only after this second action of the Creator was man declared to be "a living being." In a similar fashion, the skeleton formed by the coming together of the bones in Ezekiel was a totally lifeless being, still lying at the foot of the valley. Only

22 Cf. Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 214. Feinberg argues that the prophecy must refer to the return of

the nation of Israel to the land because of these two stages, since resurrection from the dead never occurs in stages. But by his own point that Ezekiel's two stages reflect Genesis 2 (p. 213), Feinberg has refuted his own case. In the Genesis account (2:7), the Lord God first forms man of the dust of the earth, and then breathes into his nostrils the breath of life.

Only after this second step does man become "a living being" (*nepsh hayyah*)—not "a living soul," as the KJV reads. The point is not that man



had no soul at creation, but that he had no life in his body until the Lord breathed the breath of life into him. In a similar way, Ezekiel's "dry bones" first came together. They had no life until God breathed on them.

I t s L A N D 25

after the breath of life from God entered the skeleton did it come to life.

From this perspective, it would seem evident that the return of the Jews to Palestine in the twentieth century, leading to the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, should not be regarded as a fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. Israel's twentieth-century rebirth as a nation did not involve any opening of graves, resurrection of the body, inpouring of the Spirit of God, or renewal of life through faith in Jesus Christ as the Lord of life. However the establishment of the state of Israel may be viewed, it does not fulfill the expectation of Ezekiel as described in this vivid prophecy. Instead, this picture of a people brought to newness of life by the Spirit of God leads to a consideration of the role of the land in the context of the new covenant.<sup>23</sup>

### **C. The Land from a New Covenant Perspective**

So how does this long development of the concept of the land under the old covenant translate into the categories of new covenant fulfillment? It must be remembered at the outset that any transfer from the old covenant to the new covenant involves a movement from shadow to reality. The old covenant appealed to the human longing for a sure and settled land; yet it could not compare with the realities of new covenant fulfillment.

23 A similar analysis of Ezekiel's vision of Israel's restored temple may be found in Peter Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 313. In light of references to this prophecy in the New Testament, Walker concludes that New Testament writers "were presumably not expecting Ezekiel's prophecy to be fulfilled literally at some future point in a physical Temple. Instead this prophecy became a brilliant way of speaking pictorially of what God had now achieved in and through Jesus. Paradoxically, therefore, although Ezekiel's vision had focused so much upon the Temple, it found its ultimate fulfillment in that city where there was 'no Temple,' because 'its Temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb' (Rev. 21:22\*)."

## **26 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

This perspective is confirmed by a number of references in the new covenant documents. Abraham is declared to be heir,

not of "the land," but of "the world" (Rom. 4:13). By this comprehensive language the imagery of land as a picture of re-

stored paradise has finally come of age. No longer merely a portion of this earth, but now the whole of the cosmos partakes of the consummation of God's redemptive work in our fallen world.

This perspective provides insight into the return to the land as described by Ezekiel and the other prophets. In the nature of things, these writers could only employ images with which they and their hearers were familiar. So they spoke of a return to the geographical land of Israel. Indeed there was a return to this land, though hardly on the scale prophesied by Ezekiel. But in the context of the realities of the new covenant, this land must be understood in terms of the newly recreated cosmos about which the apostle Paul speaks in Romans. The whole universe (which is "the land" from a new covenant perspective) groans in travail, waiting for the redemption that will come with the resurrection of the bodies of the redeemed (Rom. 8:22-23). The return to paradise in the framework of the new covenant does not involve merely a re-

turn to the shadowy forms of the old covenant. It means the rejuvenation of the entire earth. By this renewal of the entire creation, the old covenant's promise of land finds its new covenant realization.

The same perspective can be seen in Jesus' reference in the Sermon on the Mount to the promise in the Psalms of inheriting the land. What did Jesus mean when he spoke of the meek inheriting "the earth" (Matt. 5:5)? Although the Greek term found in the Beatitudes for "earth" is the same as that which is used in the Septuagint for "land," the context of Jesus' statement requires a larger frame of reference than the land of Palestine. Jesus teaches not that the Jewish race will inherit the Promised Land, but that in the new covenant the "meek," regardless of their ethnic back-

I t s L A N D 27

**ground, will inherit the "earth," wherever in this world they might live.**

**Yet many theologians in the present day continue to interpret the promise of the land in the old covenant in terms of its shadowy, typological dimensions, rather than recogniz-**

**ing the greater scope of new covenant fulfillments. Many would view the establishment of the modern state of Israel as a fulfillment of the promise of the land as it was originally given to the patriarchs.<sup>24</sup> Some would go further and even see the forced displacement of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the land as a legitimate reenactment of the Conquest as it was ordered by God in the days of Joshua.<sup>25</sup> While some secular Jews view this process merely as a necessary step to secure their national existence, others interpret this policy as the reclaiming of the land as promised to the patriarchs. In this concrete way, the old covenant typological concept of possessing the land has been superimposed on the radically different circumstances of the new covenant era. Clearly the plight of the Jews**

<sup>24</sup> In the two prefaces to his later work, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (1982,1991), W. D. Davies indicates that he explored the topic of Judaism

and the land as a consequence of current events in the land of the Bible.

He notes that his earlier work on the subject, *The Gospel and the Land*

(1974), was written as a consequence of a letter received in 1967 just before

the Six-Day War, urging him to support Israel against Egypt (as noted

in *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, xv). His later work was published in 1982 "under the direct impact of the Six-Day War of 1967" (p. xiii). This work was reissued in 1991 because of the author's apprehension that people needed to understand the situation causing the Gulf War and its af-

termath (p. xiii). Yet despite the contemporary context, Davies has re-

sisted the urgings of his friends to discuss what happens when Judaism's

understanding of its right to the land "conflicts with the claims of the traditions and occupancy of its other peoples" (p. xv).

25 Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1983), 104, notes that from this perspective it should not be surprising

"that cabinet ministers in Israel should quote from the Old Testament to support Israel's claim to the West Bank, or that the Israeli government should make the book of Joshua compulsory reading in all schools."

## **28 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

**after the horrors of the Holocaust must be fully appreciated.**

**Yet the tragic circumstances of the residents of the land dis-**

**placed during the twentieth century must also be appreci-**

**ated.<sup>26</sup>**

**In his letter to the predominantly Gentile church in Eph-**

**esus, Paul applies the promise of the inheritance of the land to**

**a circumstance that reaches far beyond the typological experi-**

**ences of the people of God under the old covenant. He relates that promise specifically to children of Christian believers who are obedient, not to people who are simply Jewish by birth. The fifth commandment of the Decalogue had promised that children who honored their father and mother would live long on "the land" that the Lord their God was giving them (Ex. 20:12). Now Paul applies the same promise to children of Christian parents. If they submit willingly to the authority of their parents, they will enjoy long life on "the earth" (Eph. 6:3). Clearly, the concept of the land has expanded in its new covenant fulfillment to include the entire Gentile world. It**

26 The report of one Palestinian Christian inhabiting the land at the time it was claimed by the Jews in 1948 may help to achieve a better awareness of their plight. He had just turned eleven when the Jews occupied his hometown. His father was a Christian living in Beisan, a city located about twenty miles south of the Sea of Galilee. According to his account, all inhabitants of the town were ordered to evacuate within a few hours. They were all ordered to appear with their belongings in the town square. Muslims and Christians were then separated. The Muslims were sent across the Jordan, while the Christians were loaded in buses and dropped off on

the outskirts of Nazareth. "Within a few hours, our family had become refugees, driven out of Beisan forever" (Nairn Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* [New York: Orbis Books, 1991], 9-12). But to the degree that so-called liberation theology has conditioned the thinking of Palestinian Christians, they too would be basing their claim to the land on an erroneous theology. For the poor and the abused of the earth are not automatically the elect of God, and the model of Israel's using force to throw off the yoke of Egypt in the days of Moses cannot provide a proper theological basis for initiating armed conflict with an oppressive government

#### I t s L A N D 29

now extends, as does the Great Commission, to the uttermost parts of the earth (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8).

But what about Jerusalem in the new covenant? This city was obviously a major focus of the ministry of Jesus. Yet it was not Jerusalem but Capernaum that was designated as "his own town" (Matt. 9:1; 13:54). Jesus centered his ministry in Capernaum because, as prophecy had indicated, the messianic kingdom would be situated "by the way of the sea" in the land of the Gentiles (Isa. 9:1; Matt. 4:12-17). He located in Capernaum when John the Baptist was arrested (Matt. 4:12), since



the arrest of his forerunner indicated the rejection of his ministry by Herod as ruler of the Jews. By choosing Capernaum as the base for his ministry, Jesus made a statement concerning the scope of his emerging kingdom. The "way of the sea" was the narrow trade route that linked three continents across the land bridge that was Palestine. Much earlier, God had directed Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldees and resettle in this land. With this place as its point of origin, the gospel of Jesus Christ could travel at the fastest possible speed to the ends of the earth. This land, crafted by the One who shaped the continents, was designed from the beginning not as an end in itself, but as a means to the end of reaching the world with the gospel.

By the conclusion of the apostolic era, the focal point of the redemptive work of God had shifted from Jerusalem to places like Antioch, Galatia, and Ephesus. These centers became hubs for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth (read "land"). So far as Jerusalem was concerned in this new era, Paul was quite explicit: "the present city of Jerusalem" was "in slavery with her children" (Gal. 4:25) because the Judaizers

in Jerusalem had muffled the freedom of the gospel in favor of the bondage of legalism. The Jews were inhabiting Jerusalem, but it was no longer "the city of God" as it had been under the typological administration of the old covenant.

Jerusalem today remains as it was in Paul's day. It is still in bondage to legalism and rejects the gracious gift of salvation

### **30 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

that has come through the Messiah. It must not be assumed that those who live in Jerusalem today without faith in Jesus have been chosen by God for salvation. Apart from repentance and faith, the inhabitants of Jerusalem continue to be in bondage and are "without hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12). To suggest anything else is to slight Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross, while at the same time imperiling the souls of many by encouraging false presumption.

But there is another Jerusalem, a Jerusalem that is above, from which the enthroned Son of God sends forth his Spirit. Apart from this Jerusalem, none of us would have a mother to bring us into the realm of God's redemptive work, for she is "the mother of us all" (Gal. 4:26 KJV). Only those who have

been born from above by the outpouring of the Spirit from the throne of Christ, situated in the heavenly Jerusalem, can claim to be citizens in the kingdom of God.

This 'Jerusalem that is above' is not an esoteric, spiritualized entity that has little connection with the real world. As a matter of fact, only a thin veil keeps the people of this world from perceiving its reality. That veil will be removed at the "revelation" or "unveiling" that will occur when Christ returns.

Then the curtain will be pulled back, and it will be made clear to all exactly what has been the state of things since the ascension of Jesus Christ. All this time he has been situated on his throne, exercising all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:19). He reigns from the place where Jerusalem has come to its fulfillment, and he sits enthroned as the legitimate heir to the throne of David (Acts 2:30). The exalted Christ now rules from the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), manifesting his sovereignty over all nations until the end of the age.

## **Conclusion**

In the process of redemptive history, a dramatic movement has taken place. The arena of redemption has shifted from

I t s LAND 31

type to reality, from shadow to substance. The land which once was the specific place of God's redemptive work served well in the realm of old covenant forms as a picture of paradise lost and promised. But in the realm of new covenant fulfillments, the land has expanded to encompass the whole world.

In this age of fulfillment, a retrogression to the limited forms of the old covenant must be neither expected nor promoted. Reality must not give way to shadow. By claiming the old covenant form of the promise of the land, the Jews of today may be forfeiting its greater new covenant fulfillment.

Rather than playing the role of Jacob as heir apparent to the redemptive promises made to Abraham their father, they could be assuming the role of Esau by selling their birthright for a fleshly pot of porridge (Gen. 25:29-34; cf. Heb. 12:16).

Evangelical Christianity in particular should take care to apply the implications of Pauline theology to the current situation with regard to the land. For Paul emphatically notes that "if you let yourself be circumcised [an old covenant institution], Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Gal. 5:2). In a

similar way, if the promised land of the old covenant becomes the blessed object to be achieved, then its tremendous fulfillment in the new covenant could be missed. To claim "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10), Abraham had to look beyond the shadowy form of the promise, which he never possessed, to the realities that could be perceived only by faith. How sad it would be if evangelical Christians who profess to love the Jewish people should become a primary tool in misdirecting their faith and expectation. The land in its totality and in its final form belongs to the Lord (Lev. 25:23). In his grace he has given it to "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The proper identification of this "Israel of God" that may claim the promise of the land in the new covenant will be the subject of the next chapter.

## TWO THE ISRAEL OF GOD

its people

### **Introduction**

It can be a thing as simple as a traffic ticket. Or it can be an archaeological dig near the temple mount. Or it can be the opening of a new settlement on the West Bank. Any one of a

thousand different things can trigger days of rioting that result in death for both Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel.

Yet at the root of these conflicts ultimately lie strong convictions about the land and the people to whom it belongs. In the minds of many, the land belongs perpetually by God's assignment to the Israel of God, and no one should attempt to contravene the terms of his unchangeable covenant.

But who are "the Israel of God," and what claim do they have today to the geographical territory known as the land of the Bible? In the previous chapter, the character of the promise of the land in God's redemptive covenant was discussed. Now consideration must be given to the equally pressing question, Who is the Israel to whom God has promised this land? Various people currently claim that they have a right to this land. They fall into at least three major categories: (1) those who are externally related to the God of the covenant, (2) those who are internally related to the God of the covenant, and (3) those who are unrelated to the God of the covenant.

## **34 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

### **A. Aspects of the Identity of "the Israel of God"**

The idea of various "peoples" finds its origin in creation and fall, as did the idea of "land." The first human couple was commanded to multiply and "fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28). After man's fall into sin, the scattering of peoples eventually involved the formation and development of nations. The first promise of a Savior who would descend from the woman involved a struggle between the "seed" of the woman and "seed" of Satan (Gen. 3:15 KJV), anticipating a multiplication of peoples on opposing sides of God's redemptive work.

When establishing his covenant with Abraham, God promised him an innumerable seed (Gen. 12:2; 15:5), which indicates that redemption has in view the multiplication of the descendants of the redeemed. But identifying this redeemed seed involves a number of complex considerations. Exactly who is "Abraham's seed," the designated heirs of the covenant promises of God? To be more precise, how do Jews and Gentiles relate to the seed of Abraham down through redemptive history?

At first this question may appear to have an obvious answer.

But a more careful consideration of how God has identified his people complicates the matter. Several factors must be considered. Here, seven aspects of the identity of "the Israel of God" will be noted.

1. Abraham was originally simply another Gentile. Yet he was the person specifically called by God to be an instrument in the fulfillment of his redemptive purposes.

Was Abraham a Jew?

At first the question might seem ridiculous. Since Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, he must have been a Jew—even if technically the term *Jew* arose much later.

But Scripture indicates that Abraham was originally nothing more than another pagan "Gentile" before being called by God. He was simply one of many idol worshipers on the other

I T S P E O P L E 3 5

side of the Euphrates River (Josh. 24:2). Nothing of a racial, intellectual, or spiritual quality made him fundamentally different from any other Gentile on the face of the earth. When God called him, Abraham did not become the father of some kind



of super race, and it would be monstrous to suggest otherwise. Just as the calling of a person to be a Christian does not set him apart racially from other human beings, so the calling of Abraham did not make him an essentially different kind of being from what he was before he was called.

Yet it must be recognized that it was Abraham who was called and no other. To him were given the promises of a land, a seed, and a blessing. To him alone were the promises of redemption originally spoken.

2. From the beginning, any Gentile could become a full-fledged Jew. Yet Abraham's descendants began their life with an identity among God's people.

When God first instituted the covenant sign that designated Abraham as his chosen vessel for communicating blessings to the nations, he specifically indicated that any Gentile could become a full-fledged Jew by professing the God of Abraham and being circumcised. No racial barrier existed to keep Gentiles from becoming full participants in the covenant promises. As a Jewish commentator on the book of Genesis has noted,

Indeed, differences of race have never been an obstacle to joining Israel which did not know the concept of purity of blood. . . . Circumcision turned a man of foreign origin into an Israelite.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, it must be remembered that the descendants of Abraham began their lives with an identity among the people of God. As Abraham's offspring, they were sealed by

1 Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 233.

### **3 6 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

circumcision as a part of God's covenant at eight days of age (Gen. 17:12).

3. By the Exile, Abraham's descendants became "not-my-people." Yet the old covenant made with Israel did not end with the Exile.

According to the prophecy of Hosea, the descendants of Abraham became *Lo-Ammi*, meaning "not my people," by the Exile (Hos. 1:8-9). Because they refused to repent of their apostasy, Abraham's descendants were thrust back into the mass of the Gentile world. The ten northern tribes were ap-

parently absorbed forever into the world of the Gentiles so that their descendants can no longer be identified. Clearly, being descended from Abraham carried with it no guarantee that a person would remain among God's covenant people without any consideration of his faith and his faithfulness to God's covenant.

Yet the history of the old covenant does not end with the Exile. Those who had been removed from Judah returned, even as the word of the Lord through Jeremiah had foretold (Jer. 25:11; 29:10). Once more the people of Abraham were identified as the ones on whom the Lord had shown his special mercy.

4. The election of God could be redirected. Yet the Lord promises that he will not cut off his people altogether.

In his sovereign action of saving certain undeserving people, God could decide to redirect his grace and choose another nation to be his own. Because of the undeserving character of all the descendants of Adam, God could determine to apply his grace to a different community of people. As the prophet Amos declares, there is no difference:

"Are not you Israelites  
the same to me as the Cushites?"  
declares the Covenant LORD.

### **I T S P E O P L E 3 7**

"Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt,  
the Philistines from Caphtor  
and the Arameans from Kir?" (Amos 9:7)

God has been moving peoples across the face of the earth  
for a long time. He retains a special interest in all the nations  
of the world. Could he not choose one nation just as easily as  
another? Indeed he could!

This unpopular prophet proceeds to speak the unspeak-  
able. God's name will be placed on Edom, the descendants of  
Esau, indicating his gracious election of this people (Amos  
**9:12**; cf. Deut. 28:9-10, where the identical phrase is applied to  
God's election of Israel). At one point in redemptive history,  
God declared his redemptive love for Jacob and his hatred for  
Esau (Gen. 25:23; Mai. 1:2-3; cf. Rom. 9:10-13). Yet according  
to the prophet Amos, the one who was rejected by God is now  
declared to be God's elect. God will shake the house of Israel

among all the nations, and all the sinners among his people will die. But Esau will have God's name set on him, indicating that he is the recipient of God's redemptive grace (Amos 9:9-10, 12). So the electing process that characterized earlier ages can be redirected.

Yet the Lord promises that he will not totally cut off the house of Jacob (Amos 9:8). Furthermore, the salvation of Edom will be accomplished as a consequence of the restoration of David's fallen tent (Amos 9:11). God's promises cannot fail. There will always be a remnant from the house of Israel, and therefore all of God's people should rejoice.

5. Jesus indicated that the kingdom would be taken from Israel (Matt. 21:43). Yet God has not cast off his people altogether (Rom. 11:1).

Because of their rejection of him as their Messiah, Jesus indicated that the kingdom would be taken away from Israel and given to a nation bearing its proper fruit (Matt. 21:43). Because Israel crucified their Christ, their distinc-

### **38 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

tive claim on the kingdom would be given over to repentant

Gentiles.

Yet Paul demonstrates by his own person that God has not cast off his people altogether, for he is an Israelite (Rom. 11:1).

The branches of Israel that have been broken off may be grafted in again, which means that the Gentiles have no ground for boasting by comparing themselves with a rejected Israel (Rom. 11:20-21).

6. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance. Yet Christ has made Jew and Gentile into one.

Because of the greatness of his grace, "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29 kjv). As a consequence, the Jew possesses many advantages in the realm of redemption (Rom. 3:1-2). God has promised that there will always be a remnant of Israel according to the promises of his grace, and this promise extends to the present day (Rom. 11:5).

At the same time, Christ has made Jew and Gentile into one, having destroyed the dividing wall of hostility (Eph. 2:14). Gentile believers now are fellow citizens, fellow members of God's household, and fellow heirs of the promises with Jewish

believers (Eph. 2:19). There is no second-rate citizenship in the kingdom of God. Whatever the promises of God's redemptive grace may include, they are shared equally by Jewish and Gentile believers.

7. The "Israel of God" today includes believing Jews. Yet it does not exclude believing Gentiles.

A careful analysis of the concept of "the Israel of God" in the Scriptures of the new covenant reveals who is included and who is excluded by this idea. Paul makes it plain that external circumcision does not make one a Jew:

He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew

I T S P E O P L E 39

who is one inwardly, whose circumcision is of the heart, by the Spirit, and not of the letter, whose praise is not of men but of God. (Rom. 2:28-29\*)

According to this Hebrew of the Hebrews, who was commissioned by God as an apostle to the Gentiles, Abraham is equally the "father" of two communities. He is the father of believing Jews, but he is equally the father of all uncircumcised

believers (Rom. 4:11-12).

Throughout his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues that the law of circumcision, which previously marked off the people of God, now avails nothing. As a matter of fact, anyone who insists on keeping the law by requiring circumcision is in effect denying the work of Christ (Gal. 5:2-3). Those who insist that circumcision must be applied to mark off the people of God are only attempting to escape the persecution that comes from being identified with the cross of Christ (6:12), for the concept of a Messiah who suffers condemns inherently any pride that might stem from being identified with the people of God. Paul will boast only in the cross of Christ, for all other boasting must end when one realizes that Jesus had to suffer and die before sinners could be redeemed (6:14).

Then Paul sets down his rule for identifying the people of God: neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15). The radicalness of the apostle's statement needs to be appreciated. Circumcision now means absolutely nothing in terms of the identity of the people of God. Lack of circumcision likewise means absolutely



nothing in terms of the identity of the people of God. The mark of identity that set God's people apart through all the centuries of the old covenant now has no meaning in this regard. The only thing that can establish a person as one of God's people is for him to experience a new creation by God's grace.

In this context, Paul introduces the phrase "the Israel of God." He says, "And as many as walk according to this canon,

#### **40 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

peace on them and mercy, even [ *kai*] on the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16\*). A canon or rule of conduct related to the identity of the people of God has been established.<sup>2</sup> The observance or nonobservance of this rule will determine whether or not a person will be blessed with peace and mercy.

That rule is that no distinction may be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people when identifying the people of God. Paul's pronouncement of peace and mercy is denied to anyone who allows religious circumcision—more specifically, Jewishness—to be a criterion for identifying the people of God. This rule not only must serve

as a theoretical concept, but must be a way of living and walking (*stoicheo*) in this world.<sup>3</sup> No distinction may be made between Jew and Gentile in identifying God's people. This perspective must be maintained tenaciously despite contrary opinions that may arise, according to Paul's injunction.<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that Paul's phrase, "the Israel of God," must be evaluated. Two understandings would appear at first glance to fit the context. But perhaps more importantly, a third understanding must be excluded, for it would contradict the canon or rule of behavior that Paul himself has just established. The phrase "Israel of God" cannot refer to the Jewish people as a community distinct from the Gentile world. For Paul has just established the rule that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision identifies anyone as belonging to the people

2 The word *canon* could refer to "the carpenter's or surveyor's line by which a direction is taken" (J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* [London: Macmillan and Co., 1881], 224). In modern parlance, a canon could be regarded as a "standard of measurement" to which all other measures must conform.

3 Says John Calvin, "The word *rule* denotes the regular and habitual course which all godly ministers of the gospel ought to pursue" ( *Commentaries on*

*the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948], 186).

4 Ibid.

## **GOD**

### I T S P E O P L E

of God. If the phrase "Israel of God" is understood to refer to the Jewish people, then Paul has pronounced his apostolic "peace and mercy" over a people regardless of their faith in Jesus Christ. That would flatly contradict Paul's whole argument throughout the letter to the Galatians and violate the canon he has just established.

Two other understandings of the phrase "the Israel of God" would appear at first to be suitable in the context. On the one hand, Paul may be using the phrase in a way similar to his employment of the term *Israel* in designating elect Jews as distinct from all those who are of Jewish descent. As he says elsewhere, "They are not all Israel which are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6 kjv). In accordance with this usage, "the Israel of God" would be the elect Jews.

However, the Greek word *kai* in Galatians 6:16 presents a

problem for this interpretation. From a grammatical perspective, the term may be legitimately translated in two ways, and both of them create problems if "the Israel of God" is understood as referring to the elect Jews.

First, the word *kai* may be understood as meaning

"and," as it usually does in the Greek New Testament. On

this understanding, Paul would be pronouncing his bene-

diction of peace first over "as many as" (that is, "all who") hold to the rule that the distinction between Jew and Gentile cannot serve as a basis for determining who is and who

is not to be reckoned among the people of God. But then

he would be extending that blessing to another category of

people, and that presents the problem. He would in effect

be violating the very rule that he himself has just estab-

lished by pronouncing his blessing over elect Jews who did

use circumcision to identify themselves as the people of

God. "The Israel of God" would be a group of people other

than all those who make it a practice never to regard a dis-

tinction between Jew and Gentile as a basis for identifying

the people of God. But this would have Paul contradicting

his own line of argument. It would include in his apostolic

**THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

blessing people who made the very distinction that Paul has just disallowed.<sup>5</sup>

The second possibility is to understand *kai* epexegetically (as explanatory), so that the phrase "even the Israel of God" would refer exclusively to *Jewish* believers who hold to Paul's rule as he has just set it down.<sup>6</sup> But this interpretation also has a problem that renders it unacceptable. Surely Paul does not intend to suggest that the only people holding to his rule are Jewish believers. Certainly he would include Gentile believers among those he intends to bless, particularly since his point has been to eliminate any distinction between Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Jesus. This interpretation also fails to satisfy the demands of the context. The expression "as many as walk according to this canon" cannot be interpreted in a minimalistic way, as though the only ones who accept this principle of nondistinction are Jewish believers. Instead, the context demands an inclusiveness for this phrase. "As many as walk ac-

5 Ernest de Witt Burton argues that "Israel" in the phrase refers to Jews, not to members of the Christian community. But since this particular Israel is more precisely defined as "the Israel of God," he concludes that it must refer not to all Jews, but to the elect Jews, who would include even those Jews "who had not seen the truth as Paul saw it" and so could not be included among those who walked according to the rule that no distinction may be made between Jew and Gentile (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921], 358).

But Paul would not have stated a rule as essential, and then in the same breath placed his blessing on those who deliberately violate that rule.

6 John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1869), 470-71, argues that "the Israel of God" refers to Jewish believers who may or may not be included in the group designated as

"as many as hold to this rule." However, it would seem quite unthinkable that Paul at the end of Galatians would pronounce his apostolic benediction on those who showed favoritism toward people who were marked externally as Jewish. It was for this very reason that he had opposed Peter to his face (Gal. 2:11); and he has just declared unequivocally once more that circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing in terms of the actual experience of redemption.

## **I T S P E O P L E 43**

**cording to this canon" have the peace and mercy of God spo-**

**ken over them, whether they be Jewish or Gentile believers. At the same time, anyone who denies this rule is walking contrary to the new covenant principle that has ended the distinction between Jew and Gentile once and for all.**

**The only explanation of Paul's phrase "the Israel of God" that satisfies the context as well as the grammar of the passage also begins by understanding the Greek conjunction *kai* as expegetical of "all those who walk according to this canon."**

**These people agree that no distinction is to be made between Jew and Gentile when it comes to identifying the people of God.**

**Following hard on that principle, Paul declares that the "new creation"—the new community within humanity brought into existence by the cross of Christ in its uniting of Jews and Gentiles into one new people of God—is the community that may be designated as "the Israel of God."<sup>7</sup> Combined into one body, they represent all those who refuse to distinguish between Jew and Gentile.<sup>8</sup>**

<sup>7</sup> Cf. William Pringle's quotation of Justin Martyr: "We, who have been brought to God by this crucified Christ, are the true spiritual Israel, and the seed of Judah, and of Jacob, and of Isaac, and of Abraham, whose

faith was attested and who was blessed by God, and called the father of many nations, while he was in [un] circumcision," in Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians*, 186, n. 1. Cf. also Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 225, where he says that the Israel of God "stands here not for the faithful converts from the circumcision alone, but for the spiritual

Israel generally, the whole body of believers whether Jew or Gentile; and thus *kai* is *epexegetic*, i.e., it introduces the same thing under a new aspect."

8 Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 224, states that the expression "as many as" includes all who refuse to distinguish among the re-

deemed on the basis of external considerations. Says Herman N. Ridder-

bos, "In view of what has gone before (*cf.* 3:29, 4:28, 29) we can hardly doubt that this *Israel of God* does not refer to the empirical, national Israel as an equally authorized partner *alongside of* the believers in Christ ('they who walk by this rule'), neither only to the believing part of the national

Israel, but to all the believers as the new Israel" ( *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956], 227). According to

#### 44 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

**In the end, only this explanation of the phrase suits the**

**grammar and the context of Paul's usage.<sup>9</sup> And what a dra-**

**matic restatement of the identity of God's people it represents!**

**The treasured phrase that has distinguished the people of God**

**from all others is now applied to the combination of Jews and**



**Gentiles who are justified by faith in Christ. As John Calvin**

**says, "In a word, he gives the appellation of *the Israel of God* to those whom he formally denominated the children of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:29), and thus includes all believers,**

**whether Jews or Gentiles, who were united into one church."**<sup>10</sup>

**This new body of people constitutes "the Israel of God."**<sup>11</sup> At

**the same time, any person who dares to identify any group of**

**people as the people of God on any other basis is excluded**

**from the treasured apostolic benediction of "peace and**

**mercy."**

**Both by its position in the sentence and by its word order,**

**this benediction receives a special emphasis.**<sup>12</sup> It might have

Frederic Rendall, " *kai* is not properly copulative here, but intensive.

Those who walk by the rule of the Spirit are declared to be indeed the

true Israel of God, not the Jews who have the name of Israel, but are re-

ally only children of Abraham after the flesh" (*The Expositor's Greek Testament* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 3:191).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the comment of G. K. Beale in a paper presented on November 20,

1998, at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society: "To

identify 'Israel' with only the ethnic nation would be introducing a new

idea into the letter: whereas Paul has throughout underscored unity

among redeemed Jews and Gentiles, it would seem, not only a new thought, but an odd notion to underscore at the end a blessing on Gentile and Jew separately" ("The Old Testament Background of 'Peace and Mercy' in Galatians 6:15-16," 3).

10 Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians*, 186.

11 It has been argued that the term *Israelis* never used by Paul to refer to Gentile believers. But in Romans 2:29 and Philippians 3:3, Paul indicates that

all believers in Christ, whether or not they are Jewish externally, are truly the Israel of God. This understanding of Paul's statements would hold unless all the recipients of these letters were Jews, which they were not

12 Eadie, *Commentary on Galatians*, 469.

#### **I T S P E O P L E 4 5**

been expected that "mercy" would be named first and then

"peace," since the experience of mercy opens up the possibility

of peace.<sup>13</sup> The most likely explanation for this reversal of

the expected order is that Paul is reflecting the language of the

Jewish prayer called the *Shemoneh Esre* The prayer reads in

part, "Grant *peace*, salvation, and blessing, grant favor, grace,

a ***nd*** *mercy* to us *and to all Israel*, thy people."<sup>15</sup> In this petition, the plea for peace precedes the prayer for mercy, exactly as

Paul presented the two elements of his benediction. Furthermore, the prayer is offered first "for us" and then for "all Israel," which provides the best explanation of Paul's exegetical use of *kai*, in which the term "Israel" is used to refer to all the people of God. Says Ridderbos, "The apostle is, in other words, making use of a relationship lying ready in his mind. It is a relationship, however, which in his preaching was given a new content because of the new development in the history of salvation."<sup>16</sup>

The drama associated with this redefinition of "the Israel of God" now becomes even more apparent. Paul, the Hebrew of the Hebrews, the learned Jewish Pharisee, the one steeped in the traditions of Judaism, transfers the customary benediction of Israel to the universal church of Jesus Christ, the new Israel of God.

This understanding of the people of God is quite different from the view that has been most common among ecclesiasti-

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Beale, "The Old Testament Background of 'Peace and Mercy' in Galatians 6:15-16," 4, contends that this Jewish prayer did not exist in a form

that would support Paul's wording until a later date. He proposes instead that Isaiah 54:10 provides the background for the Pauline benediction.

But see Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in*

*Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 321-22, for the relevant literature.

Betz concludes, "There is no certainty how old this benediction is, but in all likelihood it is at least as old as the time of Paul."

15 Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, 227.

16 Ibid.

#### 46 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

cal and government peoples. Contrary to so much modern thought, it is not those who distinguish between Jews and Gentiles who are blessed by God. Instead, those who maintain this distinction are the very ones who have been denied God's blessing.

#### **B. The Relation of Various Peoples**

#### **to the Land of Promise Today**

So, it may be asked, what conclusion may be reached concerning various categories of people as they relate to the geographical territory known as "the land of promise" today? Ear-

lier, three categories of people who are currently in the land were noted: (1) those who are externally related to God's redemptive covenant, (2) those who are internally related to God's redemptive covenant, and (3) those who are unrelated to God's redemptive covenant.

### 1. People Who Are (Only) Externally Related to God's Redemptive Covenant

First of all, consider how the redemptive promise of land relates to those people who are (only) externally related to God's redemptive covenant. These people would include professing Christians who have not been born from above. They might belong to any number of groups, including the liberal Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church, or the various Eastern Orthodox churches. Indeed, they might even belong to evangelical churches and yet not be new creations in Christ.

The claim of these people to the land goes only so far as religious sentiment may dictate. If the land of the Bible were actually a holy, consecrated land, then professing religious groups might make a distinctive claim on its territory. But Je-

Jesus himself taught that the hour was coming when people would worship neither in Samaria nor at Jerusalem (John

#### **I T S P E O P L E 47**

4:21). Because God in his very essence is a spirit, it is the worshiping of him in spirit and in truth rather than at a particular locale that defines true worship (v. 24). In a new covenant context, the place of worship is quite irrelevant. As a consequence, religious groups have no basis for claiming the land of the Bible as a necessity for their worship.

A second category of persons related externally to the covenant would be Jews who today claim a covenant relationship with God on the basis of the old covenant administration. They regard the covenant that God made with Abraham as still valid in the form in which it was originally administered. Do they have a legitimate claim to the land of the Bible?

Some of these people believe very strongly that the land belongs to them and their descendants in perpetuity by reason of God's covenant with Abraham. Some of them have taken up arms to see that this promise, as they understand it, is fulfilled.

A major problem with this position is that other people

have been present in this land, claiming it as their own, particularly since it had belonged to their families through previous generations.<sup>17</sup> Varying attitudes have been expressed toward these prior inhabitants of the land by those who believe that the land belongs in perpetuity to the Jews. First, it has been proposed that these people simply do not exist as a people. As Golda Meir has stated,

It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> As noted earlier, W. D. Davies, in *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), xv, refuses to deal with the problems raised by

other people who claim the same land. He chooses instead to deal only with the tradition of Israel's claim to the land.

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Colin Chapman, *Whose Promised Land?* (Herts, England: Lion Publishing, 1983), 168.

#### **48 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

The intent of this statement may have been merely to affirm that the people living in Palestine prior to the establish-

ment of the Jewish nation had not been shaped into a national community. But the statement actually goes beyond that point. The very existence of these people in the land is being denied. A similar attitude is found in the "brilliantly simple formulation" of Theodor Herzl: the claiming of the land by the Jews was simply a matter of "moving people without a home into a land without a people."<sup>19</sup>

A second attitude toward the people already in the land by those who claim that it belongs in perpetuity to the Jews is simply that the people already present must be displaced. By whatever means necessary, the land must be cleared so that it can be possessed by the Jews. Said David Ben-Gurion, who became the first prime minister of the state of Israel in 1948, "At the present time we speak of colonization, and only of colonization. It is our short-term objective. But it is clear that England belongs to the English, Egypt to the Egyptians and Judea to the Jews. In our country there is room only for Jews. We will say to the Arabs: "Move over"; if they are not in agreement, if they resist, we will push them by force."<sup>20</sup>



The same sentiment was expressed by Joseph Weitz, a Jewish government official responsible for Jewish colonization, in 1940: "It must be clear that there is no room for both peoples in this country."<sup>21</sup> This view says simply that the non-Jewish people must be removed from the land so that it can be occupied by its rightful owners, the Jews.

But should the Jewish people, quite apart from their lack of faith in the Messiah who has come, receive the blessings of

19 Ibid., 169.

20 Ibid., 49.

21 Ibid., 49.

#### **I T S P E O P L E 4 9**

the Messiah's reign if basic principles of justice are violated in the process? And if the land of the Bible belongs to participants in the new covenant, as some would hold, then it would belong to all who are the seed of Abraham by faith, whether Jews or Gentiles, Israelis or Palestinians (Gal. 3:26-29). The promises of redemption have never been offered to people without a true faith in the Messiah sent by God. In the past, those who did not exercise proper faith

were driven out of the land and regarded as "not [God's] people." On the other hand, any person who exercises true faith in the Messiah sent by God has been declared to be heir of all God's promises.

Recognizing the validity of a claim to the redemptive "land-promise" (however that promise may be understood) by a group of people who are identified in some way other than by faith in Jesus as the Christ inevitably involves a return to the shadowy realm of the old covenant provisions of redemption. Acceptance of this kind of claim would mean regression to the older typological forms of God's redemptive work. The recognition of a distinctive people who are the recipients of God's redemptive blessings and yet who have a separate existence apart from the church of Jesus Christ creates insuperable theological problems. Jesus Christ has only one body and only one bride, one people that he claims as his own, which is the true Israel of God. This one people is made up of Jews and Gentiles who believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

2. People Who Are Internally Related to God's Redemptive Covenant

Second, consider how the redemptive promise of the land applies to those who are internally related to God's redemptive covenant, whether they be Jewish or Gentile believers. The following principles should apply however a person may understand the fulfillment of the redemptive land-promise in the context of the new covenant.

Jewish Christians should recognize that Gentile Christians

### **5 0 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

can equally claim the promises of God. No special privileged position in terms of the possession of the promises can be carried over from the shadowy forms of the old covenant into the realities of the new covenant. To be sure, throughout redemptive history the Jew has a special *opportunity*, since he already has in his possession the light that comes through the law, the covenants, and the service of the tabernacle. But once they enter the new covenant, Jewish believers must recognize that Gentile believers have an equal claim to God's covenant blessings.

On the other hand, Gentile Christians must not minimize the significant role that Jewish believers have played and con-

tinue to play in the church of Jesus Christ. God has been faithful in bringing into the community of Christ those who are rich in the heritage of his ancient covenants.

### 3. People Who Are Unrelated to God's Redemptive Covenant

A third category of people in the land are those who are unrelated to the redemptive covenant of God. They would include secularists, Muslims, and adherents of other non-Christian religions. These people also put forward a claim to the land, or to portions of the land that pertain to their family, their community, and their work.

In considering their claim, the matter of civil justice must be faced. If a transfer of land takes effect, the question of proper compensation must be considered. Justice must be done. At all times, both Jewish and Gentile Christians must maintain the cause of the right. Our God cannot be honored properly with anything less.

It is true that the circumstances of war create certain unique dimensions for the question of land possession. "To the victor belong the spoils" is a proverb of worldly wisdom, the

truth of which is difficult to deny. But Scripture also answers with its own proverb of undeniable truth: "All who take up the sword shall perish with the sword" (Matt. 26:52\*).

ITS PEOPLE 51

### **Conclusion**

So how are these various groups to relate to one another with regard to possessing the land? The slant given to this question will determine the nature of the response. Is the question, "How *should* these various groups relate to one another?" or "How *will* these various groups relate to one another?"

Many prognostications may be offered as to how this critical drama will work itself out. But no one knows precisely how future events will develop.

Admonitions of love and understanding may be agreed upon by all. But in this case, concrete details must be considered. A few proposals might be offered, directed specifically to believers in Jesus as their sovereign Messiah:

1. All Christians should agree that all people in the land of the Bible should be free to worship according to their conscience without fear of reprisal. This freedom should include

the right of each religious group to communicate its faith to others.

2. All Christians should work for justice wherever questions of the ownership of real property in the land of the Bible arise. If land is taken, the previous owner should receive fair remuneration for, or replacement of, that land.

3. All Christians should reject violence or revenge as the way of conducting relationships. In all cases, peaceful negotiation should be preferred to armed conflict.

In the end, Christian brothers using their corporate wisdom may be able to devise concrete steps that might lead to an outpouring of the blessing of God in the land that always has had so much significance to all the peoples of the world. In this design, all should be united in faith, hope, and love.

### THREE THE ISRAEL OF GOD

its worship

#### **Introduction**

People in today's secular world ordinarily think very little of priests and priesthods, of sacrifice, ritual, and worship. But whenever desperation strikes a man, he casts about for some-

one who can get aid for him from the Almighty. Sooner or later everyone wants to reach out to the resources found only in the Creator. Despair may seize him, as it did King Saul, so that he resorts to a witch. Or a person may be overpowered with a sense of guilt, as was David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba, until he acknowledges his guilt before God's prophet (Ps. 51). Everyone eventually turns to a prophet, a priest, or a witch, or to prayer, sacrifice, or ritual. Israel was unique among peoples of the world in that God himself appointed a priesthood for the nation—with accompanying laws of sacrifice and ritual—which carefully defined the right way to approach God. The laws of the Levitical priesthood, along with its festival days and sacrifices, contained touches of glamour and glory. Colorful robes, impressive ceremonies, feasts, washings, the waving of recently harvested grain, and the chanting of divine benedictions all contributed to the allurements of the priestly order of the old covenant. So it should not be surprising that throughout the centuries the Jewish people have had difficulty relinquishing these

## 54 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

treasured ceremonies. They all contributed to making them feel right and good in the presence of God. Furthermore, when the new covenant came along with its minimal ritual, it seemed as though something significant had been lost. Following hard on the heels of the birth of Christianity was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70. Now no proper, God-appointed place existed on the face of the earth to carry out the rituals of the old covenant. This circumstance has prevailed for the past two thousand years.



Some groups of Christians and Jews have expressed the sentiment that the time has come for the erection of a new temple and the reinstatement of a Levitical priesthood to offer sacrifices. With the repossession of the land by the Jews and the establishment of the state of Israel, expectations have been rising. Sentiment has even been growing to remove the Muslim Dome of the Rock from the peak of Mount Zion so that a third temple can be built there.

Sympathy for the plight of religious Jews who have no place to offer their sacrifices is understandable. Have these people not suffered enough? Should they not be free to worship God in their own way?

Yet the new covenant documents say something about the value of these rituals, whether or not they are renewed. Once Jesus has been acknowledged as the promised Messiah, the old covenant rituals must be reevaluated.

The letter to the Hebrews shows that its author had a special concern in this area as he interacted with the struggles of Jewish converts. He fully appreciated the old covenant

arrangements, for he recited the divine sanction placed on the tabernacle's construction: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mount" (Heb. 8:5 NKJV) . But he also had a deep understanding of the superiority of the new covenant, its new temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. In particular, its priesthood was uniquely significant to him, for it had to do directly with the person and ministry of Jesus. This interest in the priesthood of Christ and its impact on

I T S W O R S H I P 55

**the worship practices of the people of the new covenant manifests itself throughout the book of Hebrews. But the extensive treatment of the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek, as mentioned in Psalm 110:4, provides a special focal point for the writer's analysis of this subject. The present chapter will concentrate on his extensive development of the implications of Psalm 110:4 regarding priesthood and worship for the new covenant as it is found in Hebrews 7, which is the climactic point of the book.**

**The writer begins to discuss the Messiah's priesthood after describing the danger facing his readers, for this danger made**

necessary a ready access to the Almighty. A whole generation of Israelites fell in the wilderness without entering the rest of God, and he did not want his contemporaries to have the same experience. They faced the same danger in their own day—and the church continues to face it today. God's oath that the Israelites would not enter into his rest could apply to those who profess to be God's people today. For "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight" (Heb. 4:13). Under scrutiny by the Almighty, the believer today must avail himself fully of the high priesthood of Christ. Only the constant work of a priestly mediator between the sinner and his holy God can guarantee the realization of full salvation. Jesus is that priestly mediator. He has gone into the heavens, he can empathize with our weaknesses, he presents his atoning sacrifice of himself, and he provides grace and mercy in our time of need (Heb. 4:14-16).

From this introductory point, the writer develops the nature of Messiah's priesthood from the old covenant perspective, bringing his discussion quickly to Psalm 110:4, which speaks of the Messiah's priesthood "according to the order of

**Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:1-10). But then he recognizes a major problem in proceeding any further. His readers have remained spiritual babes far too long. Their immaturity in being "slow to learn," in failing to develop the capacity to distinguish good from evil, provides a major obstacle to his proceeding any fur-**

## **56 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

ther with this exalted subject. If they cannot comprehend the life-changing truth he was about to present, what point would there be in his going any further?

The same situation prevails in much of the church today.

All kinds of heresies, sins, and immoralities have taken up residence in the contemporary church. Because of spiritual immaturity, the church is not capable of dealing with these problems. As a consequence, many confessing Christians cannot seem to "stay out of trouble."

So what will the writer do? Having brought them (and us) to the tantalizing brink of initiation into the deeper truths about our messianic high priest, will he now drop the subject and move on to other things more suitable for his readers' level of spiritual maturity? Or will he proceed to de-

velop this precious doctrine, knowing his readers cannot assimilate its significance despite their need for it? Will he reach out with the fond hope that somewhere along the way his readers will "catch on" to the significance of what he is discussing?

This wise man of God chooses to follow neither of these options. Bold man that he is, he stops at this point and deals with the problem of spiritual immaturity that confronts him. So in chapter 6 he admonishes his readers to leave the elementary teachings behind them and to stop their childish quibbling about the basics (Heb. 6:1-2). God permitting, this they will do, right then and there (v. 3). Turning away from childishness that obstructs spiritual growth does not necessarily take a long time. Growth may take time, but one can adopt a healthier attitude right away.

Having offered his admonition, the writer then reinforces it with a warning (vv. 4-8). A person cannot simply keep tasting the good things of God without properly absorbing them, or they will become a curse to him. Good soil will produce a good crop when the rains come, but the same rain will pro-

duce thorns in thorny soil. A fruitless soil faces the constant danger of being cursed. So his hearers must take heed right

## ITS WORSHIP 57

now so that he can move them on to more fruitful responses to the rich truths about their messianic high priest. Otherwise, the very teaching they now are hearing could become the occasion for their falling into deeper sin.

To make sure that this transition to readiness for mature growth in Christ is taking place right, the writer adds a strong word of encouragement to his admonition and his warning (vv. 9-20). Even though he speaks in threatening ways, he is confident of the positive response he will get from them. God will never forget their work, their love, their continuing helpfulness toward others. They simply must be patient, as was Abraham. God assured him with an oath that he would inherit all the promises despite his long wait. Our hope is just as sure, if not more so, since in fulfillment of the divine oath Jesus has been inducted into the high priesthood and has entered the inner sanctuary. He will remain in this position as "a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (v. 20

NASB).

Now the writer is ready to proceed with the development of his principal subject.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 7 then becomes the pivotal point of the book, with its focus directed to an exposition of Psalm 110:4, "The Lord has sworn, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' " (RSV) .<sup>2</sup> This chapter represents one of the fullest expositions of an Old Testament passage that can be found anywhere in the New Testament. The passage may be outlined as follows:

The "unique and all-sufficient high priesthood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" is, according to Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, "central to the doctrine of this epistle, previously introduced but then interrupted at 5:10" (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 236).

"The heart of the doctrinal section of the Epistle to the Hebrews lies in the discussion of the high priesthood of Christ recorded in chapter 7. All of the preceding material in this chapter [sic] is introductory" (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 183).

## **5 8 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

A. "This Melchizedek" (vv. 1-10)

B. "After the order of" Melchizedek (vv. 11-15)

C. You are a priest "forever" (vv. 16-19)

D. "The Lord has sworn" you are a priest (vv. 20-25)

E. "You are a priest" (vv. 26-28)

The challenge of the writer's exposition continues into the present. The church of today must lay aside its spiritual ineptness and grow in its understanding of the significance of Christ's high priestly work for its worship. A verse-by-verse exposition may serve as the most effective way to recover a message that has been largely lost.

**A. "This Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:1-10)**

*For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, the one who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him . . . (Heb. 7:1\*).*

The opening reference to "this Melchizedek" naturally leads to the question, Which Melchizedek? Since only one historical person named Melchizedek appears in Scripture, it would seem obvious that the writer must be referring to Abraham's contemporary.<sup>3</sup> However, the designation has a fuller significance than might at first be imagined, for he refers not



only to the historical figure in Genesis 14, but also to the

3 The Qumran document 11QMelch demonstrates that quite a lot of speculation concerning this mysterious figure was going on in New Testament times. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 238, indicates that in this document Melchizedek appears as "the eschatological deliverer cast in the role of champion of the faithful Jewish remnant who have not defiled themselves by serving Belial." In addition, the Maccabean leader Simon resembled Melchizedek in holding the two offices of priest and king, the "leader and high priest in perpetuity until a true prophet should appear" (1 Macc. 14:41ff., as cited by Hughes, p. 239).

#### I T S W O R S H I P 59

Melchizedek of Psalm 110:4. In other words, the writer is constructing a composite picture of Melchizedek. He is indeed the priest-king who confronted Abraham. But he is also the messianic figure celebrated by David in Psalm 110, who is currently seated at God's right hand not only to intercede but also to rule. This drawing together of more than one reference in the old covenant Scriptures is a major stylistic characteristic of the writer to the Hebrews. This capacity to sweep across the whole of the Scriptures and order the entirety of God's truth on a specific subject so that it illuminates the climactic state of the

new covenant era is demonstrated in the author's treatment of the sabbath principle in Scripture. He moves easily from God's rest on the seventh day, to the failure of Joshua to give Israel its rest, to the denial of rest to rebellious people in every generation (Ps. 95), to the rest that still remains for the people of God (Heb. 3:11-4:11). In short, the author unpacks the full biblical-theological significance of "Melchizedek."

Melchizedek is immediately identified by the writer as "king of Salem" and "priest of God Most High." He combines in himself the offices of both king and priest. In later Israelite history, this combining of offices was disallowed. But the author of Psalm 110 wanted to stress that the Messiah would hold both of these offices, just like Melchizedek. The Messiah would "sit at God's right hand" in a kingly role (v. 1\*), even as he functioned also as "a priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (v. 4 **NASB**) .

But Melchizedek was distinctive not only as a king-priest. He also stood out because his kingly role and his priestly office were both exercised in prominent domains. He was king of Salem, which was bound for redemptive-historical significance

as (Jeru)salem. Furthermore, among the individuals to whom he ministered was Abraham, the father of the faithful. Abraham had proved himself to be a man of distinction by overcoming the kings who had invaded their territory and recovering all their booty. Yet mysterious King Melchizedek blessed Abraham the father of the faithful rather than Abraham's

## **60 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

blessing Melchizedek. Normally the conquering hero would distribute blessings as he returned with the spoils of war.<sup>4</sup> But in this case, the victorious warrior received a blessing from this previously obscure person. Melchizedek was evidently a man of prominence, and so could serve as a fitting figure for subsequent theological development throughout redemptive history, first in the Psalms and then in the Scriptures of the new covenant. He was also distinctive in his day as a man of personal piety. As Calvin says,

It was doubtless no common thing that in a country abounding in the corruptions of so many superstitions, a man was found who preserved the pure worship of God; for on one side he was nigh to Sodom and Go-

morrah, and on the other to the Canaanites, so that he was on every side encompassed by ungodly men.<sup>5</sup>

This man also exercised the priestly office with a prophetic dimension. Several aspects of his person made him able to serve appropriately as a prophetic type of Christ, as the subsequent verses in Hebrews show.

*... to whom also Abraham divided a tithe of all his spoils. First of all his name may be interpreted as meaning "king of righteousness." But then he also was king of Salem, which means "king of peace" (Heb. 7:2\*).*

Abraham voluntarily paid to Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils he had reclaimed after his pursuit of the eastern kings who had kidnapped his nephew Lot. The writer sees Abra-

<sup>4</sup> Says Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 187, "Abraham had reached a pinnacle in his leadership career in the southern part of

Canaan" by defeating the coalition of kings. Yet he recognizes Melchizedek as worthy of receiving the best spoils of war.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 155.

I T S W O R S H I P 61

ham's payment of a tithe to Melchizedek as a significant mat-

ter. In this context, the writer exposit the significance of the name and person of Melchizedek.

The name Melchizedek literally means "my king is righteous," and the writer sees significance in this designation in accordance with the prominence attached to names in the biblical age. Melchizedek was a righteous king in contrast to the oppressive kings who appeared from the earliest days (cf. Gen. 10:8-12).

The second designation of Melchizedek is "king of peace."

This observation derives from the name of the city or the territory that he governed, which ultimately received the designation 'Jeru-Salem," meaning "city or foundation of peace."<sup>6</sup>

This designation of his place of rule as a city of peace may be regarded as a commendation of Melchizedek. The place where he ruled was blessed with peace.

So the first aspect of Melchizedek to be noted is that he was a believing and righteous king, who brought peace to his domain. He appears as a godly leader, and in the history of redemption he could be appropriately considered a forerunner of the coming messianic Savior.

*Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he continues as a priest forever (Heb. 7:3\*).*

6 For a discussion of the identity of Salem with Jerusalem, see Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 246. Hughes notes that Jerome indicates that all Christians of his day equated the two places. But Hughes rejects the idea that the word had a hybrid etymology with the Greek "holy" (*hieros*) preceding the Hebrew "peace" (*shalom*). For a full discussion of the relation of the two places and the etymology of the term, see

James Calvin DeYoung, *Jerusalem in the New Testament* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1960), 5-25. DeYoung cautiously notes that the etymology of the term "presents very difficult and perhaps insolvable problems" (p. 5). But he proposes that the Hebrew name arose as a combination of the roots *yrh* and *shim*, meaning "foundation of peace" (pp. 6-7).

## **6 2 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

The statement that Melchizedek was "without father, without mother," if taken literally, could lead to the conclusion that he must have been a preincarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity. But it is much more likely that the writer of Hebrews is noting that Melchizedek appears in Genesis—a book that focuses on people's origins—without any tracing of

his genealogy. Since Melchizedek appears in redemptive history in this unique manner, it is appropriate that he is presented by the writer of Hebrews as having been "made *like* the Son of God." In this unique way, Melchizedek appropriately depicts a permanent priest. Having neither beginning of days nor end of life, he continues in unbroken fashion as one who has immediate access to God.

Up to this point the writer has drawn only from the historical record of Melchizedek. But he is anticipating the way in which Psalm 110:4 will present him as "a priest forever." As a priest who "remains forever," this Melchizedek will fit in a different category than the priests established under the Mosaic covenant.

*Now consider just how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tithe of the best of his spoils (Heb. 7:4\*).*

Melchizedek's greatness is measured by the respect paid to him by Abraham.<sup>7</sup> The great patriarch of Israel gave him not

<sup>7</sup> Rabbinical scholars, apparently before the end of the first century A.D., introduced the idea that Melchizedek was Noah's eldest son, Shem. This

correlation would have the effect of minimizing the significance of Abra-

ham's paying him a tithe, since it might be expected that he would show such respect to Shem, from whom he was descended. This tradition was endorsed by Jerome and Luther. But Calvin rejected the theory, noting that God would not have designated a man of such prominence as Shem by a different name without indicating the connection. In opposition to this theory it has also been noted that Melchizedek is presented in both the Old Testament and the New Testament without genealogy, while Shem's genealogy is thoroughly traced. For the discussion, see Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 244.

#### I T S W O R S H I P 63

merely a tithe, but the choicest, the best of the spoils (*ek ton akrothinion*). As honorable as the position of Abraham was, Melchizedek ranked above him. The Jews of New Testament times might boast about having Abraham as their father. But Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, and was not even a Jew. The choicest of the spoils of war Abraham turned over to him, acknowledging him to be God's emissary on earth to receive his gifts. Is it possible? Can it be? Could a Gentile be presented in Scripture as greater than the greatest of the Jews in the Old Testament? Yes, it is possible. It is true. The Gentile blesses the Jew.



Considering the role of Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of Christ, a further point may be noted. If the shadow is greater than the patriarch, how much greater is the reality! If the priesthood of Melchizedek was greater than the Levitical priesthood, how much greater still must Christ himself be as a priest!<sup>8</sup>

*Now the sons of Levi who receive the office of priest have a commandment in the law to collect a tithe from the people, even from those who are their brothers, although they have come from the loins of Abraham. But this one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tithe from Abraham, and blessed the one who had the promises (Heb. 7:5-6\*).*

The brief interchange between Abraham the father of the Levitical priesthood and the priest Melchizedek indicates a superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the priesthood of Levi.<sup>9</sup> The one who was not reckoned according to the ge-

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 251, quotes Herveus (twelfth century): "If Melchizedek, who was a sign and shadow, is preferred to Abraham and to all the levitical priests, how much more Christ, who is the truth and the substance! ... If a type of Christ is greater than he who has the promises, how much more so is Christ himself!"

<sup>9</sup> This comparison of the two priesthoods is structured grammatically by

the Greek *men . . . de* structure. "On the one hand" (*men*), the Levitical priesthood had the law's authorization to collect tithes from the people.

"On the other hand" (*de*), Melchizedek collected a tithe from Abraham, and blessed the one having the promises.

#### **6 4 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

nealogy of Abraham collected tithes from Abraham himself and blessed him. Abraham had been promised that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed, and yet Melchizedek blessed him. This fact establishes the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the priesthood of Levi, which descended from Abraham. Melchizedek stood outside Abraham's genealogy, and by receiving his tithe and blessing him, he showed himself to be the contact with God that the patriarch needed. This ancient fact eventually proved to have significant consequences for future generations. If another priest should ever arise who would be appointed according to the order of Melchizedek, he would rank higher than the Levitical priesthood.

*But apart from any controversy the lesser is blessed by the greater (Heb. 7:7\*).*

The person bestowing a blessing is in a position that is su-

perior to that of the person receiving it. A millionaire may have to borrow a quarter from a shiftless bum for a phone call if he has just been robbed, but in that situation the bum is in a superior position. Similarly, when Abraham received a blessing from Melchizedek, he held a lesser position in God's plan of redemption than did Melchizedek. Abraham may have been the wealthier man and even the specified heir of God's redemptive promises. But Melchizedek blessed him. This fact indicates that in gaining access to God through worship, Melchizedek was Abraham's superior.

*And on the one hand, men who die receive tithes, but on the other hand, witness is borne that he continues to live (Heb. 7:8\*).*

One priesthood was staffed by men who died, while the other was represented by a person concerning whom it was witnessed that he lived forever. This witness is brought forward by the fact that no father or mother, nor end of life, is mentioned

I T S W O R S H I P 65

with respect to Melchizedek. As a consequence, this man can serve well as a figure for an eternal priesthood.

*So it might be said that through Abraham even Levi, who received*

*tithes, paid a tithe, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him (Heb. 7:9-10\*).*

The reasoning of the writer may seem strange to the modern mind. How can the action of a person in one generation be reckoned as the action of another person in a subsequent generation? As strange as it may seem, this concept fits the pattern of biblical representations. Adam acted as the representative for the whole human race, and the high priest of Israel acted for the whole nation on the Day of Atonement. In a similar way, Abraham acted for Aaron in acknowledging the superiority of Melchizedek.

This superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham might create difficulties in the mind of some Jews today. How could their great forefather offer a token of submission to a Gentile? An easy escape from this problem might come through asserting that Melchizedek was a Shemite, as was Abraham. But nothing whatever is said concerning the genealogy of Melchizedek, which is a fact that deserves special notice in a book that otherwise centers on genealogies.

The point must be acknowledged. Nothing inherent in the

descendants of Abraham makes them superior to other worshipers of God. Indeed, the text indicates that the relationship between Abraham the father of Israel and Melchizedek the pious Gentile should be understood as having a permanent significance. Not just in this one incident, but throughout subsequent history, the order of Melchizedek remains superior to any priesthood of the descendants of Abraham.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 253 and n. 11.

Hughes shows that the sequence of finite verbs in the perfect tense confirms an ongoing relationship.

## **6 6 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

Conclusion to Hebrews 7:1—10

The writer carefully restrains himself up to this point from going beyond the historical record of Melchizedek in Scripture. He limits himself to matters that may be deduced from it. Furthermore, even though his reasoning may at first appear quite strange, it actually makes good sense. The main point is that Melchizedek stands above Abraham and his descendants. From this conclusion, a number of points will follow. But most significantly, the writer has demonstrated from the Old Testa-

ment that a priesthood exists in redemptive history that is superior to the priesthood of Levi. That superior priesthood is embodied in the person of Melchizedek.

Now the question may be posed, What would happen if another priest should arise according to the order of Melchizedek? How would it affect the people's approach to God? How would it affect the Levitical priesthood? The writer considers this prospect next.

### **B. "After the Order of" Melchizedek (Heb. 7:11-15)**

Since the Reformation, Protestant Christians have lost virtually all awareness of the significance of a priestly "order." The term as it describes priesthood refers to the law or the set of rules governing a particular group of priests. In the present case, a comparison is being made between two priestly orders as they are found in the Scriptures of the old covenant.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The writer focuses on the "perfection" (*teleosis*) achieved by these contrasting priestly orders. Here the term refers not so much to moral perfection as to the perfection that would be required for a person to approach God in life and worship without fear of being consumed for his

corruption. Long after Abraham, the Mosaic Law provided rules and directions for sacrifice that involved the Levitical priests. This priesthood with its laws was intended to draw people to God, opening the way for safe access into his presence.

#### ITS W O R S H I P 67

*Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron ? (Heb. 7:11\*).*

The priests of the postexilic period made it quite plain that only people who could prove their descent from Aaron could serve as priests (cf. Ezra 2:61-63; Neh. 7:63-65). Yet all this care was to no avail in making the people of Israel perfect. If the Levitical priestly order had effectively carried out its intended purpose, then Melchizedek, who lived five hundred years before Levi, would have been regarded merely as a curious phenomenon in the ancient history of Israel. But instead, this unique person, who never fostered a line of priests himself, appears again in a psalm written by David. So why

does he reappear, and this time in a context that suggests a priestly "order" to follow his priestly rule? As the writer says, "What further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?" (Heb. 7:11 NASB). The reason was that "perfection," the total consecration of the people appropriate for a proper approach to God, was never achieved through the Levitical priesthood. It might have been expected that perfection would come through the Levitical priesthood, for in connection with it (*gar ep' autes*) the people were brought into the life ordered by divine law (*nenomothetetai*). Yet despite its divine origin and its comprehensive instructions, it could not bring perfection to the people. Their approach to God was still faulty. So a different priestly order had to arise. But how was it to arise? Psalm 110:4 points to the source of this second priesthood. It would come through a messianic man who could be compared to Melchizedek, the ancient priest of God Most High. David's Lord, the Messiah who was to sit at God's right hand, would also be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.



## **68 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

*For when a change of the priestly order occurs, of necessity a change of the law must also take place (Heb. 7:12\*).*

A change in priesthood is not a simple matter. The order of the priesthood is defined by a governing law. So if a different priestly order takes effect, a different law must be put in place to govern the way in which it will function. A change in the order of the priesthood would alter the whole way in which worship is ordered.

Any person who would function as a priest in the line of Melchizedek could not assume the priestly office according to the order of Levi, for the simple reason that he was not a Levite. So if Psalm 110 anticipates the appearance of a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, then a whole new legal structure would have to be put into effect. This new law of the new priestly order would presumably make "perfection" possible for the people of God in a way in which it was not possible under the old law and the Levitical priesthood.

This change of the priestly order has significant implications for the worship practices of the people of the new covenant. The laws of the Levitical priesthood involved the continual offering

of sacrifices in association with specified festivals and holy days.

The ritual of these cultic celebrations was not complete without the accompanying sacrifices. But if a new priestly order supersedes the Levitical order, then the framework for the offering of the required sacrifices has come to an end. As a consequence, the festivals and holy days cannot be carried out according to the law of the Levitical priesthood. The entire manner of worship must be changed when the priestly order changes.

*For the one concerning whom these things are spoken is a member of another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord has descended from Judah, and concerning this tribe Moses said nothing about priests (Heb. 7:13-14\*).*

The evidence for the appearance of a new priestly order derives from the fact that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah.

I T S W O R S H I P

69

If he is a priest, he must belong to a different priesthood, for Moses said nothing about priests coming from Judah.

The writer stresses this point, since people would not have been accustomed to thinking of priests who did not belong to

the tribe of Levi. Since the Levitical priesthood was established under Moses, the people had known no other priesthood. No one but a Levite would have presumed to serve as a priest.

It might then be concluded that Jesus Christ could not be a priest. How could he serve as a priest if he did not arise "according to the [priestly] order" of Levi? Jesus could be a priest only if God had set up another priestly order. That divine ordering appears in Psalm 110:4, which finds its historical fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ.

The priesthood mentioned in Psalm 110 is clearly not according to the order of Levi. The opening verse of this psalm says that the promised Messiah was to sit at God's right hand, and the expectation of the old covenant community was that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah. Since this messianic king is depicted as holding the office of priest as well as the office of king, his priesthood cannot be Levitical.

*And this fact becomes more abundantly clear, if another priest actually arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:15\*).*

The writer is trying his best to contain his remarks to "self-evident" things.<sup>12</sup> This idea of a new priestly order was not only

12 The word used in verse 14 is *prodelon*. It occurs only here in the New Testament and means "evident." It is evident or obvious that Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, and that tribe was always associated with kingship, not

priesthood. The word in verse 15 is *katadelon*. It also occurs only here in the New Testament, and it suggests the writer's intent to deal with self-evident

facts. He underscores the self-evident character of the point he is making by using the expression *perissoteron eti*, meaning "more abundantly" evident. It becomes even more evident that a new priesthood has developed if another priest actually arises after the likeness of Melchizedek. With the coming of Jesus, that is exactly what happened.

## **70 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

a hypothetical possibility presented in Psalm 110:4. The coming of Jesus Christ made it an actual fact.

So a new priestly order has arisen in history. But how does this new order affect the functioning of the old priesthood?

Could the two orders function side by side, or does one exclude the other?

Already the writer has made the point that a new priesthood involves a new law. So if a new priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek has been established, then a new

priestly law has come into effect, and the Levitical priesthood is over. This point is driven home in the next section of the writer's argument, in which he stresses that the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek lasts forever.

### **C. You Are a Priest "Forever" (Heb. 7:16-19)**

*He has become a priest, not by fulfilling a requirement regarding fleshly descent, but by the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7:16\*).*

The priesthoods deriving from Levi and Melchizedek were both established by God. But one of them was severely limited because it was administered by men who perished. As a consequence, there could be no long-term continuity. But the priesthood of Melchizedek did not have this limitation. In a manner of speaking, the first priest of this order never died. That is, no record remains of his decease. But even more significantly, the second member of this priestly order does actually live forever, which makes a drastic difference in terms of priestly service. He has become a priest by virtue of the power of "an indestructible life." This expression is unique in the literature of the new covenant.

Because of the indestructible life of this high priest ac-

according to the order of Melchizedek, there is never any interruption of his intercession. By the power invested in an indestructible life, he functions forever as a priest for his people.

#### I T S W O R S H I P 71

*For the testimony is borne, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek " (Heb. 7:17\*).*

The quotation from Psalm 110:4 is not introduced with the common formula found in the Gospels ("that it might be fulfilled"), nor with the formula used most regularly by Paul ("it is written"). It is not even introduced in the usual manner of the writer to the Hebrews himself ("God says," "he says," "the Holy Spirit says"). Instead, this quotation is introduced by the unique formula "it is witnessed" or "the testimony is borne" (*martyreitai*). What might have led the writer to use this particular phrase to introduce this quotation?

It may be assumed that a close attention to the text of Scripture itself led the writer to coin this special formula. In the context of Psalm 110, the words being quoted are introduced as the quotation of an oath uttered by God. So, appropriately, "it is witnessed" or "testimony is borne" that God has sworn these things.

According to the testimony cited, this priest is remarkable in comparison with all Levitical priests because a divine oath has established him as a priest *forever*. Because this priesthood is based on an indestructible life, it continues without ever ending. This different priestly order produces a priest who lives "forever," as realized in the resurrected Jesus Christ, whose life continues without interruption so that he can intercede continually as a priest for his people. Nothing less than the oath of God confirms this unique position.

*For on the one hand there is a setting aside of the former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is the introduction of a better hope, through which we draw near to God (Heb. 7:18—19\*).*

The drastic nature of these expressions is often overlooked. The whole priestly order of Israel that had functioned for the previous 1,500 years, along with its sacrifices and cere-

## **7 2 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

monies, is said to be finished. If the temple was still standing when Hebrews was written, the writer is saying that the temple rituals no longer had any role in bringing men to God.

Today many devout Jews still long for a restoration of the old system. Nothing could be better, so far as some adherents to Judaism and their supporters are concerned, than the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices of the old order. Yet that order could never perfect the worshiper. Otherwise sacrifices would not have needed to be offered continually.

But the resurrection of Christ and his ascension to the right hand of the Father bring in a better hope. Although we cannot see these realities with our eyes, we understand and believe that the Lord is at the right hand of God interceding for us.

By this "better hope," we are drawing near to God.<sup>13</sup> The vitality of this new access to God is emphasized by the use of a verb in the present tense: we "are drawing near." We are continually coming near to the very presence of God through Jesus Christ, our priestly mediator.

The most drastic conclusion to be drawn from this perpetual priesthood of Christ is that it sets aside the former priesthood, temple, and sacrifices. The weakness and *uselessness* of the old way is exposed by the perfections of the new priest-



hood.

The significance of this point for today needs to be fully appreciated. No return to the old form of temple, priesthood, and ritual is possible. The perfections of Christ's priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary of the new covenant can never be replaced or augmented by the weaknesses of the shadowy, temporally and spatially limited service of the old covenant. If

13 Both the word "better" and the phrase "are drawing near" are key concepts to the writer, as is the term "perfect" in the previous phrase. Of the eighteen times the adjective *better* occurs in the New Testament, twelve are found in Hebrews. The contrast between the covenants is not one of "bad" over against "good." Instead, it is "good" over against "better."

#### I T S W O R S H I P 73

a third temple were ever erected in Jerusalem on Mount Zion, it would not open a way of access to God. The priesthood of Jesus Christ in the heavenly temple of the new covenant is perpetual and eternal, and none of the earthly forms of the old covenant can replace or supplement it.

#### **D. "The Lord Has Sworn" You Are a Priest**

**(Heb. 7:20-25)**

*And clearly it did not happen without an oath. For on the one hand*

*they had become priests without an oath, but on the other hand he (became a priest) with an oath by the one who said to him, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever' " (Heb. 7:20-21\*);*

What was it that brought about the revival of the idea of a priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek one thousand years after its appearance in the days of Abraham?<sup>14</sup>

David, the author of Psalm 110, was busy composing psalms and collecting building materials for the temple. Why would he have introduced the idea of a superior priestly order that might seem to question the legitimacy of Israel's approach to God under the Levitical order?

<sup>14</sup> The structure of these verses indicates that a parenthesis runs from the second half of verse 20 through verse 21. So the main thought of vv. 20-22 reads, "And in view of the fact [*kath' hoson*] that it [the declaration concerning a revived priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek] was

not without an oath ... by so much more has Jesus become the surety of a better covenant." That is, because an oath was involved in the establishment of the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek (which was not the case for the priesthood of Levi), that priesthood is that much bet-

ter, due to its greater surety. For God does not normally swear, since his word by itself is sufficient. But in this case, for the sake of the weakness of men, he took an oath. That God took an oath shows the superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek.

#### **74 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

Psalm 110 itself may provide a clue to the answer. In verse 1, the Covenant Lord (*Yahveh*) speaks to King David's Lord (*Adonai*) and invites him to remain seated at his right hand until all his enemies are subdued. Clearly David's Lord (*Adonai*) is the Messiah to come, since no other human figure could have stood as Lord over King David. But then this messianic figure is described as a priest as well (v. 4). Perhaps in this light David came to understand that the offices of both king and priest would be fulfilled by the coming Messiah. So the concept of a new order of priesthood that would be appropriate for a royal Messiah naturally found its fulfillment in a revival of the old order of Melchizedek, which also combined these two offices.

The association of a divine oath with the priestly order of Melchizedek firmly establishes it as a better priesthood. For although a great deal of ceremony was involved in the establish-

ment of the Levitical priesthood, nothing is said about a divine oath. Yet as David's kingly office was confirmed by God's own oath, so the messianic office of priest is also confirmed by an oath.<sup>15</sup>

The divine oath is strengthened even further by the addition of a negative statement: "The Lord has sworn *and will not change his mind.*" Nothing will deter God from his intent to establish a merciful and faithful high priest after the order of Melchizedek. A law might be changed, but this oath, which included the affirmation that God would never change his mind, will last forever. As has well been noted,

It is a matter of exceptional significance that the covenant with Abraham and the declaration concerning the priestly order of Melchizedek were both con-

<sup>15</sup> The word *oath* occurs only four times in Hebrews, all in this immediate context: Heb. 7:20 (twice), 21, 28. It gives the idea of strengthening a commitment. Although the New Testament passages that refer to a divine oath are not numerous, it is plain that God intends to keep in the new covenant the oaths he took under the old covenant (cf. Luke 1:23; Acts 2:30; Heb. 6:17). God holds to his word, but particularly to his oaths.

## ITS WORSHIP 75

firmed by God with an oath, for under these two heads all the gracious promises and prophecies which precede the coming of Christ are gathered, and with the coming of Christ both the evangelical covenant and the evangelical priesthood burst into fulfillment.<sup>16</sup>

So the participants in the new covenant can be greatly encouraged. A divine oath has established their mediator in a perpetual office. The word "forever" includes the concept of unbroken succession, which is one of the main points the writer intends to stress. The high priest appointed by God for the new covenant intercedes for his people without interruption. No matter how great the seeming weakness of his people may be, this high priestly mediator is always at the right hand of the Father, interceding constantly for the well-being of his people. He has been established in his office by an oath that God will never change.

*. . . by so much more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant (Heb. 7:22\*).*

The divine oath concerning this perpetual priesthood,

which confirms a perfected, unbroken fellowship between God and his people, should be all the assurance that anyone needs. But there is still more. Jesus himself has become the guarantee, the surety, of this better covenant.<sup>17</sup> The name Jesus, which indicates his human nature, is stressed by being placed at the end of the sentence in the original Greek. In his human nature he was offered as a sacrifice, which guaranteed the efficacy of the new covenant. Just as animals were divided to confirm the oath of the old covenant, so the body of Jesus

<sup>16</sup> Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 267.

<sup>17</sup> The word *guarantee* (*enguos*) is a legal term that means literally "under good security." The word occurs only here in the New Testament, and appears three times in the Septuagint (Sir. 29:15-16; 2 Macc. 10:28).

## **76 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

was crucified to guarantee the acceptance of all who come to God on the basis of the new covenant.

Because of the unbroken nature of his intercession, Jesus provides in his person as high priest the guarantee of this better covenant. Under the old covenant, the high priests were continually dying. In that circumstance, the people could not help but feel some uncertainty about the mediatorial ministry

of their high priest. But Jesus has the power of an indestructible life. His permanence as high priest serves as a personal guarantee of the effectiveness of the new covenant.

Now for the first time the writer speaks of a "better" covenant. But he has prepared his readers for this concept.

The lesser is blessed by the *better*; consequently, Melchizedek is better than Abraham and the descendants in his loins (Heb. 7:7). We now have a *better* hope than the law could provide (v. 19). Therefore, the whole covenantal structure of God's relationship to men has changed, and Jesus has become the guarantee of a *better* covenant (v. 22).

So the "betters" build on one another: a better priesthood, a better law to go along with this better priesthood, and a better covenant that embraces both the better priesthood and the better law. The writer is steadily developing his case that people under the new covenant are in a better situation than the people under the old covenant. The old covenant may have more spectacular outer forms, but it is far outstripped by the substance of redemptive blessing provided by the new covenant.

*And those priests on the one hand existed in greater numbers, but only because death kept them from continuing; but he, on the other hand, holds his priesthood permanently, because he lives forever (Heb. 7:23-24\*).*

The person concerning whom God swears in Psalm 110:4 is clearly an individual. 'The LORD has sworn . . . 'You [sing.] are a priest.' " A single person is the beneficiary of God's oath.

#### I T S W O R S H I P 77

The passage in no way anticipates a line of priests. Inherent in the text itself is the fact that this priesthood could be filled by only one person. The multitude of priests of the old covenant, far from showing its superiority, displays its weakness. Priests continually succeeded one another because they kept dying. But Jesus lives forever, and so can hold his priesthood permanently.

The idea behind the term *permanently* (*aparabaton*) is somewhat ambiguous, but in this case the ambiguity enriches the concept. It has been interpreted to mean either "perpetual" or "nontransferable." Each concept is contained in the other. Because Christ's high priesthood is "nontransferable," no one



else can occupy his office; because he holds his office perpetually, it necessarily cannot be transferred to someone else.<sup>18</sup>

*So he is able to save totally those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Heb. 7:25\*).*

This is the first and only time in Hebrews in which the word *save* refers to the effect of Christ's work for others. The other time it is used in Hebrews it speaks of Jesus' own salvation through his calling out to God with many tears and much crying (5:7). Putting the two instances together, Jesus appears as one who himself needed to call on the Lord to deliver him from a great threat to his soul and body, even to the point of shedding great tears. For this very reason he is able to function well as a high priest. On the one hand he knows the distress that fallen sinners feel. On the other hand sinners may be helped greatly by knowing that Jesus truly understands their distress. He knows exactly how his people feel, because he has had and continues to have a human nature.

So the believer in Jesus should be confident. A high priest intercedes, continually drawing near to God. By the oath of

18 Cf. the discussion in Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 268, n. 34.

## **78 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

God and by the power of an endless life he is established permanently at the right hand of God to intercede for the needy.

The participant in the new covenant is better off in every way in terms of his ability to draw on the resources of a gracious God who remains reconciled to sinners. Any returning to the older forms of the old covenant could only mean loss of blessing.

### **E. "You Are a Priest" (Heb. 7:26-28)**

Now the writer comes to the last segment of his exposition.

At this point he becomes quite explicit in including himself among the benefactors of Christ's priestly work. He declares that it was fitting that "we" should have a holy high priest who is exalted above the heavens.

*For it was fitting that we should have a high priest who is holy, without evil, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (Heb. 7:26\*).*

Considering the particular needs of sinners, it becomes clear that Jesus is exactly the kind of high priest that is needed.

In verses 26-28 the writer mentions seven characteristics of this great high priest of the new covenant. Each one of them shows how Christ is suitable to meet the needs of his people.

First, he is holy. When standing in the presence of the thrice holy God, he does not recoil in shame as did the prophet Isaiah. He stands without shame to intercede with the Lord because he manifests the same holiness as God himself.

As a consequence, he can enter effectively into the presence of a holy God on behalf of his people.

Second, this high priest is "without evil" (*akakos*). In addition to being consecrated to God, Jesus has no evil to which people may point. He is altogether innocent of any charge, properly comparable to the innocent lamb of the old covenant sacrifices. Jesus was separate from all evil and all appearances

I T S W O R S H I P 79

of it. So he was fully qualified to offer himself as a sacrifice for sin in the place of others.

In relation to God he is holy, and in relation to men he is without evil. An evil priest works havoc among the people of God. The people trusted Aaron, and he led them in the con-

struction of the golden calf. But Jesus can be trusted. Because there is no evil in him, he can lead his people in the right way to God.

Third, he is "without impurity" or "undefiled" (*amiantos*).

In relation to God, he is holy. In relation to men, he is without evil. In relation to himself, he is undefiled. These three words describing the distinctiveness of Jesus as a high priest in his sinless perfections build on one another. He is most qualified as a high priest because of the absence of any defilement whatever. Therefore if he should take up our cause, which he has done, his priestly role must meet with success.

Fourth, he has been separated from sinners (*kechorismenos apo ton hamartolon*)—and continues to maintain that separation. Sadly, one servant of the Lord after another shows the weakness of his sinful flesh. But Christ displays no such weakness, which makes him most qualified for interceding on behalf of sinners. Being fully man, Jesus experienced every human temptation. But he yielded to none of them. In his circumstances he is altogether identified with sinners. But in his performance he is separated from them all.

Fifth, as the great high priest of the new covenant, he has been exalted once and for all above the heavens.<sup>19</sup> Jesus is not only a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, but also the kingly figure to whom the Lord has said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet" (Ps. 110:1\*). Because he has heavenly as well as earthly enemies,<sup>19</sup> The verbal contrast is noteworthy. Jesus "has been separated from sinners" (and continues in that separation—as indicated by the use of the perfect tense), and he "was made higher than the heavens" (once and for all—as indicated by the use of the aorist tense).

## **80 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

demonic as well as human foes, his exaltation must place him "above" the heavens. All his enemies, seen and unseen, earthly and heavenly, remain under his authority.

Is not this exactly the kind of high priest needed by weakened sinners? He has not only the position that enables him to intercede continually, but also the power to bring about the demise of all his and our enemies.

*He does not have a daily necessity, as do those high priests, of offering up sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people.*

*For he made an offering of himself once and for all (Heb. 7:27\*).*

Sixth, he is a high priest who had to make only one offering for sins when he offered himself up. The priests of the old covenant had to make their offerings continually, because their sacrifices were not truly effective in removing sin. An animal could never substitute for a human being.

Jesus did not follow this imperfect pattern of sacrifice. As a sinless high priest, he offered himself *once* for the sins of others. The transaction has been completed, and will never need repeating. The offering of himself once has made the way to God perpetually open to sinners. All the sins of those who trust in him have already been removed by the single offering of the Son of God.

*For the law establishes men as high priests who are weak. But the word of the oath, which came after the law, establishes the Son, who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:28\*).*

Seventh and finally, this high priest is "the Son," in contrast to the mere "men" appointed under the old covenant. The many men who served as priests over the centuries all had the same characteristics, in contrast to the sevenfold strengths of

Jesus. They all had weaknesses, and they were incapable of overcoming them. When compared to the perfections of Jesus, their weaknesses become even more obvious.

#### I T S W O R S H I P 81

- He is holy; they were unholy.
- He is without evil; they were evil.
- He is separated from sinners; they were themselves sinners.
- He is exalted above the heavens, where he can intercede directly with God; they were confined to earth, and cannot reach God.
- He made one sufficient offering for sin; they presented many ineffective offerings.
- He is the perfect Son of God; they were imperfect men.

No deficiency characterizes Jesus, the great high priest of the new covenant. The word of the oath that came after the law appoints a Son who has none of the limitations of the old covenant priests. As a result, he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him.

These closing verses of the chapter have been called "a

hymn to the high priest."20 Humanity rejoices in finally finding a high priest

qualified to understand its weaknesses and to come to its aid: so far above us and so near to us; himself in need of no cleansing and able to cleanse and expiate all our guilt; so different from the levitical priests and so much more effective in the function of his sacerdotal mediation.21

## **Conclusion**

So the writer has completed his exegesis of Psalm 110:4.

Word by word, phrase by phrase, line by line, he has examined

20 Teodorico, as cited in Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 280. He also quotes Moffatt's rather spontaneous response to the passage:

"It is generally misleading to parse a rhapsody" (n. 52).

21 Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 280, quoting Teodorico.

## **8 2 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

the significance of this one verse in the Scriptures of the old covenant to indicate its fulfillment in the new. His exegetical work can be described as nothing less than brilliant. Treating the passage in its full biblical-theological context, he has



brought out the richness of its meaning in a way that must have communicated great blessing to its original recipients.

The exposition of this rich text by the writer to the Hebrews should also communicate significant understanding to readers today. This treatment of Psalm 110:4 not only exalts Jesus Christ as our great high priest, but also shows how futile it would be to rebuild the temple and reinstitute sacrifices and a priesthood.

As the writer to the Hebrews has indicated, Jesus cannot exercise his priesthood according to the old order. He belongs to the tribe of Judah, and cannot function as a Levitical priest. For this reason, he will never function as a priest in a temple built in Jerusalem according to an order that has passed away. His priestly ministry is located in the temple of the heavenly, eternal realities. He cannot fulfill his exalted ministry in the shadowy, temporal forms of the old covenant.

Any restoration of temple and sacrifice according to the order of the old covenant would supplant the high priestly ministry of Jesus. The idea is unthinkable. No priesthood on earth could compare with the perfected priesthood of Jesus in

heaven, and it would be an insult to his perfect sacrifice to suggest that any subsequent offering by other priests would be able to reconcile the sinner to God.

If the temple, the sacrifices, and the priesthood of the old covenant have been replaced in the advance of redemptive history by the new covenant, it should not be surprising that these old rituals have also been superseded. The form of worship for participants in the new covenant cannot follow the patterns of the old covenant worshipers. With the change of priesthood came a change of the laws of worship. The heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above, is the mother of us all, and the focus of our drawing near to God (Heb. 12:22-24; Gal. 4:26). Jesus, our

#### I T S W O R S H I P 83

great high priest, is there making continual intercession for us. Having entered into this true tabernacle, he has opened a new and living way by his blood. As we approach this Jerusalem of the heavenly realities, we join with the assembly of saints and angels who will be in God's presence forever.

Because of this great privilege of continual access to the very presence of God himself, we should look for no other city,

temple, sacrifice, or priesthood. The perfections of Jesus provide all we need, both for this life and for that which is to come. As a consequence, our worship cannot conform to the old patterns associated with the previous priesthood and sacrifices. Instead, the new covenant community must worship in a way that indicates that the old rituals are gone and the eternal realities have come.

#### FOUR THE ISRAEL OF GOD

its lifestyle

##### **Introduction**

A basic factor that defines "the Israel of God" in the context of the new covenant is its lifestyle. What is the pattern of life for the Israel of God as delineated by Scripture? Is it a militant, conquering kingdom, overcoming the secular governments of the world? Is it a secret society that keeps its identity veiled from the eyes of those who do not participate in its rituals? Is it a community isolated from the world in which it lives? A number of images in Scripture depict the lifestyle of the people of God. They are members of a kingdom that has come and is coming; they are "the church militant," seeking by the

proclamation of the gospel to bring the earth into conformity to the righteous rule of the one true God. They are a chosen bride, awaiting the arrival of the groom. They are the body of Christ, knit to him and to one another by his Spirit.

But none of these images captures the state of the people of God in the present age quite like the picture presented in the epistle to the Hebrews. In this distinctive letter addressed to converts from the old covenant, the writer portrays the people of God in terms that they could well understand, for the description is built on the experience of the old covenant people of God at the time of their formation. The people of God

**8 5**

## **8 6 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

today are depicted as a people of the wilderness. Having been delivered from the guilt and oppression of sin, they suddenly find themselves in a barren territory filled with dangers as they move toward the land flowing with milk and honey. In a distinctive way, the lifestyle of God's people in the present world should conform to this life "in the wilderness."

To appreciate this concept of a lifestyle for the people of

God, the imagery of a people of the wilderness must be perceived in its full biblical-theological context.<sup>1</sup> This way of life, as it is experienced daily by the Israel of God in a new covenant context, is deeply rooted in redemptive history. The present study will consider this theme from three perspectives:

- A. The wilderness in Israel's historical tradition
- B. The development of the wilderness theme in Israel's theology
- C. The wilderness theme in the age of the new covenant

### **A. The Wilderness in Israel's Historical Tradition**

The first stage of the wilderness theme as developed in Scripture centers on Israel's experience in the wilderness. The later theological development of this theme presupposes this historical experience. To differentiate between a historical and a theological phase of the wilderness concept in Scripture does not imply that the historical tradition has no theological content, or that the theological development is not based on history. It merely acknowledges the form in which the presentation is made in Israel's own record. On the one hand, Scripture presents a wilderness history whose prime "message"

is embedded in the events themselves. On the other hand, the

1 Note the advocacy of this methodology by Joachim Jeremias in developing a similar theme in *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (Naperville, 111.: Alec R.

Allenson, 1958), 57.

## ITSLIFESTYLE 87

wilderness theme is developed in a theological tradition based on the history.<sup>2</sup>

The historical tradition of Israel concerning its wilderness experience is first related in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Perhaps the most basic aspect of the wilderness experience in Exodus-Numbers is its setting. This period of Israel's history is an interim between the Exodus and the Conquest, extended in duration because of the sin of Israel (cf. Num. 14:20-35; 26:64-65; 32:13). The wilderness experience plays a significant role in Israel's redemptive history throughout the subsequent traditions of Israel.

Since the wilderness period is connected with the Exodus and the Conquest, the Israelites in the wilderness are viewed as the elect people of the Covenant Lord. It is true that Israel is

chastened and judged in the wilderness, but they are disciplined as sons. It may seem to be a strange, deprived existence for God's chosen people, but these wanderers are clearly treated as his own people.

A second basic aspect of the wilderness theme arising out of Israel's historical experience involves the formation of the people into a covenant community (Ex. 19:1-24:18).<sup>3</sup> God reveals himself as the God of the Covenant to Israel at Sinai, a mountain in the desert. There in the wilderness the bonds of the covenant are formalized and confirmed. This establish-

This differentiation basically follows the analysis by Gerhard von Rad in his contrast of the wilderness theme as treated by Exodus-Numbers and by Deuteronomy, with the basic exception that von Rad would not affirm the historicity of the events as they are recorded. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 1:288.

It is in the wilderness that the covenant relationship is formed, regardless of the efforts of G. von Rad and M. Noth to detach the Sinai tradition from the Exodus-Conquest tradition. For a treatment of the subject, and an answer to the contentions of von Rad and Noth, see John Bright, *A His-*

*tory of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 115; Arthur Weiser, *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development* (New York: Association Press, 1957), 82-90.

## **88 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

ment of the covenant proves to be one of the most significant events in Israel's history. It includes the revelation of the law and the formation of the cult (Ex. 19-24; 25-31; Lev. 1-27; Num. 15-19).

The prominence of Moses in Israel's formative history must also be noted. This one great personage towers over the entire wilderness experience. He fulfills the twofold role of mediator and leader of the people. He mediates the covenant to them (Ex. 20:18-21) and intercedes on their behalf (Ex. 32:30-32; 33:12-16). He is the shepherd of the people, who leads them in their wilderness wanderings (cf. Num. 27:15-23). Out of this vital relationship with their leader comes the expectation of another figure who will arise and prove to be at least Moses' equal (Deut. 18:15-18).

A third characteristic element of the wilderness existence of Israel in Exodus-Numbers is its dual nature. The wilderness is depicted both as a region of great danger and at the



same time as a place of wondrous deliverance. In the narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 13:17-14:31), the whole pattern of Israel's ensuing experience in the wilderness may be seen.<sup>4</sup> Threat of disaster is answered by miraculous deliverance. From that point on, the two elements of danger and divine help appear regularly. In the wilderness of Shur, the people suffer for lack of water, but by the intervention of God their need is met (Ex. 15:22-25). Again, the people lack food for sustenance, but God miraculously provides manna from heaven (Ex. 16). This pattern of danger and deliverance continues as a prominent motif throughout the wilderness period.

Israel can respond in two ways under these circumstances. The people can offer to God a spirit of obedience and submissiveness as the product of their faith, or they can rebel against their plight and display distrust of their Covenant

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Naperville, 111.: Alec R. Allenson, 1963), 21.

## I T S L I F E S T Y L E 8 9

Lord. The incident of the golden calf (Ex. 32) even presents

the possibility of apostasy.<sup>5</sup> The pattern of disobedience and judgment seems to be the constant experience of Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 14:10ff.; 15:24; 16:3ff.; 17:2ff.; Num. 11:1ff.; 16:1 Iff.; 21:5ff.).

The desert, therefore, has a dual significance in Israel's historical experience. It provides the stage on which the saving acts experienced in Egypt may be continued, and at the same time it is the place of testing and uncertainty for Israel.

In summary, the dominant motifs of Israel's wilderness existence as presented in Israel's early history may be noted. It is an extended period of interim existence between the Exodus and the Conquest. In this period the people are formed into a covenant community and receive the revelation of law and cult at Sinai. Their wilderness life is characterized by danger and deliverance, by testing and disobedience, by judgment and blessing.

When the writer to the converted Hebrews of the first century after Christ explains the lifestyle of the new covenant people of God, he makes use of each of these basic elements in the historical experience of Israel in the wilderness. The Christian

life must be understood as an interim existence between "exodus" and "conquest." The once-for-all deliverance from sin and its oppressions comes by the sacrifice of Christ and begins the life of the Christian (Heb. 9:25-26). But the goal of the Christian life still lies in the future and is depicted as the "rest" that remains for the people of God (Heb. 4:9-11). The writer to the Hebrews also emphasizes the establishment of the new covenant, which binds the people to God and to one another (Heb. 8:8-13; 12:18-24). At the same time, as in the Exodus-Numbers narrative, the life of the wilderness community revolves around a cultic order: Christ as a great high priest carries out his ministry of mediation in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1-6). Through this high priest of the new covenant,

5 Ibid., 29-30.

90

## THE ISRAEL OF GOD

the people of God have free access to the immediate presence of God (Heb. 4:14-16).

The third basic characteristic of Israel's wilderness experience, that of danger and deliverance, of threat and promise,

also finds explicit development in Hebrews. A hardening of the heart by the people of the new covenant will have as devastating an effect as it did for the original wilderness generation (cf. Heb. 3:7-19). Quite clearly, then, each of the major motifs of the Israelite wilderness experience finds expression in the epistle to the Hebrews.

## **B. The Development of the Wilderness Theme in Israel's Theology**

The repeated treatment of the wilderness theme in Israel's theological tradition provides ever enlarging significance to the concept of the desert. Rather than becoming merely a historical curiosity in the archives of Israel's history, the wilderness experience grows until it takes on eschatological dimensions. The wilderness theme plays a significant role in Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and the Psalms.

### **1. Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy provides a new stage in the treatment of the wilderness tradition by the very nature of the structure of the book. It is an address by Moses to the people of Israel just prior to their entrance into the Promised Land (Deut. 1:1-5). The

experiences in the wilderness are recounted in a context of exhortation, for the purpose of teaching a lesson:

And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:3 NASB)

#### I T S L I F E S T Y L E 91

Other references to the wilderness may be found throughout the book.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of these reflections on Israel's previous wilderness experience is to provide background for exhortations.<sup>7</sup> This form of exhortation is distinctive to the treatment of the wilderness theme in Deuteronomy, compared with the tradition in Exodus-Numbers.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to note that the writer to the converted Jews of the new covenant era adopts the same form of exhortation based on Israel's wilderness experience. The Israel of God under the present circumstances must not harden its heart, as did Israel in the wilderness (Heb. 3:7-4:7). Christians must not have an evil heart of unbelief that would lead them to turn away

from the living God, or they will never enter into his rest (Heb. 3:11-12). These exhortations to members of the new covenant community presume that they are essentially in the same situation as was Israel in the wilderness under the old covenant.

## 2. The Prophets

In their treatment of Israel's wilderness experience, the prophets of Israel are clearly aware of the historical tradition.

But they also make new use of that tradition.

The continuity of the prophetic treatment with the older traditions appears in the basic setting of the wilderness theme.

The wilderness experience is closely connected with the Exodus and the Conquest. The Exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness, the establishment of the covenant, and the entrance into a fruitful land are grouped together in Hosea

2:14-23. Numerous other passages in the prophets connect these formative events of Israel's past.<sup>9</sup> The place of the wilder-

6 Cf. Deut. 1:19, 26-27, 31, 33, 40; 2:1, 7, 15; 6:16; 8:15; 9:22-24; 23:3-4; 32:10.

7 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 20.

8 Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 288.

9 Cf. Amos 2:9-10; Isa. 4:5-6; 11:15-16; 35:5-10; 40:3-5; 43:14-21; 49:8-12;

51:9-10; Jer. 2:6-7; 7:22-26; Ezek. 20:5-20.

## **9 2 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

ness experience in the tradition of the saving events of Israel is firmly established.

Equally strong in the prophetic treatment is the tendency to view the wilderness as a place of both judgment and blessing. The second chapter of Hosea may again serve as an example. The wilderness represents for Hosea the first stage of Israel's restoration, as well as its place of judgment. The Covenant Lord will remove Israel from Canaan and return her to the barren existence of the wilderness. Yet in the midst of this judgment for sin, the Covenant Lord "speaks to Israel's heart" (Hos. 2:14\*). The prophet Ezekiel paints the wilderness in even darker colors than those of Hosea (see Ezek. 20:10-20). In his view, the rebellion of the people began shortly after their entrance into the wilderness, and as a result God poured out his wrath on them. Yet because of his great mercy he spared them and brought them to the threshold of

the Promised Land.<sup>10</sup> Jeremiah also depicts the wilderness experience as a period of great danger, but also as one in which God acts to deliver his people (see Jer. 2:6-7).

The most fascinating aspect of the prophetic treatment of the wilderness tradition is its development of the expectation of a new wilderness experience. The Covenant Lord will prepare a way for his people through the wilderness and lead them to their new Zion (Isa. 40:3-5; 42:16; 43:19).<sup>11</sup> In the wilderness, God will supply food and water for his people (Isa. 41:17-20; 43:19-21; 49:10). He will again make water flow from the rock (Isa. 48:21). The wilderness, in fact, will be transformed so that its barrenness will become a fruitful garden (Isa. 35:6-7; 49:9-11; 55:13). The revelation of the law is presupposed in this new wilderness experience, and a new

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the analysis by Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 48-49.

<sup>11</sup> The references in this section are taken largely from an article by Bernhard W. Anderson entitled "Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah," in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962), 177-96.



**covenant will be established (Isa. 42:21, 24; 48:17-18; 51:7; 55:3; Jer. 31:1-6, 31-34; Ezek. 20:33-38). Even a new covenant meal will be celebrated (Isa. 55:1-2; cf. Ex. 24:11).<sup>12</sup> The language used to describe the wilderness now goes far beyond anything actually experienced by Israel during its wilderness wanderings. Yet numerous descriptions of both judgment and blessing are couched in terms reminiscent of Israel's wilder-**

<sup>12</sup> This prophetic expectation of a new wilderness experience has been explained by some as an exercise in idealization. According to one view, the prophets of Israel saw Canaanite culture as the principal cause of the departure of the people of Israel from their faith in their Covenant Lord.

Their solution for this departure was a return to the state of "innocency" that Israel enjoyed in the wilderness. This viewpoint is argued by John B.

Flight in "The Nomadic Idea and Ideal in the Old Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 42 (1923): 158-226. Flight uncovers a long history of the idealization of desert life in the biblical tradition. He feels that Israel's

wilderness experience was one of the most important influences on the culture of the nation. According to Deut. 32:10, the Covenant Lord initially found Israel in the wilderness, and consequently their Covenant Lord always remained closely associated with the desert around Sinai. In the same connection, Flight notes that the Kenites went back into the desert at the

time of Israel's entrance into Canaan (p. 179). The Nazirite's vow never to let a razor touch his head (Judg. 13:5; 1 Sam. 1:11), according to Flight, is rooted in the desire to preserve the customs of desert life. The familiar phrase, "To your tents, O Israel," is regarded as the equivalent of saying, "Resume your old tribal independence," which was experienced in the desert. The entire religion of Israel, including its tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifices, was derived essentially from nomadic life. In the opinion of Flight, this long and influential tradition explains the call of the prophets to return to the desert. The prophets sought a return to the "simple and uncorrupted faith of the fathers" (p. 223). According to Flight's interpretation of the message of Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, the solution to Israel's social and religious problems was to be found in a devastation of the land by the Covenant Lord so that only nomadic existence would be possible. Flight points convincingly to the words of Hosea and Jeremiah, who threatened a forced return to desert existence (Hos. 2:14-15; Jer. 2:2).

Flight's thesis finds at least partial support in an essay by W. F. Albright entitled "Primitivism in Ancient Asia," in *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, ed. A. O. Lovejoy and G. Boas (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins **94 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

ness experience. The prophets use wilderness imagery to depict the barrenness that will be brought about by God's judg-

ment:

I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty;

. . . I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the LORD, before his fierce anger. (Jer. 4:23, 26)

For thus says the Lord GOD, "When I shall make you a desolate city, like the cities which are not inhabited, when I shall bring up the deep over you, and the great waters will cover you, then I shall bring you down with those who go down to the pit. . . and I shall make you dwell in the lower parts of the earth, like the ancient waste places . . . so that you will not be inhabited."

(Ezek. 26:19-20 NASB)

The realm of death and chaos is now identified with the wilderness. It is connected to the covenant curse as well as the original chaos.<sup>13</sup> It is a place uninhabitable by humans.

Press, 1935), 421-32, and in an earlier article by Karl Budde entitled "The Nomadic Ideal in the Old Testament," *The New World* 4 (1895): 726-45.

In spite of many helpful insights into the wilderness tradition of Israel provided by this line of investigation, it seems doubtful that Israel ever

idealized their wilderness experience in the way that Flight suggests. The wilderness may be the place in which Israel will be restored to fellowship with the Covenant Lord, but it serves as a place of judgment, not blessing. The desert purges Israel of its adherence to pagan gods, but never constitutes Israel's ideal place to live. This is demonstrated by the connection of the wilderness tradition with the Exodus-Conquest tradition. It would be difficult to defend a thesis that the expectation of a new wilderness experience is presented by the prophets as an isolated phenomenon, separated from the new exodus and the new entrance into the land.

13 Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), I—II: 445, 463n.

## **I T S L I F E S T Y L E 95**

At the same time, the state of blessing in a transformed wilderness becomes the object of extravagantly poetic language:

The wilderness and the desert will be glad,

And the Arabah will rejoice and blossom. (Isa. 35:1

**NASB)**

For waters will break forth in the wilderness

And streams in the Arabah.

And the scorched land will become a pool,

And the thirsty ground springs of water. (Isa. 35:6-7

**NASB)**

I will put the cedar in the wilderness,

The acacia, and the myrtle, and the olive tree;

I will place the juniper in the desert,

Together with the box tree and the cypress. (Isa.

**41:19 NASB)**

This poetic extravagance emphasizes the continuing importance of the wilderness tradition. The wilderness experience is seen as an appropriate vehicle for setting forth eschatological expectations. God will drive Israel into the wilderness because of its unfaithfulness, and he will also transform that same wilderness by an unsurpassed revelation of his grace. Even in the midst of scathing judgment may be found the hope of new life.

Viewing the state of the new covenant people from the same tradition, the writer to the Hebrews describes their future as an entering into rest after their life of wilderness wandering. Joshua did not give them rest, and they must be careful or they will perish in the wilderness. Yet God will not fail to

fulfill his promise to the true Israel of God, for there yet remains a sabbath-rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:1-9). It is therefore the duty of those living in the "wilderness" of today to strive to enter into that rest (vv.10-11).

## **9 6 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

### **3. The Psalms**

That the Psalms make use of the historical experiences of Israel and of the wilderness tradition in particular is a fact of significance in and of itself. This fact indicates that Israel viewed its own history as having great significance for its current religion and worship.

The most important psalms that refer to the wilderness experience in a context of historical recollection are Psalms 78,95, 105-6, and 135-36.<sup>14</sup> Numerous other psalms have references to the wilderness experience, but the material is not presented in a context of historical recollection. Only Psalms 78, 95, and 106 treat the wilderness theme in an extensive manner. In Psalms 105, 135, and 136, the desert tradition plays a subordinate role to the themes of exodus and entrance into the land.<sup>15</sup>

More important than the extent of the references to the

wilderness in the Psalms is the purpose which this material serves.<sup>16</sup> The uses made of the wilderness tradition may be divided into several categories.<sup>17</sup>

First, the psalmist makes use of Israel's historical experiences to give thanks to God for his mighty deeds, and for the revelation of his grace and judgment toward Israel. The references to the wilderness in Psalm 105:2, 39-41 may be viewed from this perspective:

Sing to him, sing praise to him;

tell of all his wonderful acts. . . .

He spread out a cloud as a covering,

and a fire to give light at night.

<sup>14</sup> Aarre Lauha, *Die Geschichtsmotive in den alttestamentlichen Psalmen* (Helsinki: n.p., 1945), 128.

<sup>15</sup> Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 38-39.

<sup>16</sup> Note the treatment of Lauha, *Die Geschichtsmotive in dm alttestamentlichen Psalmen*, 1-144.

<sup>17</sup> These categories basically follow those suggested by Lauha, *Die Geschichtsmotive in den alttestamentlichen Psalmen*, 135-44.

They asked, and he brought them quail  
and satisfied them with the bread of heaven.

He opened the rock, and water gushed out;  
like a river it flowed in the desert.

In this psalm, the grace of the Lord in supplying the need of  
his people in the wilderness is the basis for united praise in the  
worshiping assembly.

Second, Israel's history is viewed as demonstrating man's  
freedom to act, while emphasizing his responsibility to act in  
obedience to God. Psalms 78 and 95 offer the best examples of  
the use of the wilderness theme in this pragmatic, pedagogical  
manner. In view of the past experiences of Israel, the present  
generation is warned and called to obedience.

Third, the Psalms employ Israel's history to generate a con-  
sciousness of personal sin in the present generation. Psalm 106  
uses the wilderness theme in this connection. Before rehears-  
ing the principal events of the Exodus and the wilderness wan-  
derings, the psalmist says in verse 6,

We have sinned with our fathers,

We have committed iniquity,



We have done wickedly, (NKJV)

At the conclusion of the psalm, a plea appears for the continuing mercy of the Lord of the covenant on a sinful people (v. 47):

Save us, O Covenant LORD our God,

And gather us from among the [nations],

To give thanks to Your holy name,

And to triumph in Your praise, (NKJV)

Although the exact setting for the use of these psalms may be difficult to determine,<sup>18</sup> the communal emphasis seems

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the problems, see Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 23-91.

## **98 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

quite apparent. The current community shared the message which the past experiences of Israel brought them, as interpreted by the psalmist. God was praised, comfort and reassurance were given, and sin was confessed through the rehearsal of past events. The wilderness experience of Israel played a significant role in this cultic renewal of the nation's past.

Summary

The wilderness theme was extensively enriched in the theological treatments of Deuteronomy, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Most significantly, the wilderness experience never became a sterile fact of Israel's past. On the contrary, it became the basis for describing the religious situation of Israel throughout the ages. The extensive use of the wilderness tradition in a context of exhortation makes the past situation come alive in the present circumstances of the Israel of God.

At the same time, the wilderness experience has swelled to eschatological proportions. Along with the events of the Exodus and the entrance into Canaan, it has become the vehicle of expression for the fondest hopes of Israel. Intense poetic language has depicted the transformed desert as the climactic revelation of God's grace to Israel. It is against the background of the wilderness tradition in Israelite thought that the relationship of the wilderness theme to the people of the new covenant may be examined.

### **C. The Wilderness Theme in the Age of the New Covenant**

The wilderness theme in the age of the new covenant appears in the messianic expectations of the day. Both extrabiblical literature and the New Testament itself develop the wilderness theme in terms of these messianic expectations.

## ITS LIFESTYLE 99

### 1. The Wilderness and Messianic Expectation in Extrabiblical Literature

Various first-century Jewish sects connected the Israelite wilderness tradition with messianic expectations. Josephus refers to numerous messianic leaders who used the wilderness as their rallying point. Each of them seems to have called his disciples into the wilderness in order to initiate a new exodus.<sup>19</sup> Josephus describes a man named Theudas, who designated himself as a "prophet" and called his disciples to the Jordan, where he promised to divide the river and open the way into the wilderness. The same pattern was followed by an unnamed leader, an Egyptian, a Gaul, and a weaver named Jonathan of Cyrene.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, people expected the messianic era to dawn in connection with the desert.

Strong additional evidence that this was actually at the cen-

ter of current messianic expectation is provided by the Qumran community. They lived in the desert because of their messianic expectation. According to one scholar, "Since the sect represented the true Israel, the Israel of the last days, it tried to model itself after the pattern of Israel in the days of the Desert Wanderings, described in the Book of Numbers."<sup>21</sup> When this group first went out into the desert, they predicted a stay of forty years, conforming to the experience of Israel. Their duty during this period was to overcome temptation where Israel had failed.<sup>22</sup> They believed that while many of the elect would fall by the wayside, a faithful few would always remain. They were convinced that those who joined them in their desert life constituted the true remnant.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Joachim Jeremias in *Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. G.

Kittel and G. Friedrich (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1942), 4:866 (hereafter cited as *TWNT*).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 866.

<sup>21</sup> J. T. Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea* (London: SCM, 1959), 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

23 Ibid., 113.

## **100 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

**The Qumran community regarded itself as the new Israel, the new covenant people of God. Their settlement in the desert conformed to the prophetic expectation of a second wilderness period.<sup>24</sup> The community even structured itself after the pattern of Israel in the desert. They divided themselves into tribes and then into thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (cf. Ex. 18:25; Deut. 1:15).<sup>25</sup> On the basis of Jeremiah 31, they understood themselves to be the people of the new covenant. Annually they celebrated a feast to renew the covenant.<sup>26</sup>**

**The existence of such messianic movements in the wilderness seems to find confirmation in the New Testament. Christ's warning of false messiahs who appear in the wilderness (Matt. 24:26) may indicate an awareness of these movements. Acts 21:38 describes the mistaking of Paul for "the Egyptian, who before these days stirred up to sedition and led out into the wilderness four thousand men."**

**The references to the wilderness in the Apocrypha, the**

**Pseudepigrapha, and Philo are sparse,<sup>27</sup> but the common peo-**

<sup>24</sup> Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>26</sup> Jeremias in *TWNT*, 4:865ff., confirms the linkage of the wilderness tradition with messianic expectations by referring both to the literature of the

Damascus sect and to rabbinic traditions. The Damascus Document describes a sect existing in the time of Herod that taught that the wilderness experience of Israel foreshadowed the messianic period of salvation. This community dwelt in tents, its members were numbered (cf. Ex. 30:12), and divided itself according to the plan of Ex. 18:25. They entered into "the covenant," "the covenant of God," "the new covenant." Their leader was compared to Moses. He was their "teacher" and "lawgiver"; he had called them to a new exodus. This "teacher of righteousness" was probably a messianic figure, a second Moses who had inaugurated the new exodus.

According to Jeremias, some of the older rabbinic traditions stated that the days of the Messiah were to last forty years, even as the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness. The Messiah would lead the people during their wandering in the wilderness.

<sup>27</sup> Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 53-54.

I T S L I F E S T Y L E 101

pie's interest in the wilderness seems quite apparent.<sup>28</sup> They

took the expectations of the prophets of Israel quite literally. Many people were willing to abandon the conveniences of a settled life and expose themselves to the rigors of desert life, all because of an intense expectation that the Messiah would come to them in just such a context.

Closely tied to this emphasis on the wilderness was a concentration on the figure of Moses. He was without a doubt the most important figure of late Judaism.<sup>29</sup> Innumerable legends sprang up to adorn his life from birth to death. In the picture developed by Hellenistic Judaism, Moses became father of all Egyptian wisdom, science, philosophy, and culture. This picture was derived from the Palestinian idea of Moses, rooted firmly in the Old Testament. Moses, according to Palestinian Judaism, was the servant of God, given the privilege of seeing the glory of God, hearing his voice, and mediating his law. Indeed, he was the prophet of God for the whole world. He was the true shepherd, the suffering leader of his people, who endured hardship in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness. The key aspect of this image of Moses was his role as mediator. There was some expectation that Moses would rise from

his grave in the wilderness and lead the people into the Promised Land. No other idea describes so fully the concept of messianic salvation as the image of a new Moses initiating a new exodus, leading the people in a new wilderness experience, and entering the Promised Land.

The messianic movements described by Josephus, the New Testament, Qumran, and rabbinic tradition all attest to the intimate connection between wilderness tradition and messianic expectation. Many people, though perhaps not always the leaders of Israel, expected God's new day of salvation to appear first in the desert.

28 Jeremias in *TWNT*, 4:867.

29 The following material is taken largely from the article by Jeremias referred to in note 20.

## **102 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

### **2. The Wilderness and the Messianic Expectation of the New Testament**

It would be overstating the case to assert that the New Testament focuses on the theme of the wilderness. Yet the wilderness tradition is significant in most of the New Testament. Even



a cursory survey of the term *desert* (*eremos*) and its derivatives confirms this evaluation.<sup>30</sup> The present treatment will focus on the desert motif as it relates to John the Baptist, Jesus, and the New Testament church.

a .*John the Baptist*. The abrupt appearance of John the Baptist "in the wilderness" (Mark 1:3 KJV) is best understood from the point of view of current messianic expectation. The quotation of the Old Testament in Mark 1:2-3 can hardly be understood otherwise. The mention of a "messenger" (*angelos*) in verse 2 may have a dual reference to Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20. The Exodus passage records the promise of God to send his "angel" before the people on their way through the desert.<sup>31</sup> The reference in Mark 1:3 to Isaiah 40:3, with its anticipation of a new wilderness experience, is unmistakable. Very possibly John's message of repentance (Mark 1:4) was rooted deeply in the wilderness tradition, for the idea of returning to the desert involved repentance and submission.<sup>32</sup> Certainly the supposition of some that John the Baptist was the Messiah rested in part on the wilderness setting of his ministry.<sup>33</sup>

The relation of the baptism of John to the wilderness tra-

dition merits further exploration. The baptism of John may

30 Cf. Pierre Bonnard, "La signification du desert, selon le Nouveau Testament," in *Hommage et Reconnaissance: Recueil de travaux publies a l'occasion du soixantieme anniversaire de Karl Barth*, ed. Jean-Jacques von Allmen

(Paris: Delachaux and Niestle, 1946), 10; Werner Schmauch, "In der

Wuste," in *In Memoriam Ernst Lohmeyer*, ed. Werner Schmauch (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951), 203.

31 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 81.

32 Ibid., 87.

33 Jeremias in *TWNT*, 4:872.

I T S L I F E S T Y L E 103

have been linked to Jewish proselyte baptism.<sup>34</sup> According to some Jewish traditions, the baptism of the proselyte furnished him with the same experience that the wilderness generation underwent in their passing through the Red Sea. The proselyte had to be circumcised, pass through the Red Sea, enter the wilderness, and offer sacrifice even as the original Israelite nation had done.<sup>35</sup> This understanding is supported by the affirmation that the non-Jew had not only to be circumcised, but also

to be associated symbolically and sacramentally with the historical acts through which the election of the Jewish people took place. Like Israel he had to depart from Egypt and march through the Red Sea to be received into the covenant of God in the desert.<sup>36</sup>

Whether or not this explains the baptism of John, the wilderness clearly had messianic significance in his ministry. The widespread interest in the wilderness was reflected in John's stance "in the wilderness."

b. *Jesus*. Jesus went out to John in the wilderness, where he submitted to John's baptism and received the heavenly designation of "Son." From there he was driven further into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. He remained in the desert forty days, where he lived with the wild beasts and received the ministry of angels (Mark 1:9-13).

This wilderness setting was not merely a geographical detail. It had theological significance for the ministry of Jesus.

<sup>34</sup> Joachim Jeremias, "Der Ursprung der Johannestaufe," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 28 (1929): 312-20. Jeremias repeats his hypothesis in *TWNT*, 4:872.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremias, "Der Ursprung der Johannestaufe," 317.

36 Harald Sahlin, "The New Exodus of Salvation according to Saint Paul," in

*The Root and the Vine*, ed. Anton Fridrichsen (London: Dacre, 1953), 89.

## **104 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

This significance was not lost when he left the wilderness and went into Galilee (Mark 1:14), for the wilderness theme continually recurs in the gospel tradition.<sup>37</sup> As in the case of John, the ministry of Christ was closely related to the desert.

The wilderness tradition plays its most obvious role in Jesus' temptation. Forty days and nights may not amount to forty years, but the parallels between Israel's and Christ's temptation in the wilderness cannot be missed. Besides the general scene of testing, all of Christ's replies come from Deuteronomy, and even more specifically from passages relating to Israel's testing in the wilderness.<sup>38</sup> The setting on a mountain, with wild beasts and angels present, fits the Israelite traditions all too well. The new messianic era has begun, and Jesus succeeds in his period of testing where Israel failed.<sup>39</sup>

Several studies have explored the theological significance of the wilderness theme in the designation of Jesus as God's

"Son" let out of Egypt,<sup>40</sup> in his calling of the twelve disciples,<sup>41</sup> in his delivery of the new law in the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>42</sup> in the feeding of the five thousand,<sup>43</sup> in his transfiguration on the mountain,<sup>44</sup> and in the "exodus" of his de-  
cease.<sup>45</sup> None of these suggestions may be cast off lightly. The recurring of the wilderness tradition in the Synoptic Gospels cannot be escaped.

37 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 102.

38 T. Francis Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM, 1963), 21-22; Jean Danielou, *Sacramentum futuri: Etudes sur les origines de la typologie*

*biblique* (Paris: Beauchesne et ses Fils, 1950), 135.

39 Milik, *Ten Years of Discovery in the Wilderness of Judea*, 115.

40 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 96.

41 Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: Die typologische Deutung des Alten Testaments im Neuen* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1939), 127.

42 Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel*, 22.

43 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 135ff.

44 *Ibid.*, 110-11.

45 Jindrich Manek, "The New Exodus in the Book of Luke," *Novum Testamentum* 2 (1957): 12, 15.

The same desert motif plays an important part in the fourth gospel's presentation of Christ. T. F. Glasson, in *Moses in the Fourth Gospel*, presents those aspects of John's gospel which he sees as depicting Christ as the second Moses.<sup>46</sup> Such chapters as "The Serpent in the Wilderness," "The Manna and the Bread of Life," "The Living Water and the Rock," "The Light of the World and the Three Gifts," "Christ and the Torah," and "The Shepherd and the Lamb" indicate the connections he sees with the wilderness theme. Beginning with the reference in his prologue to the Shekinah as it tabernacled among the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings (John 1:14; cf. Ex. 40:36),<sup>47</sup> John returns repeatedly to the imagery of the wilderness days of Israel for the purpose of depicting Christ. As was conceded earlier, the wilderness cannot be regarded as the key to the New Testament presentation of Christ. Yet the Gospels clearly make full use of current messianic expectation, which envisioned a new wilderness experience. The saving events of the new covenant are to be perceived as having their origin in the return of God's people to the desert.

c. *The Church of the New Testament.* The wilderness theme is also found in the New Testament description of the church. The fact that the gospel writers show such an awareness of it in their treatment of the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus indicates how influential this way of thinking was in the Christian community. Indeed, the church expressed its self-consciousness in terms of the wilderness motif. The clearest examples of this self-identity are to be found in Acts 7, 1 Corinthians 10, and Hebrews 3-4.

Stephen's address in Acts 7 makes extensive use of the wilderness theme. He refers to the establishment of law and cult at Sinai (vv. 38, 44), to the church "in the wilderness" (v. 38), and to the disobedience of the fathers during their wilderness wanderings (vv. 39-43). All this material appears in the

46 Glasson, *Moses in the Fourth Gospel*, 22.

47 Danielou, *Sacramentum futuri*, 139.

## **106 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

context of the development of the Exodus-wilderness-Conquest complex (vv. 36-45). Stephen's criticism of the Jewish localization of the place of God's blessing in the Jerusalem temple may be regarded as the practical application of a theology that un-

derstands the wilderness period as a visual representation of the relation of God to his people (Acts 7:48-50). God does not restrict himself to a single locality. He and his people are always on the move, dwelling in tents. As one commentator has analyzed Stephen's critique, "The mobile sanctuary of the early days corresponds with the idea of the ever-onward call of God to His people, the static temple does not."<sup>48</sup>

It has been suggested that Stephen intends to blame the apostasy of Israel on its departure from the wilderness, and wishes to protest the exchange of the tabernacle in the wilderness for the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> This thesis can hardly be maintained, for Stephen himself places the apostasy of Israel in the wilderness (vv. 39-42) and recognizes the divine appointment of the temple (vv. 46—48). Stephen's quarrel is rather with the interpretation placed on the temple by the settled Jews, which blinds them to the true nature of their relationship with God, a relationship which cannot be confined to a building. Stephen's review of the history of Israel emphasizes the unsettled life of the fathers outside the Promised Land. Abraham had to leave the land and never possessed it (vv. 2-4). Joseph



also wandered outside the land (vv. 9-10), and Jacob and his family had to flee to Egypt (vv. 9, 14—15). Moses was born in exile, lived in the desert country of Sinai, and received the law in the wilderness (vv. 29-38). The whole purpose of this polemic is to say something about the lifestyle that the people of God may expect in any generation. This life finds clear illustration in the experience of the fathers and in the life of the wilderness generation. With the deliverance from Egypt behind them and

48 William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), 35.

49 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 71.

#### I T S L I F E S T Y L E 107

the promise of settled rest before them, they endured their current life as wanderers, never fully possessing the promises. It is true that Stephen's primary application points to Jewish unwillingness to relinquish the stable religion of the temple for the worship of an omnipresent Messiah. But in the process he depicts the Christian church as resembling the wandering fathers and the wilderness generation of Israel.<sup>50</sup>

First Corinthians 10 offers further evidence that the

church thought of itself as a wilderness people. The church in Corinth had dared to take the grace of God for granted, and so had been abusing its Christian privileges.<sup>51</sup> Paul reminded them that the wilderness generation partook of Christ himself, and yet fell in the wilderness (vv. 3-5). The entire reference to the experience of Israel presupposes that the situation of the Christian church is not essentially different from the situation of Israel in the desert.

Still further, the reference to the eating of "the same spiritual food" (v. 3) and the drinking of "the same spiritual drink" (v. 4) may be intended to compare the miraculous provision of sustenance in the wilderness with the partaking of the Lord's Supper.<sup>52</sup> That connection would provide further evidence that the church conceived of itself as a people of the wilderness.

But more than any other New Testament book, the epistle to the Hebrews depicts the people of the new covenant as a people of the wilderness.<sup>53</sup> According to the writer of this

<sup>50</sup> Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 35.

<sup>51</sup> James Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 129; F.

W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerd-

mans, 1953), 219.

52 Cf. Goppelt, *Typos*, 174-75.

53 For an extensive treatment of the wilderness theme as it is developed in Hebrews, see O. Palmer Robertson, "A People of the Wilderness: The Concept of the Church in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Va., 1962).

## **108 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

book, the new wilderness people have been formed into a covenant community through a new covenant assembly that may be compared with the covenantal assembly at Mount Sinai in the desert (Heb. 12:18-24). Even as Moses was the representative head who led old covenant Israel through the desert, so Jesus stands as the head of the new covenant people, leading them into the realization of their heavenly calling (Heb. 2:10-3:6). God dwells in the "house" formed by the people of the new covenant, just as he dwelt in the tabernacle of the wilderness (Heb. 3:1-6). Even as Aaron the high priest represented the whole nation of Israel as their mediator, so Jesus the

high priest of the new covenant represents his covenant people in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 4:14-5:10; 7:1-28). In their current wilderness wanderings, the people of the new covenant live in a situation of tension between danger and deliverance, belief and unbelief, as did the Israel of the old covenant during their wilderness wanderings (Heb. 3:7-4:10). In this context, the new Israel of God must take care, lest they fail to enter into the rest of God, even as Israel failed (Heb. 4:11-13). During this time of journeying in the wilderness, as

they move toward the rest that remains for the people of God, the people of the new covenant must "draw near" to offer spiritual sacrifices, even as the priests of Israel did during their wilderness wanderings (Heb. 10:19—25; 13:15—16).

Even the eschatological expectation of God's new covenant people is developed in accordance with the imagery of Israel's wilderness experience. The rest that remains for the people of God reflects the rest of Canaan, which was the goal of Israel in the wilderness (Heb. 4:9). Also, the eschatological expectation of "perfection" may be related to the search for perfection in consecration through the cultic practices of Israel in the wilderness. Even the distinctive concept of faith in Hebrews may derive in part from Israel's situation in the desert. Faith is described not so much as belief in an event of the past as a believing and persevering hope in a promise for the future (Heb. 11:1). As Israel had to persevere despite the difficulties of

I T S L I F E S T Y L E 109

desert existence, so the members of the new wilderness community must substantiate the things hoped for by their faith.

Numerous additional allusions that present the church of the New Testament as being in a situation similar to that of Israel in the wilderness could be explored.<sup>54</sup> The church quite consciously related its situation to that of Israel in the wilderness. It found no difficulty in applying the experiences of Israel to its own situation.

### **Conclusion**

The messianic expectations of Jesus' day as represented in biblical and extrabiblical literature point up the continuing significance of the wilderness theme in Israelite thought. The wilderness experience became a concept of wide eschatological implications. God ordained that the eschatological age should experience its dawn in the context of the wilderness, and that the people of the new covenant could expect to live out their lives in the wilderness, as did the Israel of old. John the Baptist and Jesus both began their ministries in the wilderness. But even more significant for the present study is the New Testament view that God has ordained that the eschatological people of God remain in the wilderness. The "Israel of God" in this age of the new covenant may regard its salvation as having been accomplished, but it must

also live in the eschatological tension of the not-yet-fulfilled.

54 Cf. 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Peter 1:13-2:10; 2 Tim. 3:8-9; Jude 5; Rev. 12:6, 14.  
With

regard to Hebrews in particular, note the attempt of Ernst Kasemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1957), to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the wandering motif from Heb. 10:19 to the end of the epistle. He notes the use of verbs of motion, such as *proserchomai* (10:22; 11:6; 12:18; 12:22), *exerchomai* (12:13), and *anastrophe* (10:33; 13:7). He also describes the cloud of witnesses in chapter 11 as those wandering toward the city of God. Even the representation of the Christian experience as a race (Heb. 12:1-2) is seen to relate to the concept of the wandering people of God.

## **110 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

As Israel was delivered from Egypt and had to pass through the desert in order to reach the promised land, so the Christian is delivered by Christ from the bondage of the old age and is on the way to the new age which in faith is already present.<sup>55</sup>

So how should this perspective on the lifestyle of God's people under the new covenant affect the outlook of the Israel of God today? God's people today must accept their redemp-

tive-historical situation as something that has been determined by God for their benefit and for the benefit of the world. The kingdom for which they long has not yet come in its fullest, final form. For this hope they must wait expectantly. In the meantime, they must learn the lessons taught so vividly by the experience of their forefathers so that they will not fall into the same sins. They must accept with joy the appointments of a Lord, who continues to be patient with the world of rebellious unbelievers. They must not set their hopes on present, earthly circumstances, but must look forward to the transformation of all things that will come with the return of Jesus in his glory and the "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:19-21 **NASB**).

Once the wilderness lifestyle that has been appointed for the Israel of God in the new covenant has been recognized, the demise of a misleading triumphalism should quickly follow. For just as God's people under Moses spent forty years wandering in the desert, so the people of God today must expect a life "in the desert" until the time of the consummation. In this context, all false expectations that the triumphant kingdom of Christ will be realized in the present age must be set aside. In-



stead, the people of God must accept with joy the Lord's appointments for the present hour, and wait patiently until the coming of the kingdom of glory.

55 Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 67.

## FIVE | THE ISRAEL OF GOD

and the coming of the kingdom

Naturally great interest centers today on the question of the future of Israel. In an almost miraculous way this community of people has survived down through the centuries. Despite its repeated dispersions across the face of the globe, Israel still exists. Although powerful nations have set out to annihilate this minority group, it continues to answer each and every roll call of the communities of nations. The Hittites, the Moabites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Medes, and the Persians have all lost their identity. But the Jews remain. But what is the future of Israel in the plan of God? What does Scripture reveal about his long-term purpose for the Jews? The modern citizen of the state of Israel will declare with solemn determination: "The second Masada will never fall!" The Romans may have devastated that last Jewish stronghold

once in the past. But these people are determined that their nation will accomplish something that never before has been achieved by any other nation in the world. Ancient Babylonia may have fallen, as did the kingdoms of the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Germans, and the British. But this Israelite nation, it is proposed, will contradict the pattern of all previous history.

Or will it?

If Israel is to survive forever as a nation, it must be shown to have a distinctive connection with the eternal kingdom of

**111**

## **112 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

God. Otherwise, it may be expected to perish as all other nations have perished in due time.

In considering the future of the Israel of God in God's plan, two subjects in particular should be considered. One of these issues is broad in its scope, and the other is very specific. One issue has to do with the place of the Israel of God in the coming of the kingdom, which will be examined in this chapter. The other issue focuses on the future of the Jews as that is

set forth in Romans 11, which will be explored in the next chapter. By carefully analyzing these issues, further insight may be gained into the future of the Israel of God.

Clarity on the question of Israel and the coming of the kingdom hinges on preciseness of definition. The terms *Israel* and *kingdom of God* must be analyzed carefully. Then some affirmations may be ventured regarding the relationship between Israel and the coming of the eternal kingdom of God.

## **A. Definitions**

### 1. The Kingdom of God

God has exercised his sovereignty over all things from the beginning of creation. He is the king of the universe, and his kingdom embraces the whole of reality. When mighty King Nebuchadnezzar finally came to his senses, he declared, His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing.

He does as he pleases

with the powers of heaven  
and the peoples of the earth.

No one can hold back his hand  
or say to him: "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:34-35)

## T H E K I N G D O M 113

It is not only the rise and fall of nations that is determined by God's sovereign will. Even the hairs of every human head are numbered by the Almighty (Matt. 10:30). His kingdom is over all, and never shall it fall.

But within the all-encompassing realm of God's sovereignty, a more specific manifestation of his authority is displayed in the kingdom of his Messiah. "The time is fulfilled" (**KJV**), declared Jesus, "and the kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15). Echoing these very words, the apostle Paul speaks of "the fulness of time," in which God sent forth his Son (Gal. 4:4 **KJV**). Although the sovereignty of God had been manifested quite clearly throughout the preceding ages, it came to a focal point with the coming of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

As the drama of his coming into the world unfolded, Jesus made it plain that the messianic kingdom was to be realized in

two stages. First the Son of Man must be betrayed, rejected, beaten, crucified, and raised from the dead (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; Luke 18:31-33, etc.). Although he is glorious in his purpose and mission, he must experience humiliation at the hands of those who should be the subjects of his rule. But then the same Son of Man will come again in glory with all the holy angels. Seated at the right hand of God in a position of power, he will judge the nations (Matt. 24:30-31; Luke 21:27-28).

This twofold coming of the kingdom of the Messiah is constantly spoken of throughout the documents of the new covenant. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter explains that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was prophesied as something that would occur "in the last days" (Acts 2:17), corresponding to the present age of gospel proclamation. But in the next chapter, he indicates that Jesus "must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:21). Currently, the gospel is being spread throughout the world by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But in some future day the Messiah himself will return to restore the entirety of this fallen world. His kingdom is spreading now,

and his kingdom will be consummated someday in the future.

#### **114 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

The same twofold structure of the kingdom of the Messiah is seen in the book of Hebrews. God has spoken to us through his Son "in these last days" (Heb. 1:2). But someday in the future, "the world to come" will be brought into subjection to the sons of God (Heb. 2:5). Jesus appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. But he also will appear a second time to bring salvation in its fullness to those who are waiting for him (Heb. 9:26-28). Similarly, Peter in his first epistle contrasts "the last times" with "the last time." Jesus the Christ has been revealed "in these last times" for the redemption of his people (1 Peter 1:20), and these same people are shielded by God's power "until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

So the kingdom of God comes through the person of the Messiah. But the world should not be surprised at the humbleness of the first stage of its realization; nor should the world stop looking for this kingdom's glorious consummation, just

because of a long delay in its realization.

But what is the role of Israel in the coming of the messianic kingdom? Before this question can be reasonably answered, *Israel* must be defined. This term has various meanings, each of which is connected in its own way with the coming of the kingdom. The term *Israel* may refer to a place, a person, or a people.

## **2. Israel**

As a place, Israel is the Promised Land. This locale first came to the fore with the everlasting covenant that God made with Abraham. The place called Israel has a significant role to play in the coming of the messianic kingdom since the gospel of the kingdom was first proclaimed there. To this place and

1 For a helpful discussion of the two-advent structure of the coming of the messianic kingdom, see Richard N. Longenecker, "The Return of Christ," in *A Guide to Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl Edwin Armerding and W. Ward Casque (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1989), 145.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 115**

no other did the messianic king come, and in this place the sovereign Spirit of the Messiah was first poured out on human flesh. Israel as a place is significant in the coming of the king-

dom, but several other meanings of the term *Israel* must be recognized.

Historically, the term *Israel* first designated the person of Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham. This patriarch contained in his person all the subsequent generations of the covenant people of God. Ultimately in an even more significant way, God's Israel found its embodiment in the Christ of God. Whereas Jacob, or "Israel," had a vision of a ladder providing access to the heavenly realms, Jesus identified himself as the ladder on which God's Israel would ascend to the house of God (Gen. 28:10-15; John 1:47-51). He contained in himself all the people that he represented in the accomplishment of redemption. For they were chosen "in him," were redeemed "in him," and find their eternal security in their union with him (Eph. 1:4, 7, 13-14).

So *Israel* may designate a place or a person. But, in addition, the term may refer to a community of people viewed from a variety of perspectives:

- The ethnic descendants of Abraham, together with converting Gentiles, could be designated as Israel.



- The chosen remnant from within this people might also be designated as Israel, distinct from the rest of the nation (Rom. 9:6).
- From a new covenant perspective, "the Israel of God" could more inclusively be the body of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Gal. 6:16).
- In contemporary parlance, the Jewish state is called Israel.

These various groups are quite differently related to the coming of the messianic kingdom. A more detailed examination of the biblical testimony concerning the coming of the

## **116 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

kingdom should provide a proper framework within which to understand these relationships.

### **B. Affirmations Concerning the Relation of Israel to the Coming of the Kingdom**

Extensive investigation has been made of the teaching of Jesus regarding the coming of the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> According to Jesus, the kingdom of the Messiah exists now and is yet to come. Jesus' rule as the Messiah is proved to have begun if by the fin-

ger of God he repels the power of the Devil (Luke 11:20). At the same time, Jesus teaches that his kingdom is yet to come in its fullness. One day in the future, the Son of Man will come in glory with all the holy angels (Matt. 24:30-31).

But what precisely is the relation of Israel to this twofold coming of the kingdom? As this matter is considered, the various meanings of the term *Israel*, as previously discussed, must be kept in mind.

### 1. Israel and the Coming of the Kingdom in the Synoptic Gospels

The opening chapters of the life and ministry of Jesus relate the coming of the kingdom to the fulfillment of God's promises to *Israel*. At the very first shattering of the four-hundred-year silence between the testaments, the angelic messenger announces to Zechariah that his son (John the Baptist) will turn many of *the sons of Israel* to the Lord (Luke 1:16).

When he finally regains his ability to speak, Zechariah blesses the God of *Israel* because he has provided redemption for *his*

2 Cf., among others, Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962); George Eldon Ladd,

*The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (London: SPCK, 1974); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

## **THE KINGDOM 117**

*people* (1:67-68). Subsequently, John the Baptist remains in the desert until his public appearance to *Israel* (1:80).

So the inbreaking of the messianic kingdom began with a special focus on Israel. Clearly this nation had a unique role to play in the coming of the messianic kingdom of redemption.

The fact that Jesus made his entrance into the world through the cradle of Judaism should not be overlooked. More specifically, Mary declares that God has remembered to be merciful to *Israel his child* (Luke 1:54). In a similar way, the aged Simeon is described as waiting for the consolation of *Israel* (2:25). When he sets his eyes on Jesus at the time of the child's dedication in the temple, Simeon identifies him as "a light of revelation for the nations, and the glory of your people *Israel*" (2:32\*).

In the context of this acknowledgment of Israel's assured place in God's redemptive purposes at this early stage in the life of Jesus, certain qualifications must also be noted. As

Simeon indicates, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel" (Luke 2:34). His coming to Israel by no means guarantees that each and every Israelite will receive the richness of redemptive blessing. Instead, "many" in Israel will fall as a consequence of his coming. It should also be noted that the coming of the Messiah will by no means prove to be beneficial only to Israel. He is named initially as a light of revelation for *the nations*. In accordance with the promise as it was first given to Abraham, in him all the nations will be blessed. The precise relationship of the nations blessed in Abraham to the Israel of God will become clear as the ministry of the Messiah progresses. But clearly the nations of the world are included in the blessings of Messiah's redemptive kingdom. The birth of the messianic king also underscores the role of Israel in the program of the Messiah. When Herod inquires of Jewish scholars where their Messiah is to be born, they give an unequivocal answer. It must be "in Bethlehem," for the prophet has written, "Out of you [Bethlehem] will come a ruler who will shepherd *my people Israel*" (Matt. 2:6\*).

The beginning of Jesus' ministry indicates the ongoing role of Israel in the kingdom of the Messiah. The designation of exactly twelve disciples shows that Jesus intends to reconstitute the Israel of God through his ministry. He is not, as some suppose, replacing Israel with the church. But he is reconstituting Israel in a way that makes it suitable for the ministry of the new covenant.

From this point on, it is not that the church takes the place of Israel, but that a renewed Israel of God is being formed by the shaping of the church. This kingdom will reach beyond the limits of the Israel of the old covenant. Although Jesus begins with the Israel of old, he will not allow his kingdom to be limited by its borders. When Jesus hears that John the Baptist has been arrested, he deliberately situates himself at Capernaum in the territory known by the prophets as Galilee of the Gentiles (Matt. 4:12-17). Even though this city had a significant Jewish population, its location "by the sea" placed it, specifically from a prophetic perspective, squarely in the middle of the main trade route linking Africa, Europe, and Asia. As a consequence, Capernaum symbolized in the

mind of Matthew the vital connection of the proclamation of the kingdom of God by Jesus with the vast populace of the Gentile world.

This unlikely place quickly comes to be known as "his town" (Matt. 9:1; 13:54). By this choice of locale, Jesus indicates that his kingdom will have a worldwide scope. It was never intended to be limited to Israel.

Yet Israel continues to have a favored role in his mission.

When giving his first commission to his disciples, Jesus is very specific: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the *lost sheep of Israel*" (Matt. 10:5—6). The disciples are directed not to mingle with the Gentiles. They must not even enter a town of the Samaritans. Instead, it is to Israel that they must go. Indeed, the people of Israel are characterized as sheep, indicating their need of a shepherd to lead them. They are judged by Jesus to be "lost"

T H E K I N G D O M 119

sheep. Having wandered from God, their good shepherd, they must be regathered to him. Clearly according to Jesus, a priority of mission belongs to Israel.

This lostness of Israel is seen again when Jesus characterizes its leaders as "blind guides" who should be left alone (Matt. 15:14). He then goes to the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Yet in those distant regions, he rebukes a needy Gentile woman by reaffirming the special role of Israel in his mission: "I am not sent except to *the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matt. 15:24\*).

The two men on the road to Emmaus summarize their expectation up to the time of Jesus' crucifixion: "We were hoping that this was the one about to redeem *Israel*" (Luke 24:21\*).

Not surprisingly, the followers of Jesus viewed his mission to the very end as focusing on Israel.

The distinctive place of Israel in the kingdom of the Messiah will extend to the consummation of all things. For "at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne," those who have followed him will sit on twelve thrones judging *the twelve tribes of Israel* (Matt. 19:28). Jesus expresses himself in an identical way at the institution of the Lord's Supper:

I [covenant] with you a kingdom, just as my Father [covenanted] one with me, so that you may eat and

drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones,  
judging the *twelve tribes of Israel* (Luke 22:29-30).

A precise identification of these "twelve tribes of Israel"  
must be made with care. Nonetheless, the community of the  
consummation is designated by Jesus as "Israel." As has  
been said,

What has taken place in Christ forms the termination and  
fulfillment of the great series of divine redemptive acts in  
the history of Israel.. .. Therefore the still-to-be-expected  
future of the Lord and the continuing activity of God in

### **120 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

history are never to be detached from the fulfillment of  
God's promises to Israel, but rather must be understood  
in the light of them (cf. Rom. 11:15ff; 15:8-12).<sup>3</sup>

Yet it must be clearly understood that from the beginning  
of the gospel proclamation of Jesus, the door was opened for  
full participation by the Gentile community in the kingdom of  
the Messiah. In his gospel, Luke dramatizes the opening en-  
counter between Jesus and the Jews of his hometown of  
Nazareth. Jesus declares that many widows and lepers were in



Israel in the days of Elijah and Elisha, but Israel's prophets ministered instead to a widow of Sidon and a leper of Syria (Luke 4:25-27). The conditions for Gentiles to enter the kingdom of the Messiah are no greater than the conditions they faced to enter the community of Israel under the old covenant. By repentance and faith in the God of Israel, any Gentile could become a full member of the Israel of God under the old covenant. Jesus affirms that the same situation prevails in the kingdom of the Messiah that he is now establishing.

This principle is demonstrated by the salvation that comes to the Roman centurion at Capernaum. Because of the faith of this Gentile, Jesus heals his servant without going to his house. All he has to do is say the word. Jesus' response is categorical: "I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matt. 8:10; Luke 7:9). This Gentile's faith is more than sufficient to make him a recipient of the healing powers of the Messiah.

A tragic climax to Israel's relationship with the Messiah is reached in the payoff made by the Jewish leaders to Judas. Matthew sees the betrayal money as the price that the Jews were willing to pay to rid themselves of their shepherd. He

quotes the words of Jeremiah about "the price of the one whose price had been set" (Jer. 19:1-13). But then Matthew adds his own interpretive words, "[that had been set] *by the sons*

3 Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard DeWitt (London: SPCK, 1977), 50.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 121**

*of Israel*. " Their shepherd, their Messiah, had come to the Jewish people. But they had dismissed him at a paltry price. The intensity of their feelings in rejecting Jesus is echoed in the chilling words they subsequently shouted to Pilate: "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matt. 27:25).

The solemn consequences of this rejection find expression in the words of Jesus: "The kingdom shall be taken away from you and given to a people bearing the fruit of it" (Matt. 21:43\*). Israel as a nation would no more be able to claim that they possessed the kingdom of God in a way that was distinct from other nations.

Yet the people of the new covenant would still be designated as Israel, "the Israel of God." This new covenant people would be formed around a core of twelve Israelites who were

chosen to constitute the ongoing Israel of God. To this core were to be gathered Gentile disciples hailing from the east, west, north, and south, who would take their places in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29). With this purpose in mind, the risen Christ issues his Great Commission. He has all authority in heaven and earth as the messianic king. With that authority, he commissions his disciples to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:18-20).

So in the Synoptic Gospels the king comes first to Israel. Jesus recognizes the ongoing role of Israel in the formation of the new covenant people of God. The king determines the way in which an ongoing and on-growing Israel will contribute to the coming of the kingdom, even to its climactic end.

Significantly less attention has been directed to the subject of the kingdom as it appears in Acts and in Paul than in the Synoptic Gospels. Yet both of these sources provide important information on the relation of Israel to the coming of the kingdom.

## 2. Israel and the Coming of the Kingdom in Acts

The book of Acts opens with a reference to the forty-day

period between the resurrection of Christ and his ascension to

## **122 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

heaven. During this period, Jesus established himself as actually being alive after his death by providing many decisive proofs (*tekmeriois*).<sup>4</sup> He was being seen (*optanomenos*) by his disciples and was (constantly) speaking (*legon*) of *the things concerning the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3).

During this critical time prior to his dramatic departure, Jesus concentrated on teaching his disciples about the messianic kingdom that he had come to establish. But what did he teach them during this period?

a. *Background for the Teaching Concerning the Kingdom of God in the Book of Acts.* Obviously Jesus did not introduce the subject of the kingdom of God for the first time during these forty days of instruction. The background for this instruction about the kingdom in Luke's second treatise should be found in Luke's gospel. No attempt will be made here to provide a comprehensive analysis of the approximately forty references to the kingdom in the gospel of Luke. Yet three salient points that may have been relevant to the teaching of the resurrected

Christ may be noted:5

4 This term is quite distinctive. Ben Witherington III cites Aristotle as using the word in the technical sense of "necessary proof" (*Rhetor.* 1.2.16-17). He further indicates that Quintilian used it in the sense of "indications from which there is no getting away" (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 108). Joseph Addison Alexander,

*Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 5, says the word "is used by Plato and Aristotle to denote the strongest proof of which a subject is susceptible." During these forty days the Lord

provided his disciples with irrefutable proofs that he was alive. The faith of the Christian church rests on the firm foundation of the testimony of his chosen witnesses (Acts 10:41; see also 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:30-31).

5 This obvious background to the abrupt introduction of the subject of the kingdom of God in the opening verses of Acts is generally overlooked by the commentaries. Yet Luke's gospel should be viewed as providing the major basis for understanding his intention in introducing the subject, particularly as he begins Acts by referring to his "former treatise," in which he related all that Jesus "began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1).

## **T H E K I N G D O M 123**

1. The kingdom associated with the coming of Jesus is intimately connected with the promised kingdom of the old

covenant that God made with Israel. In the beginning of his gospel, Luke indicates that the Lord would give Jesus "the throne of his father David," and that his rule over the house of Jacob (Israel) would never end (Luke 1:32-33). Clearly Jesus' kingdom would have continuity with the covenants of old.

2. The kingdom of God as presented in Luke's gospel would be realized progressively. The coming rule of the Messiah had been prophesied earlier, but it actually began only after the ministry of John the Baptist. It was only after the time of John that the good news of the kingdom was being preached (Luke 16:16). Furthermore, the least in the kingdom of God was to be viewed as greater than John (7:28). Jesus declared that he had come to proclaim the good news of the presence of the kingdom (4:43; 8:1). He passed on to his disciples the same privilege of announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God (9:2, 60; 10:9, 11). If the question arose as to whether the kingdom was only "near" or actually had come, Jesus made the point quite explicitly: "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:21 NASB).<sup>6</sup> The presence of Jesus establishes the present reality of the kingdom of God. If the king has

come, the kingdom must be present.

At the same time, the kingdom in an important sense had not yet come. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2), which implied that the kingdom remained to be fully realized. As he approached the end of his ministry, Jesus taught his disciples about the signs that would mark the coming of the kingdom (21:31). He would not eat or drink with his disciples again until the kingdom had come (22:16, 18), which implies that the full realization of the kingdom of

6 The phrase could be read "within you," as in the NIV. But this alternative rendering of *entos hymon* also affirms the actual presence of the kingdom.

Other passages in Luke's gospel that recognize the present reality of the kingdom of God include 9:62; 12:32; 18:16-17.

## **124 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

God is still in the future. The disciples' question in Acts 1:6 about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel should not come as a surprise, considering the last words that Jesus spoke to them about the coming kingdom of God: "I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on

thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29-30).

So although the kingdom was present in the person and ministry of Jesus, it was also still future. This can only mean that it would come progressively. In light of this teaching of Jesus, his disciples should have been well prepared for the further unfolding of the kingdom of God as it actually developed in the book of Acts.

3. The kingdom that Jesus brought should not be understood as belonging exclusively to the ethnic descendants of Israel. Although this point is not stressed in Luke's gospel, it is nonetheless a part of Jesus' teaching. While the people of Israel had the privilege of witnessing the ministry of Jesus, many of them would be thrown out of the kingdom of God. At the same time, "people will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:28-29; cf. Matt. 8:8-12). This teaching about the universal scope of the kingdom fits right into the programmatic realization of the kingdom as reported in the book of Acts.

So the message of Jesus about the kingdom of God as



recorded in Luke's gospel helps to explain the experience of Christ's rule as reported in the book of Acts. This kingdom would represent the realization of the covenant promises given to the patriarchs in general and David in particular. It would come into its fullness in stages. Eventually it would encompass the Gentile nations spread all across the earth.

4. Luke's gospel also anticipates the distinctiveness of God's kingdom in Acts by emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus. Because the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, the "holy one" born of her would be called the Son

#### T H E K I N G D O M 125

of God (Luke 1:35). John characterized Jesus' ministry as a baptizing in the Holy Spirit, and so Jesus began his ministry by being baptized in the Spirit himself (3:16, 22). Only Luke indicates that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" as he was led into the wilderness to be tested as the second Israel, and only he notes that Jesus returned triumphantly after his temptation "in the power of the Spirit" (4:1, 14). Only Luke records Jesus' opening sermon in Nazareth, where he claimed to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy by having the Spirit of the Lord upon him

(4:18). Only Luke states that Jesus was "full of joy through the Holy Spirit" (10:21). Only Luke records Jesus' announcement that the Father would give the Holy Spirit to those who asked him (11:13).

Luke's distinctive emphasis on the working of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus provides a natural basis for understanding the central role of the Spirit in the messianic kingdom as it comes to light in the book of Acts. If Jesus was made holy by the Spirit, his people will become holy by the same Spirit. If he was baptized in the Spirit at the beginning of his ministry, then they may expect to have the same experience. If he was led by the Spirit, preached in the Spirit, and ministered in the power of the Spirit, then would not the citizens of his kingdom experience similar manifestations of the Spirit? Of course, the uniqueness of Christ must be maintained. But since he had experienced these manifestations of the Spirit, the citizens of his kingdom could also expect to participate in the workings of the Spirit.

The opening verses of Acts build on the teaching in Luke's gospel regarding the coming of the kingdom and its relation

to the work of the Spirit. In the forty-day period between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus was regularly appearing to his disciples and instructing them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). These forty days may be compared to the forty days in which Moses received divine instruction regarding the nature of the theocracy at Sinai (see Ex. 24:18; 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 11; 10:10). As one commentator notes, "There he [Moses at

## **126 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

Sinai] was given the programme of action for old Israel, as the Apostles are now given the message that is to be preached by the new Israel."<sup>7</sup>

In the closing words of his gospel (24:46-49), Luke notes that Jesus told his assembled disciples,

This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power [*dynamis*] from on high.

In one sense it is too bad the four gospels were not arranged in a different order in the binding of the Bible. If Luke had been bound as the fourth of the gospels, then its concluding verses would have immediately preceded the opening words of the book of Acts. Then it would have been more obvious just how much the words of Jesus at the end of Luke anticipated the beginning of Acts.<sup>8</sup> The "promise of the Father," the "power" from on high, the admonition to "stay in the city," and the "beginning at Jerusalem," followed by the preaching of repentance and forgiveness "to all nations," are all mentioned both at the end of Luke and at the beginning of Acts. Clearly, in composing the opening words of his "second

<sup>7</sup> William Neil, *Acts*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 64.

<sup>8</sup> This connection is recognized by Everett F. Harrison when he states that during the forty days between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus was "primarily occupied with explaining His mission in the light of the Old Testament (Luke 24:25, 44-47)" (*Acts: The Expanding Church* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1975], 37). Harrison continues: "The Kingdom, or rule, of God, as used in Acts, seems virtually to be a term for the Gospel

viewed in relation to the overall plan of God."

## THE KINGDOM 127

treatise," Luke intended to reflect the closing words of his gospel. Both the similar content of his two treatises and the way in which one concludes as the other begins, indicate that the gospel of Luke provides the background for understanding the teaching about the kingdom of God in the book of Acts.

b. *The Critical Question of the Disciples Concerning Israel and the Kingdom in Acts.* While Jesus was teaching his disciples about the kingdom of God during the forty days after his resurrection and eating with them, he directed them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4).<sup>9</sup> John the Baptist had baptized with the water of repentance, which initiated the era of messianic salvation. But they would be baptized in a few days with the Holy Spirit, and that would enable them to experience a dramatic manifestation of the distinctive characteristic of the messianic age (Acts 1:5).

The coming of the kingdom, then, centers on the sending of the Spirit by the Father. This baptism by the Spirit comes in

fulfillment of the promise that not only was announced by Jesus just before his death, but also was promised by the Father in ages long past (Acts 1:4). This "kingdom" about which Jesus continued to teach was the Father's kingdom, as was explicitly stated by Jesus when he taught his disciples to pray, "Father, . . .

The unusual Greek word *synalizomenos*, which most likely derives from the root for "salt" (*hatas*), literally means "while partaking together of salt," and conveys the idea of sharing a meal. Cf. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), 25-26; Neil, *Acts*, 65. The NIV rendering, that Jesus' instruction on this point occurred only "on one occasion," is possible. But the present participle "eating"

suggests that it occurred on more than one occasion. Cf. William J.

Larkin, Jr., *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 39-40: "Jesus gave this instruction on a number of occasions (not only once, as in the NIV)." A clear statement that the chosen witnesses of the Resurrection ate and drank with Jesus is found in Acts 10:41.

## **128 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

your kingdom come" (Luke 11:2). The "promise of the Father" is the promise that the Father has made regarding the coming

of his kingdom.<sup>10</sup> According to Peter's first sermon, it was "the promised Holy Spirit" that the exalted Christ poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2:33; cf. John 14:15-17, 26; 15:26; Joel 2:28). As a matter of fact, the whole expectation of redemption created by the decades, centuries, and millennia of the old covenant era could be said to focus on this great fact of the outpouring of the Spirit by the crucified, risen, and reigning Messiah.<sup>11</sup> If the purpose of God in redeeming sinners throughout the ages was to reestablish a oneness of fellowship between himself and estranged transgressors of his law, then the outpouring of the Holy Spirit by the Messiah into the lives of the redeemed brings this purpose to its fulfillment. Out of this establishment of intimate fellowship with God, which began in Jerusalem, came the impetus to reach out with the same message to the vast Gentile world. As Paul summarizes God's grand design, "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:14; cf. Eph. 1:13).

In this light, it becomes clear that the promise of the Father mentioned by Luke "must refer to the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> As a

consequence, the coming of the kingdom of God that is being

10 Brent Kinman attempts to separate Jesus' teaching about the kingdom in

Acts 1 from his reference to the Spirit by saying that he taught about the

kingdom of God (Acts 1:3) and then "afterwards" spoke about the Holy

Spirit (Acts 1:5) ("Debtor's Prison and the Future of Israel [Luke

12:57-59]," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999): 422.

But the reference to "the promise of the Father" in v. 4 joins the teaching of Jesus about the kingdom in v. 3 to his promise of the baptism of the Spirit in v. 5.

11 See the distinctive development of this "one promise" idea in Willis Judson Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963), esp. pp. 180-94.

12 I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commen-*

*tary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 58.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 129**

announced by Jesus "is synonymous with, or at least closely as-

sociated with, the coming of the Holy Spirit in power."<sup>13</sup> What

Jesus taught about the kingdom of God for the period of forty

days (Acts 1:3) is explained in the following verses as pertain-

ing to "the promise of the Father" (**RSV**) that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.



The continuous instruction of Jesus about the kingdom and the Spirit throughout the forty-day period provoked the critical question of the disciples, as the word "therefore" in Acts 1:6 indicates (**NKJV**).<sup>14</sup> Because of this constant teaching about the kingdom and the Spirit's coming "in [just] a few days," the disciples asked for more specific information about the time of the kingdom's coming. As a matter of fact, the imperfect tense of the verb (*eroton*) may indicate that the disciples were regularly asking, "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6 **RSV**).<sup>15</sup>

This question, placed so prominently by Luke at the beginning of his second treatise, cannot be ignored. What did the disciples mean by the kingdom being restored to Israel? How is the apparent avoidance of the question by Jesus to be understood? What role does this pivotal question play in the rest of Acts, or is it totally ignored after Jesus' rather abrupt response? Each of these matters deserves careful attention.

First of all, what did the disciples mean by the kingdom being restored to Israel? It ought to be noted at the outset that the disciples were not referring to "a" kingdom for Israel, dis-

tinct from "the" kingdom that Jesus had been introducing to

13 Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 109.

14 Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 28, argues that because *hoi men oun* is used frequently in Acts, it should be regarded as a simple connective. But since Jesus returns immediately to the subject of the baptism of the Spirit after being interrupted by the question of the disciples

(Acts 1:5, 8), it was indeed his comments about the coming of the Spirit

that evoked the question of the disciples. In this case, *oun* should be given the full force of "therefore."

15 Larkin, *Acts*, 40.

### **130 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

them. They were talking about "the" kingdom, the very same kingdom about which they had been receiving instruction from Jesus over the past forty days (Acts 1:3).

What can be said about the nature of this kingdom as understood by the disciples? The fact that they spoke of its being "restored to Israel" indicates that they were thinking of it as a national entity with its center located in Jerusalem and its domain encompassing the land of their fathers. They were expressing the Jewish hope that God would establish his rule, so that Israel would be freed from its enemies and reconstituted

as the great nation that it once was.<sup>16</sup>

Since Jesus had proved himself to be the Christ of the old covenant Scriptures, this question was one that was "most natural for Jews to address to the resurrected Messiah."<sup>17</sup> In this context, one could infer that these disciples' understanding of the nature of Christ's kingdom was little better than had been displayed by the Jews in the days of the Maccabees or by the Zealots in Jesus' own day.<sup>18</sup>

However, it should be assumed that during the previous forty days Jesus had provided some enlightenment for his disciples regarding his kingdom. Indeed, the idea of restoring the kingdom to Israel implies a return to the original form of God's reign among the Jews. Yet as one commentator has summarized the situation,

The question shows neither an absolute misapprehension of the nature of Christ's kingdom, nor a perfectly

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Says J. Rawson Lumby, "A temporal kingdom confined to Israel is what they still contemplate," since they had not yet understood the universal

scope of the work to which Christ was calling them ( *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges [Cambridge: University

Press, 1893], 4). Cf. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 30:

"The fact that the Apostles still expressed strong earthly conceptions by their question can scarcely be denied."

### T H E K I N G D O M 131

just view of it, but such a mixture of truth and error as might have been expected from their previous history and actual condition.<sup>19</sup>

Restoration of the kingdom after Israel's exile was a major expectation of the prophets of old (see Isa. 1:26; 9:7; Jer. 16:14-15; 23:5-8; 33:14-18; 50:19; Hos. 3:4-5; 11:11; Amos 9:11-12; Zech. 9:9-10), and it was exclusively to Jewish disciples in the ancient land of Israel that Jesus presented himself as their glorified, anointed king. So it should not be surprising that the disciples would speak in terms of a restoration of the kingdom to Israel.

But to get a fuller understanding of the significance of this critical interchange at the beginning of Acts, Jesus' response to

the question must be considered. It is often suggested that Jesus totally avoided answering his disciples. Some have supposed that Jesus made no response because the question showed such misunderstanding. As John Calvin states, "There are as many errors in this question as words."<sup>20</sup> He judges that the disciples "desire to enjoy the triumph before fighting the battle," and that they confine to Israel after the flesh the kingdom that should be extended to the farthest point.<sup>21</sup> From an alternative perspective, some have assumed that the question involves a perfectly legitimate focusing on the future kingdom that God has prepared for his chosen nation of the Jews, but that Jesus chooses at the moment to deal with the more pressing matter of the current expansion of Christianity.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1-13* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 29.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kinman, "Debtor's Prison and the Future of Israel," 423, says that Jesus chooses not to give a direct reply to their question, since they are not to be preoccupied with this issue. Instead, they are "to carry out the world-wide

evangelistic mission once the Spirit comes (v. 8)." From his perspective, the coming of the kingdom and the coming of the Spirit are two different things.

### **132 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

Jesus' response can be understood properly only by carefully considering the various elements of the question. The query of the apostles has three elements: (1) the reality of the kingdom itself ("Will you restore the kingdom?"), (2) the specific domain of the kingdom ("Will you restore the kingdom to Israel?"), and (3) the timing of the restoration ("Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"). In his response, Jesus refused to deal with the third element of the question, the matter of timing. It was not for them to know the times or seasons that the Father had set (v. 7). As Chrysostom says, "It is the part of a teacher to teach not what the disciple chooses, but what is expedient for him to learn."<sup>23</sup> So he tells them what they need to know, not necessarily what they want to know. But it must not be presumed that Jesus' response to his disciples' question consists solely of his rather curt rebuke to their query concerning the timing of the kingdom's arrival. On the contrary, the resurrected Christ proceeds to indicate that the

presence of the kingdom will be established by a display of its power in just a few days: 'You shall receive kingdom-power (*dy-namis*) when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (v. 8\*). The power of the kingdom of God would come down on the apostles in the form of the promised Holy Spirit, thereby manifesting the current reality of the kingdom.<sup>24</sup> Jesus' indication that the Spirit would come "not many days from now" may even be understood as a partial answer to the disciples' question concerning the timing of the kingdom's coming. Already during his earthly ministry, Jesus had taught that the displays of power in his miracles indicated that the kingdom of God had come.

For if by the Spirit of God he was casting out demons, then the kingdom of God had come (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). With

23 John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, Part I* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1851), 25-26.

24 Ernst Haenchen remarks that the Holy Spirit appears as the "mediator of marvelous power" ( *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971], 143, n. 7).

## **T H E K I N G D O M 133**

this coming of the Spirit, "the spread of God's rule was to take place by means of the disciples, empowered by the Spirit."<sup>25</sup>

When the Spirit came with power, "the long promised reign of God, which Jesus had himself inaugurated and proclaimed, would begin to spread."<sup>26</sup>

With respect to the domain of the kingdom, Jesus responded with a fuller answer, which anticipated everything subsequently related in the entire book of Acts: "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem and all Judea and in Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (v. 8 **NKJV**). This statement should not be regarded as peripheral to the question asked by the disciples. Instead, it is germane to the whole issue of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. The domain of this kingdom, the realm of the Messiah's rule, would indeed begin at Jerusalem, the focal point of Israel's life for centuries. So, unquestionably, Israel would be a primary participant in the coming of the messianic kingdom. Jesus was not teaching a "replacement" theology in which all connection with the promises given to the fathers is summarily settled, and the Israel of old is replaced by the church of the present day.

At the same time, the domain of this kingdom cannot be contained within the Israel of the old covenant. Going even be-



yond Judea and Samaria, this kingdom would break through the bounds of Jewish political concern and extend to the farthest corners of the earth. According to one insightful analysis of Jesus' statement to his disciples,

Not only was Jesus seeking to turn the disciples' attention away from such political concerns: he was also indicating that their forthcoming mission to the "ends of the earth" would itself be an indication of Israel's restoration and the means whereby the truths of that

25 Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 59.

26 John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 44.

### **134 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

restoration would be implemented upon the world-stage. Israel was being restored through the resurrection of its Messiah and the forthcoming gift of the Spirit. The way in which Israel would then exert its hegemony over the world would not be through its own political independence, but rather through the rule and authority of Israel's Messiah. The chosen

method of this Messiah's rule was through the apostle's proclamation of his gospel throughout the world bringing people into the "obedience of faith" (cf. Rom. 1:5). Jesus' concern, now as before, was not for a political "kingdom of Israel," but rather for the "kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).<sup>27</sup>

The kingdom of God would be restored to Israel in the rule of the Messiah, which would be realized by the working of the Holy Spirit through the disciples of Christ as they extended their witness to the ends of the earth. Already the universal extent of the messianic kingdom had been promised in the Scriptures of the old covenant (see Pss. 2:8; 19:4; 67:7; 72:8; Isa. 48:20; Zech. 9:10). Once the Messiah himself was seated on his exalted throne, he could pour out the Spirit that he possessed in fullness on the citizens of his kingdom. In the power of that divine Spirit, the messianic kingdom would spread to the ends of the earth.

Often believers in Christ do not fully appreciate the significance of their possession of the Spirit. Because his work is generally done in quiet, unobtrusive ways, the fact that God's

power is resident within them is not adequately appreciated.

But divine power has been unleashed in the world by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church. This power is nothing less than the realization of God's kingdom in the world, and its manifestation will continue until the end of the age.

27 P. W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on*

*Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 292.

## **THE KINGDOM 135**

But the question still remains: Will there be a manifestation of the kingdom of God that will realize more directly the disciples' expectation of a "restoration" of the kingdom "to Israel"? Does the failure of Jesus to squelch that idea imply that a distinctive kingdom will be restored to Israel one day in the future?

Such a conclusion, based on the presumed silence of Jesus on the issue, contains all the weaknesses associated with an argument from silence. It might be supposed that a convincing case for a distinctively Jewish territorial kingdom could be made on the assumption that Jesus remained silent on the is-

sue as it was proposed by his disciples.<sup>28</sup> But it is far more likely that Luke deliberately positioned the disciples' question and Jesus' response in this prominent place at the opening of Acts because he intended to provide an extended, programmatic answer to the question by the whole of his second treatise. As has been noted, the remarks of Jesus regarding the kingdom power of the Holy Spirit indicate that he was already speaking of the coming of the kingdom in terms that were somewhat different from what the disciples had anticipated. Yet manifesting once more his genius as the master teacher, Jesus did not attempt at this point to wrench from the minds of his disciples every misconception regarding the kingdom. The depth of their blindness to the true nature of his kingdom had been manifested repeatedly during his earthly ministry. Even when he cited Scripture to make plain to them that as the messianic king he had to be humbled, mistreated, and even put to death, they could not understand him (Luke 9:45; 18:34; 24:25-26; see Mark 9:32). Early in his ministry he had displayed the principle that he would teach them "as they were able to understand" (Mark 4:33\*). So now he laid down

28 According to Kinman, "Debtor's Prison and the Future of Israel," 423, the failure of Jesus "to correct the disciples' misunderstanding," along with the remarks of Peter in Acts 3:19-21, provides "implicit confirmation of the premise of their question."

### **136 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

the basic principles of the kingdom he had come to establish while at the same time realizing that his disciples would be able to grasp all the implications of the universal character of his kingdom only as they actually were manifested as history unfolded.

The difficulty that the original disciples had in fully apprehending the universal character of the kingdom surfaces repeatedly in the book of Acts. When the apostles hear that Samaria has accepted the gospel, they determine that Peter and John must make a special trip to confirm this astounding development (Acts 8:14). Even after this experience, Peter can hardly accept the fact that he must share the gospel with the Gentile Cornelius, despite the repetitions of a heavenly vision (10:9-23). A major council of the church is called to debate the role of Gentile converts among the people of God (15:1-35). Even to the end of his book Luke presses on with

his point that the kingdom now embraces Gentile peoples along with Jews (13:46-48; 18:5-6; 22:21; 26:20). Because the Jews in Rome will not receive his message, Paul declares, "Therefore I want you to know that to the Gentiles God's salvation has been sent, and they will listen!" (Acts 28:28\*).<sup>29</sup> In view of this demonstrated slowness on the part of the church to grasp the character of the kingdom even as they experienced its reality, it is not surprising that Jesus did not attempt to remove all the misunderstandings of his disciples before any of these events occurred.

The disciples must have understood that the Gentiles had a place in the messianic kingdom. But they had the greatest difficulty comprehending the "mystery" that the "Gentiles" would be in every way equal with the Jews as "heirs *together* with

<sup>29</sup> The emphasis placed on the Gentiles by the word order is rightly noted by Robert C. Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 78. He also correctly notes that a parallel emphasis had earlier been placed on the Jews as recipients of the message of

salvation (Acts 13:26).

Israel, members *together* of one body, and sharers *together* in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6).<sup>30</sup> It is this equality of possession of the kingdom-promises by Jews and Gentiles that still

today is most difficult for the church to grasp. While virtually every believer is ready to acknowledge that the Gentile has a place in the messianic kingdom, many have difficulty accepting the equality of Gentiles with Jews in the possession of the promises.

*c. The Role of the Kingdom in the Remainder of the Book of Acts.*

In the light of this analysis of Jesus' response to his disciples' question, the subsequent references to the kingdom of God in the book of Acts can be understood. The term *kingdom* occurs only six times in Acts after the initial question of the disciples. But the distribution of these references is significant. At each critical moment in the narrative, reference is made to the coming of the kingdom: when the power of the gospel is displayed in Samaria (Acts 8:12), when Paul provides an explanation for the suffering of believers at the end of his first missionary journey (Acts 14:22), during the three months and the additional two years of his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:8, 10; 20:25), and after he finally arrives in Rome (Acts

28:23, 31). At each of these new stages in the advancement of the gospel, reference is made to the presence of the kingdom of God.

These references to the kingdom in Acts shed needed additional light on Jesus' response to his disciples' question regarding the coming of the kingdom. The book of Acts continually ties the coming of the messianic kingdom to the power of the Spirit in the spread of the gospel. According to F. F. Bruce, the "hope of an earthly and national kingdom . . . was recast after Pentecost as the proclamation of the spiritual kingdom of

30 The threefold repetition of the conjoining prefix in *synkleronoma kai syssoma kai syn imetocha* emphasizes the equality of Gentiles with Jews in the possession of the promise.

### **138 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

God, to be entered through repentance and faith in Christ."<sup>31</sup>

The messianic kingdom may not be nonearthly and "spiritual" in nature, but Bruce is certainly correct in pointing out its worldwide scope. The following particulars regarding the term "kingdom" as it appears in Acts after chapter 1 may be noted:

- In Samaria the people believe as Philip preaches the good news of the *kingdom of God* and the name of Jesus



Christ (Acts 8:12). Consequently, they are baptized in the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:12, 17). It can hardly be imagined that Philip would have proclaimed to these Samaritans the good news of a future kingdom that would be distinctively Jewish in nature. Instead, Jesus Christ now became their Lord as well, since he poured out on them the same Spirit by which he had baptized the Jewish apostles in Jerusalem earlier.

- During Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas explained to the newly converted disciples, both Jew and Gentile, that they had to endure many hardships to enter the *kingdom of God* (Acts 14:22). Paul had just been savagely stoned for his proclamation of the gospel. He would not have been informing Gentile converts that they had to undergo such abuse so that they could enter a future kingdom distinctly Jewish in nature.

- On his third missionary journey, Paul spent three months in the Jewish synagogue at Ephesus, "arguing persuasively about the *kingdom of God*" (Acts 19:8).

Then he spent another two years in the city, having discussions daily in the public hall of Tyrannus, declaring the gospel to both Jews and Greeks (vv. 9-10). It might be supposed that while speaking with the Jews in the synagogue his subject would have been their special

31 F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3d edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 102.

### **T H E K I N G D O M 1 3 9**

kingdom that was yet to come, but that while speaking to the Gentiles he would have addressed a matter more relevant to them. But when he subsequently met with the whole body of Ephesian elders, Paul stated that all of them knew that he had gone about "preaching the kingdom" (Acts 20:25). Once more it is explicitly stated that the preaching of Paul on this missionary journey focused on the coming of the kingdom of God. Clearly again, the kingdom being proclaimed would not have had a distinctly Jewish character. This kingdom was being spread by the proclamation of a gospel that embraced Gentiles as well as Jews.

- The book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest. But the message he preaches is still the same. He solemnly testifies concerning the *kingdom of God*, trying to persuade his hearers about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets from morning to evening (Acts 28:23). Note that the apostle derived his teaching about the relationship of Jesus to the messianic kingdom of God from the Scriptures of the old covenant. He did not find a specifically Jewish kingdom predicted in the writings of Moses and the prophets, but rather the kingdom established by Jesus that embraced both Jews and Gentiles.
- The last verse in Acts confirms this analysis of Paul's reading of the Scriptures of the old covenant. As the book ends, Paul spends two whole years under house arrest in Rome, welcoming all who come to him. As they come, he proclaims to them the *kingdom of God* and teaches the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ boldly and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31). When this reference is compared with the opening

verses of the book, it becomes clear that Luke has bracketed his narrative with references to teaching about the kingdom of God. For the forty days between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus was teaching

### **140 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). During the two years of his forced residence in Rome, Paul was teaching about the kingdom of God (Acts 28:31). And while in Ephesus for three months and two years, he was preaching about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8; 20:25).

Is it to be supposed that during the critical forty days before his ascension, Jesus was teaching about the establishment of an earthly, Jewish kingdom somewhat along the lines of David's great empire, but that his disciples later proclaimed a different kind of kingdom? Or should it be assumed that Paul gave himself to teaching about an earthly, Jewish kingdom for the two years he was in Ephesus and for the two additional years he was under house arrest in Rome? That would hardly seem likely, especially since references to the proclamation of

the kingdom and to the work of the Spirit are regularly united in Acts. To be sure, the book of Acts does not deny the role of Israel in the coming of the messianic kingdom. The king's conquering Spirit is poured out first on Jews in the city of Jerusalem. Paul's strategy is always to go first to the Jewish synagogue, and then subsequently to the Gentiles. He constantly maintains that salvation is for the Jew first and then also for the Gentile (Rom. 1:16). Only after God's faithfulness to the fathers of old has been confirmed does the Lord extend his domain to include Samaritans and Gentiles.

This conclusion about the nature of the kingdom as it is presented in Acts is confirmed by the application of messianic passages from the Old Testament to the person and work of Jesus Christ in the book of Acts. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter interprets the words of David in Psalm 16 concerning God's "Holy One" as referring to Jesus in his death and resurrection (Acts 2:25-29). David knew that God had promised to place someone on his throne forever, and so he prophesied about the resurrection of Jesus. In addition, Jesus has fulfilled the expectation of Psalm 110 by being seated at

## THE KINGDOM 141

the right hand of God (w. 33-35). As a consequence, Peter can confidently affirm that God has made this Jesus who was crucified both "Lord" and "Christ" (v. 36). The promised kingdom of David has come. The messianic king now rules from his heavenly throne, as is seen by the fact that he has poured out the anointing Spirit (v. 33).

The second, climactic phase of the rule of the Messiah is anticipated by Peter in the next chapter of Acts. He encourages the people to repent so that God may send the Christ (Acts 3:19-20). For he must remain in heaven until the time of the restoration of all things as promised by the prophets (v. 21). Quite appropriately, this passage has been connected with the question of the disciples in Acts 1:6.<sup>32</sup> They had asked the risen Lord if he would at that time restore the kingdom to Israel. Now Peter calls on the Jews of Jerusalem to repent so that times of refreshing might come from the Lord (3:19). On the basis of this connection, some interpreters have concluded that "the times of restoration" of which Peter speaks involve the restoration of a distinctive kingdom for Israel.<sup>33</sup> However,

this conclusion overlooks the specific statement that this

"restoration" would encompass the renewal of "all things" as

32 See the detailed connection between the two passages made by Tannehill,

"Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," 76. Kinman, "Debtor's Prison and the Future of Israel," 424, goes so far as to conclude that the answer to the disciples' question concerning the time of the restoration of the kingdom

to Israel is provided here. Christ will restore the kingdom to Israel "once the Jews repent." Repentance by the Jews would obviously be significant,

but that can hardly be considered the principal factor in determining the time of the establishment of Christ's kingdom, particularly since Gentile conversions play such a prominent role throughout the remainder of

Acts. Furthermore, Jesus related the time of the coming of his kingdom

directly to the worldwide proclamation of the gospel: "This gospel of the

kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations,

*and then* the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). This teaching of Jesus on the

timing of the end coincides exactly with the overarching message of the

book of Acts.

33 Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," 76.

## **142 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

promised by the prophets (v. 21). Nothing less than the resur-

rection of the body and the rejuvenation of the whole earth could fit this reference to the restoration of "all things" (see Rom. 8:21).<sup>34</sup> In addition, this view ignores the universal dimension of the kingdom developed throughout the remainder of Acts. The salvation of elect Jews will not occur apart from an expansion of the kingdom that embraces the vast realm of the Gentiles, as Peter himself indicates. God has "raised up" his servant Jesus in fulfillment of the prophecy about the "raising up" of a prophet like Moses (Acts 3:26a; cf. v. 22). Now God has "sent him *first*" to the Jews (*hymín proton*). The inference that he has been presented "first" to the Jews implies that afterward he will be presented to the Gentiles. This conclusion is spelled out explicitly at the time that Paul is rejected at Antioch during his first missionary journey. He responds boldly to the rebuff of the Jews: "We had to speak the word of God to you first" (*Hymín en anankaion proton*—Acts 13:46). But having been rejected by so many of the Jews, Paul and Barnabas now will turn to the Gentiles, as the Lord commanded:

I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the



earth [*heos eschatou tes ges*]. (Acts 13:47)

The last phrase of that verse repeats exactly the words of Christ's "Great Commission" as reported in the response of Jesus to the question of his disciples at the opening of the book

34 Tannehill, in "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," 78, also makes much of the "hope of Israel" as expressed by Paul in Acts. He correctly identifies this "hope of Israel" with the resurrection of the dead. But he goes well beyond Paul when he includes the restoration of a Jewish kingdom in his references to the resurrection of the dead. The same idea appears in Vittorio Fusco, "Luke-Acts and the Future of Israel," *Novum Testamentum* 38 (1996): 1-17. Fusco says the hope of Israel "retains an aspect of nationalism" (p. 3). But the resurrection of the dead is universal in Scripture, and can hardly be connected with Jewish nationalism.

### **THE KINGDOM 143**

of Acts (Acts 1:8). From the beginning the Lord made it plain that his kingdom rule would include Gentiles alongside Jews. It hardly could be supposed that Peter was expecting Christ to return before this blessing of Abraham had been extended to all the families of the earth. For Peter himself quotes the very words of the promise that in the seed of Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed (Acts 3:25). Only after the

kingdom has been reconstituted in this new way will the rejuvenation of all things occur in conjunction with the return of Christ. It is through this twofold coming of the Messiah that the promise to Abraham will find its fulfillment. For by raising up his servant Jesus, God has provided the way by which the seed of Abraham will bless all the peoples of the earth (Acts 3:25-26).

Subsequent speeches recorded in Acts also emphasize that God has declared Jesus to be the reigning Messiah. Paul emphasizes that by exalting Jesus through the Resurrection, God has made him known as his Son who rules over the nations of the world (Acts 13:33, quoting Ps. 2:7). According to James, the turning of the Gentiles to the Lord indicates that the fallen booth of David has been restored, meaning that the kingdom of the Messiah has come (Acts 15:16-17, quoting Amos 9:11-12).

A theology of the Messiah and his kingdom is plainly unfolded in the book of Acts. Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah. His resurrection and ascension have brought him to a position of lordship over the universe. Israel has not been ne-

glected, since it has provided the foundation for the formation of the kingdom in this world. But the rejection of the gospel by so many Jews has become the occasion for its spread among the Gentiles. Through repentance and faith in Jesus as the promised Messiah, Jews and Gentiles together become participants in the present manifestation of the messianic kingdom. Far from being postponed until some future restoration of the Jewish nation, the messianic kingdom is being realized by the outpouring of the Messiah's Spirit on Jew and Gentile alike.

#### **144 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

Through participation in the kingdom now, both Jews and Gentiles are set to join the kingdom in its consummate state when the Messiah returns to restore all things.

*Conclusion.* In the book of Acts, the pathway to the realization of the kingdom of God leads further and further from an Israelite-based kingdom of God to a kingdom with worldwide dimensions.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the proclamation of the kingdom begins at Jerusalem during a Jewish festival, with the result that many Jews are brought into the kingdom. Judea remains the center of the kingdom's manifestation through Peter's healing

of the crippled beggar, the testimony of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin, the sharing of possessions by the early believers, the divine judgment that falls on Ananias and Sapphira, the healing of many by the apostles and their subsequent arrest, the choosing of the first deacons, and the stoning of Stephen. But then the focus begins to change. Mass conversions associated with the outpouring of the Spirit occur in Samaria, where the Jews normally have no dealings. An Ethiopian eunuch is converted in the desert on the way to Africa, and Saul meets the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. Cornelius, the Roman centurion, summons Peter to Caesarea, and Antioch becomes the first center for missionary activity.

What has happened to the primacy of Jerusalem and Judea? The apostles and elders do return to Jerusalem to settle a dispute about circumcision as it relates to Gentile con-

35 Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," 74-75, develops at length the idea that the experience of Israel in Luke-Acts is presented as "a tragic story." His thesis is that the expectation of salvation for the Jews led to a great disappointment as a consequence of their rejection of the gospel.

However, in a more balanced view, the unbelief of so many Jews would be

seen as "a tragic element in a triumphant narrative." For by the rejection of the Jews, the treasures of the gospel were brought to the Gentiles, even as many among the Jews also shared in its riches. In this way the original promise of the covenant to Israel was fully realized.

#### T H E K I N G D O M 145

verts. But the outward impetus of the expanding messianic kingdom cannot be reversed. For the remainder of the book of Acts, attention is focused on Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. Nowhere is it suggested that the outward direction will somehow be reversed, so that at the point of climax everything will center once more on Jerusalem, Judea, Israel, and the Jews.

This outward expansion of the domain of the Messiah as developed in Acts represents far more than mere silence about a distinctive role for Israel in the future coming of the kingdom. It offers instead a distinct alternative. All along, throughout the whole history of redemption, Israel was promised that it would be a blessing to all the nations. By the process described in the book of Acts, that ancient purpose is being fulfilled. For this reason if for no other, there is no need for Is-

rael to regain center stage. In this divinely ordered process, God has been glorified for his faithfulness to his promises, and the kingdom of God promised to Israel has finally become a reality.

### 3. Israel and the Coming of the Kingdom in Paul

For Paul, the kingdom of God may be designated as "the kingdom of Christ" (Eph. 5:5). By using this expression, Paul goes beyond the Gospels and the book of Acts in specifically identifying God's kingdom with the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. In this kingdom, Jesus reigns as Lord.

The current reality of Christ's kingdom had great practical significance for Paul, who continually had to contend with people promoting false doctrine and false morals. The apostle planned to go to Corinth and find out what power his arrogant opponents had, for the kingdom of God comes with power (*dynamis*) (1 Cor. 4:19-20). The risen Christ had promised that his disciples would receive power (*dynamis*) through the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), and Paul was confident that he possessed this power while his opponents did not.

Believers in Christ have been rescued from the power of

## **146 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col. 1:13). This kingdom does not have to do with meat and drink, the satisfaction of the basic desires of human flesh. Instead, it focuses on righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

The future dimension of the kingdom also had practical implications for Paul. He could admonish believers to walk worthy of the God who was calling them into his kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:12). The patient endurance of the believer shows that he is worthy of the kingdom of God for which he is suffering (2 Thess. 1:5).

Paul indicates that the unrighteous will never inherit God's kingdom. In one case he specifies ten, and in another fifteen, forms of immorality that characterize the people who will be excluded from God's kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21). The implication is clear. Only those whose lives have been changed by the power of the indwelling Spirit of God can expect to enter the blessedness of God's consummate kingdom.

Yet there must be a significant transition before a person can move from the present kingdom of the Messiah to the future, consummate kingdom. For flesh and blood, the present constitution of the human being, cannot inherit the kingdom of God in its final form (1 Cor. 15:50). A dramatic change must take place. Human flesh that is capable of corruption must take on a form that cannot be corrupted. An existence that is subject to dying must be remade so that it cannot die. Only then can a person be transferred from the present form of the kingdom to its consummate state.

In addition, a judgment is coming in which Jesus Christ will judge the living and the dead. Believers must discharge their stewardship "in view of his epiphany and his kingdom" (2 Tim. 4:1\*). Paul's expectation that the living will be judged along with the dead at Christ's appearance indicates that for some there will be no intermediate state between the two phases of the kingdom of God.

## **THE KINGDOM 147**

But what is the place of Israel in the coming of the kingdom for Paul? Does the Jew have a special role to play in the



realization of Messiah's rule in either of these two stages? How does the Jew fit into the coming of Messiah's kingdom in its present form, and how does he contribute distinctively to the arrival of the future messianic kingdom?

The concept of a messianic kingdom implies Jewish participation, for the idea of the Messiah arose in Israel. Accordingly, Jesus was born and died as the king of the Jews. The twelve apostles were Jews, and the first Christians were Jews. Paul recognized the advantages of the Jews in the purposes of God (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5).

But, sadly, not all Jews have participated in the kingdom of the Messiah. In one of his earliest writings, Paul describes how many Jews were rigidly opposed to the gospel of Christ: Those churches [of Judea] suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last. (1 Thess. 2:14-16)

Yet Paul can by no means be described as an enemy of the Jews. He could wish himself cursed from Christ for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom. 9:3). His heart's desire and prayer for them is that they might be saved (Rom. 10:1). At the time of his imprisonment, he can name two Jews who are his "fellow workers for the kingdom of God," but they are "the only Jews" that he can so describe (Col. 4:10-11). God has not cast off his people, for there is and always will be a remnant from the Jewish people according to the election of grace (Rom. 11:2, 5). And so "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom. 11:26 **KJV**). Whatever conclusions may be reached about this last passage, it is noteworthy that it is all *Is-*

#### **148 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

*rael* (not all the church) that will be saved. This is the specific language of inspired Scripture.

So from Paul's perspective, no question should be raised about the participation of Israel in the coming of the kingdom of the Messiah in its present form. Throughout the present age, Jews will be saved, and they will make a significant contribution to the kingdom of God.

But what will the role of Israel be in the final realization of the messianic kingdom? Will the Jews, the nation of Israel, and the land of patriarchal promise have a distinctive role to play? Special consideration will have to be given to the teaching of Romans 11 and the answer it may provide to this particular question. This chapter in Scripture has always been the focus of attention by those seeking to ascertain the future of the Jews in the plan of God. The next chapter of this book will examine more closely the teaching of Romans 11.

The most remarkable thing about the remainder of Paul's writings is the lack of any suggestion that the Jews, considered nationally or individually, will play a distinctive role in the final coming of the kingdom of God. With an utterly even hand he excludes all the unrighteous, whether Jews or Gentiles, from the coming kingdom. Not one's ethnic origin, but one's faith in the Messiah who has come, determines one's participation in the eternal kingdom of Christ. Only faith distinguishes between the eternally saved and the eternally lost.

Indeed, the full picture cannot be grasped apart from a consideration of Romans 11. In that chapter, Paul speaks of

the "fullness" of Israel, of their "receiving," and of the salvation of "all Israel." These expressions must be given their full

weight. But otherwise, it is difficult to find in Paul's writings a special role for the Jewish people in the coming of Christ's consummate kingdom.

In any case, for Paul the kingdom of the Messiah has come, and it is yet to come in its fullness. For Jew and Gentile alike, the door is open to full participation in the blessings of this kingdom.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 149**

### **4. Israel and the Coming of the Kingdom in John's Writings**

**A great deal of attention has been focused on references to the thousand-year reign of Christ in the book of Revelation. But invariably this passage is considered in isolation from other writings that were very likely authored by the apostle John.<sup>36</sup> It is as though it has been established that no connection exists between the thought patterns of the fourth gospel and those of the book of Revelation. As a consequence, the broader theological framework that might help in understanding John's picture of a millennial kingdom has been largely ignored.**

**Assuming that this connection exists, it may be helpful first to consider the role of Israel in the coming of the kingdom as**

36 Much discussion has centered on the question of a common authorship for the gospel of John and the book of Revelation. A succinct statement of the various factors to be considered may be found in Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 27-35. Without committing himself in one way or the other, Morris notes a number of factors favoring a common authorship of the fourth gospel and the book of Revelation by the apostle John. First, the writer of Revelation identifies himself simply as John, and "only one John was great enough among the Christians to need no description" (p. 27). Second, early tradition is virtually unanimous in ascribing the book of Revelation to the apostle. Says Morris, "There does not appear to be evidence of any early or well-grounded tradition which regards anyone other than the apostle as the author" (p. 28). Third, while many differences in style from the fourth gospel may be noted, the many resemblances cannot be ignored (p. 32). These two writings, along with 1 John, are the only documents of the New Testament which refer to the *logos* (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13; cf. 1 John 1:1). Revelation and the fourth gospel also both use the imagery

of the "lamb" and the "water of life," while manifesting a number of other parallels. In short, the evidence is adequate to regard the two works as having a common authorship. Cf. the conclusion by Robert H. Mounce in *The*

*Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 31: "Since internal evidence is not entirely unfavorable to apostolic authorship and since external evidence is unanimous in its support, the wisest course of action is either to leave the question open or to accept in a tentative way that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee and disciple of Jesus."

## **150 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

it is presented in the gospel of John. Then with that background in mind, the role of Israel in the millennial kingdom of the book of Revelation can be examined.

Already in the prologue of John, the stage is set for a general resistance from the people of Israel to the coming of the messianic kingdom. This great Word that has become flesh "came to his own things," the things that he himself had made, "and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11\*). The Jews were uniquely "his own people," yet they rejected him. Some did receive him, and to them he gave authority to be-

come the sons of God. Those who believed in him were born of God, and did not derive their right to be God's sons from a human pedigree (vv. 12-13).

Throughout the gospel of John, the same perspective is brought out in numerous ways. Immediately after being identified as the Lamb of God by John the Baptist, Jesus did not go up to Jerusalem to launch his ministry. He traveled instead to Galilee, where he performed his first miraculous sign (John 1:43; 2:11). Then he settled into Capernaum with his mother and his disciples (2:12). When he did go to Jerusalem, he stirred up opposition among the Jewish leadership (2:17-19), which would ultimately lead to his crucifixion. Although many were believing in him, he would not entrust himself to them, because he knew what is in man (2:23—25).

When Nicodemus, a leader of the Judean Jews, visited Jesus, this highly educated man was instructed that he had to be "born from above" before he could see the kingdom of God (John 3:3\*). He had no greater opportunity to participate in the kingdom of the Messiah than the sinful Samaritan woman that Jesus confronted in John's next recorded episode. As a

consequence of her conversion and witness, many of the men in her village came to Jesus and were convinced that he was "truly the Savior of the world" (John 4:42\*). Jesus went first to the Jews, but he was equally the Savior of all people who would believe in him (cf. John 3:16).

After spending two days with the Samaritans, Jesus went

#### T H E K I N G D O M 151

once more into Galilee because he knew that he would not be well received in Judea. The Galileans received him (John 4:45). As the Samaritans embraced him as their Savior, so the Galileans also responded positively to him.

This warmth of reception by Samaritans and Galileans contrasted sharply with the reaction of the Judean Jews at Jesus' next visit to Jerusalem. Because Jesus claimed God as his Father, the Jews of Judea were (continually) seeking to kill him (John 5:18). As the Son of God, he had come to his own people in order to bring in the messianic kingdom. But if the Jewish leadership would do anything to aid in the coming of the kingdom, it would be by rejecting the Messiah, which would have the effect of sending him to his (atoning) death.



After teaching that no one was capable of coming to him unless it was given to him by the Father, Jesus could no longer walk freely in Judea because the Jews kept seeking to kill him (John 6:65; 7:1). Yet some believed in him as a prophet from God, or even as the Christ (7:40-41). Among those who were loyal to him was Nicodemus, the ruler of the Jews who earlier had come to Jesus by night (7:50-51).

When Jesus announced himself to be the light of the world, many put their faith in him (John 8:12, 30). But when he declared that he had existed even before Abraham was born, the Jews tried to stone him (8:59). People were divided over his statement that he was the Good Shepherd. Some said he was raving mad, while others reasoned that a demon would not be able to open the eyes of the blind (10:14,19-21). When the Jews tried to seize him once more, Jesus returned to stay for some time in the region of the wilderness where John had once been baptizing (John 10:40).

Once more, because he raised Lazarus from the dead, many Jews believed in him (John 11:45). But their leadership was concerned that because of his prominence the Romans would

come and take away "both *our* place and *our* nation" (11:48). So Jesus no longer moved freely among the Jews, but withdrew to a desert region where he stayed with his disciples (11:54).

## **152 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

At several points during his ministry, Jesus declared that his hour, his appointed time, had not yet come. He resisted suggestions offered even by his own mother and brothers because, as he said, "My time has not yet come" (John 2:4; 7:6). But when Greeks—non-Jewish foreigners—came looking for him, he suddenly declared, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified!" Then he referred to his imminent death (12:23-24). He spoke of his being "lifted up," and so drawing all people to himself (12:32). But having finished these statements, he hid himself from the Jews (12:36).

Despite all the miraculous signs that Jesus did, the Judean Jews still would not believe in him (John 12:37). Yet a number even from among their leadership did believe. But they would not confess their faith publicly, "for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God" (12:42-43 **NKJV**). In the end, the Jews handed Jesus over to the Roman governor and in-

sisted that he be crucified (18:30; 19:6). For this reason, Jesus judged them as having the "greater sin"—sin even greater than Pilate's (19:11).

So John in his gospel paints a vivid picture of the role of the Jews in the coming of the messianic kingdom. The first disciples came from among the Jews. Many Jews believed in him, though with various levels of commitment. But in the end it was the Jews that turned Jesus over to Pilate and insisted that he be crucified. In anticipation of this rejection, Jesus rejoiced when Gentiles came seeking him, for his mission had to embrace all the nations of the world.<sup>37</sup> When he would be lifted up, he would draw all the nations to himself (John 12:32). He

<sup>37</sup> Note in particular the prominence of "the world" in the fourth gospel as it is brought out by Peter Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 180-81. Walker notes that the term *world* occurs seventy-eight times in John, compared with only three occurrences in each of Mark and Luke. Says Walker, "His coming to Israel is really a divine visitation of the 'world' as a whole. Lying behind the events in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, is a divine entrance into the world. This Land merely happens to be the place where this cosmic event has taken place" (p. 180).

had "other sheep," not of the Jewish fold, whom he had to gather, so that there would be "one flock and one shepherd" (10:16). Jewish and Gentile believers together would constitute the community of the Messiah.

Many Christians assume that the other great literary work traditionally attributed to the apostle John, namely, the book of Revelation, focuses on the future arrival of the consummate kingdom. However, the overall structure of the book is best understood as organized around seven cycles that move "from tribulation to praise, from tribulation to praise, from tribulation to praise."<sup>38</sup> The time of tribulation is the present epoch of the messianic kingdom, while the period of praise anticipates the consummate kingdom that is to come. The book cannot be understood as moving directly in chronological order from the time of the apostolic church to the final consummation of all things, for midway through it the birth of Christ and his attempted murder by the satanically controlled powers of the state are described (Rev. 12:1-5).

What is the distinctive role of Israel in this movement from the present state of the Messiah's kingdom, in which its

membership is persecuted even to the point of martyrdom, to the consummate state of the kingdom, in which Christ and his people dwell safely in the perfect harmony of the new heavens and a new earth? Only two references to "Jews" and three references to "Israel" are found in the book of Revelation. Though few in number, these references shed some light on the role of Israel in the coming of the kingdom. In two of the seven letters to the churches that open the

38 These seven sections would be: (1) the seven lampstands (1:9-3:22), (2) the seven seals (4:1-7:17), (3) the seven trumpets (8:1-11:19), (4) the woman, the dragon, the beasts, and the lamb (12:1-15:4), (5) the seven bowls (15:5-16:21), (6) the fall of Babylon (17:1-19:21), and (7) final doom and final glory (20:1-22:5). For a development of this kind of structure, see William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1939), 25-31.

## **154 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

book of Revelation, reference is made to "those who claim to be Jews and are not." Instead, these people are of "the synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9\*; 3:9). They stand in sharpest contrast to those who are set to become pillars in God's temple,

with the name of God's new city of Jerusalem written on them (3:12). These references to pseudo-Jews communicate two firm convictions of the early Christians. First, members of Christian churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century were regarded as "Jews" in the proper sense, that is, as rightful heirs to the kingdom of the Messiah. For the promised Messiah, who holds the key to the kingdom of David, has used that key to open the door of the kingdom for them. As a consequence, they are set to become part of the temple of God with the name Jerusalem inscribed on them (3:7-8, 12). Second, members of the Jewish community who resisted the Christian gospel were viewed not as genuine "Jews" in the eyes of God, but as living under the influence of Satan instead (2:9; 3:9). The true Jews were members of the Christian church, believers in Christ, whether Jews or Gentiles in ethnic origin. But those who "pretended" to be Jews actually belonged to Satan, for they opposed the people of God. As one commentator has noted, "By rejecting their Messiah and attacking his followers they have forfeited the right to be called *Jews*, and by their slanderous accusations they have

made themselves agents of *Satan*, the Great Accuser (cf. 12:10)."<sup>39</sup>

These passages in Revelation echo the way that John in his gospel reports that Jesus addressed the unbelieving Jews of his day: 'You are of your father the devil, and the works of your father you will do' (John 8:44\*; cf. Rom. 2:28-29). Furthermore, it is quite significant that in the opening section of the book of Revelation, Christians are designated as 'Jews,' and 'Jews' are denied their claim to be the heirs of God's king-

<sup>39</sup> G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966), 35.

#### T H E K I N G D O M 155

dom. In this light, "Israel" is given a very specific role in the book of Revelation with regard to the coming of the kingdom of God.

Except for the allusion to Balaam's leading astray "the sons of Israel" in the days of Moses (Rev. 2:14), the book of Revelation uses the term *Israel* in only two places. In the first instance, reference is made to the 144,000 "from all the tribes of Israel" (7:4). This number seems clearly to be sym-

bolic in significance, for a number of reasons.<sup>40</sup> First of all, 144,000 represents exactly 12,000 from each of the designated tribes. Yet in each previous census of the tribes of Israel, the numbers from each tribe were significantly different (see, e.g., Num. 1; 26). Second, these 144,000 are identified as "the servants of our God," as those who were "sealed," as the ones "who had been redeemed from the earth," and as those who "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (Rev. 7:3; 14:3-4). Certainly more than 144,000 people fit into these categories.<sup>41</sup> Therefore these people should be understood as representing those who have been saved by Christ throughout all the ages. Third, the tribe of Dan is omitted from the 144,000, which indicates an arbitrary omission to reduce the number of the tribes to twelve. While some traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters have regarded Dan as an apostate tribe, the Scriptures do not sup-

<sup>40</sup> Richard Bauckham, in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 29, describes the book of Revelation in terms of its "numerical composition" and discusses the symbolic features associated with numbers in the book.

<sup>41</sup> The description of these 144,000 as "those who did not defile them-



selves with women" and so "kept themselves pure" (Rev. 14:4) would not assign a special state of purity to the celibate, since that perspective would contradict the whole of scriptural teaching on the purity of marriage (cf. Heb. 13:4). Instead, this reference to purity should be understood as a symbolic or ritualistic purity, which may be compared to the admonition to Israelite men at Mount Sinai to "abstain from sexual relations" (Ex. 19:15).

## **156 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

port this view.<sup>42</sup> Fourth, the 144,000 would appear to be connected to the "great multitude that cannot be numbered" (7:9\*). John "hears" the number of those sealed as 144,000, but "sees" a great multitude that no man can number from every nation, tribe, people, and language, wearing white robes and standing before the Lamb (Rev. 7:4, 9). This experience was like an earlier one in which John was told to behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, but actually saw a Lamb standing in the center of the throne (Rev. 5:5). Similarly, the 144,000 would be symbolic of the whole of the redeemed community, which would be the great multitude. As a consequence, the people of the new covenant who

originate from every nation, tribe, people, and language are regarded as the consummate realization of the perfected number of all the tribes of "Israel." In this sense it may be said that "Israel" plays a significant role in the coming of the consummate kingdom of Christ. The subjects of his kingdom, whether they originate as Jews or Gentiles, will ultimately be regarded as belonging to the twelve tribes of Israel.

This understanding of the 144,000 who constitute the twelve tribes of Israel accords with the testimony of the gospel of John. Just as John indicates in his gospel, some Jews believed

42 Cf. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 99. Caird notes that according to Irenaeus, John substituted Manasseh for Dan because Dan was the tribe from which the Antichrist was expected to come, according to Jer. 8:16. Rabbinic interpretation would agree with this negative assessment of Dan, since the town of Dan was one of the places where Jeroboam set up his idolatrous calves (1 Kings 12:29). In the *Testament of Dan* 5:6, Satan is represented as the tribe's prince. But the scriptural evidence cited does not support the conclusion that Dan should be regarded as an apostate tribe. The "snorting of the enemy's horses" coming from Dan (Jer. 8:16) does not mean that Dan was the originator of Is-

rael's enemy, but only that Dan, as one of the northernmost tribes, would receive the first assaults of the enemy. Cf. Jer. 4:15, which combines Dan and Ephraim in a similar context.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 157**

in Jesus, but many did not. At the same time, a number of Gentiles came to Jesus and were represented as the "other sheep" that must be joined to the one flock and be led by the one shepherd (John 10:16).

The other reference to Israel in the book of Revelation appears in connection with the symbolic representation of the new Jerusalem. The perfected bride of the Lamb comes down from heaven in the symbolic form of a city with twelve gates. On the gates of the city are written the names of "the twelve tribes of Israel" (Rev. 21:12).

It might be inferred from these names that the redeemed of the Lamb come from these Israelite tribes. However, elsewhere in Scripture the mixed community of redeemed Jews and Gentiles in the new covenant is called "the twelve tribes" (James 1:1).<sup>43</sup> It is this newly constituted community that comprise "God's elect." As "living stones" they are built into

"a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:1; 2:5).

In addition, the wall of the city described in Revelation is said to have a symbolic significance. This wall has twelve foundations inscribed with the names of "the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:13-14). If the twelve gates designate the people who enter the city of the saved through them, through which gate are the multitude of Gentile converts to enter?

Would it not seem likely that Gentile converts, brought to faith by the twelve apostles and their disciples, would enter through these various gates and so be regarded as belonging to the twelve tribes of Israel?

The paucity of references to Jews and Israel in the book

43 It is in this context that the reference in the Gospels to the apostles' judging "the twelve tribes of Israel" is best understood (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30). Jesus taught his disciples "as they were able to understand" (Mark 4:33\*), and so only later did the mystery become plain that the Gentiles would be joined to Israel as fellow heirs.

## **158 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

of Revelation has some significance for analyzing the relation

of Israel to the coming of the kingdom. Certainly the Jews who acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah will have a part in his kingdom. But particularly with reference to the consummate state of the kingdom, the book of Revelation focuses its attention not on a distinctively Jewish domain, but on the fact that "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15). The Messiah's name is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16). In this all-inclusive, consummate kingdom, he will reign for ever and ever.

These observations provide a framework for understanding the millennial kingdom in Revelation 20. No doubt dispute will continue over virtually every aspect of this passage. But it is quite difficult to establish that this kingdom, however it may be understood, is associated with a special working of God with the Jews at some time in the future.

Nowhere in Revelation 20 is it suggested that this thousand-year reign involves the establishment of a distinctively Jewish kingdom.

This point is commonly overlooked, and as a result it is as-

sumed in many quarters that the Jews will have a special place in the millennial kingdom. Yet those who come to life to reign with Christ for one thousand years while Satan is bound are nowhere identified as Jews. They are described instead as "the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus" and as those who "had not worshiped the beast or his image" (Rev. 20:4). In other words, they are faithful believers who have maintained their testimony despite persecution from Satan.

In determining the nature of the "thousand years" mentioned five times in this passage, the weight of exegetical evidence favors a symbolic rather than a literal understanding of this period of time. Favoring a literal understanding is the simple fact that the text says "a thousand years." But a symbolic interpretation offers a much better understanding of

## **THE KINGDOM 159**

the passage as a whole.<sup>44</sup> The following factors may be noted:

1. The whole of the evidence of the New Testament surveyed so far points to two phases rather than three phases of

the coming of the kingdom. In support of this perspective, the reference of Jesus to "this age and the age to come" is clearly intended as an all-inclusive expression. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in "this age" or in "the age to come" (Matt. 12:32; cf. Luke 12:10). Disciples who have left their possessions to follow Jesus will receive a reward in "this age" and in "the age to come" (Mark 10:29-30). Jesus deliberately intended to cover the whole spectrum of time by these two categories. Surely Jesus was not leaving open the possibility that people might be forgiven blasphemy against the Holy Spirit during the millennium, or that his disciples might receive no reward during that long period of time. Neither in the Synoptic Gospels nor in Acts nor in Paul nor in John can a passage easily be found that suggests that there will be an intermediate period between the present kingdom and the consummate kingdom.<sup>45</sup> This fact is can-

44 Says Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108, "The millennium becomes in-comprehensible once we take the image literally. But there is no more

need to take it literally than to suppose that the sequences of judgments

(the seal-openings, the trumpets, the bowls) are literal predictions. John no doubt expected there to be judgments, but his descriptions of them are imaginative schemes designed to depict the meaning of the judgments."

45 Peter Walker, in *Jesus and the Holy City*, 259-60, proposes that John had a vision of a "third era: the millennium," and asserts that the millennium can be distinguished, "not only from the final consummation of God's purposes (as symbolized by the descent of the new Jerusalem: 21:lff.), but also from the normal course of human history which precedes Christ's coming. It is in a class of its own." Walker bases his case for this "third era" on a chronological consideration, which is always dangerous in the interpretation of Revelation. He reasons that Rev. 19:11 must describe the second coming of Christ in triumph, and so the further activity of Satan in Rev. 20 must occur between the Second Coming and the final state of

## ^ 160 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

**didly admitted by one noteworthy advocate of a literal interpretation of the thousand years. He first says that "a millennial doctrine *cannot* be based on Old Testament prophecies**

**but should be based on the New Testament *alone*,"**46 **But then he admits that "no trace" of a millennium can be found in the**

**Gospels**47 **or in Paul, with one possible exception.**48 **This lack**

**of evidence for a three-staged coming of the messianic king-**



**dom outside of Revelation 20 strongly suggests that the reference to a thousand years should be interpreted symbolically rather than as introducing an entirely new stage in the com-**

**ing of the kingdom.**

**2. The symbolic use of numbers throughout the book of Revelation suggests that this number of one thousand is also symbolic in significance. The book begins with letters to seven churches. While these churches were actual communities, the number seven suggests that they were chosen to be symbolically representative of the whole Christian community. The**

things described in Rev. 22. But the cyclical pattern of "tribulation to praise" that has characterized the whole book of Revelation up to this point would seem to be repeated once more, beginning with the words "And I saw" that open Rev. 20. In any case, the whole two-age structure found throughout the New Testament can hardly be overthrown by one passage in the highly symbolic book of Revelation.

46 George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, 111.: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 32. Italics added.

47 Ibid., 38.

48 Ibid., 39. The proposed passage is 1 Cor. 15:23-26. The case rests on the assumption that an extended period of time is indicated by the word "then" that begins verse 24. When Christ comes, those who belong to him will rise, and "then" (i.e., after a long period of time, meaning the

millennium) the end will come. But this argument leaves the millennium hanging by an exegetical thread. The word translated "then" can refer to a brief sequence, as in verse 6, where Paul says that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Peter "and then" to the twelve—spanning only a portion of one day. For a more detailed refutation, see G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 238-45.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 161**

**seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven angels with seven bowls all fit into the same category of symbolic numbers representing the completeness of God's judgment (cf. Rev. 5:5; 8:2; 15:1; 16:1). The number 144,000 equals the number twelve squared and multiplied by one thousand, which also supports the idea of a symbolic number. Different references to the same period of time, once as 1,260 days, again as forty-two months, and again as "a time, times and half a time" (i.e., three and one-half years) also implies a symbolic use of numbers (cf. Rev. 11:2-3; 12:6, 14; 13:5). The number one thousand serves as an appropriate symbol for completeness, encompassing the whole of the current period in which Christ's lordship is being extended to all the nations of the world. This symbolic understanding of the one thousand years makes un-**

**necessary the injection of a third phase into the manifestation of the messianic kingdom that is otherwise unknown in the new covenant Scriptures.**

**3. The "binding" of Satan in a way that keeps him from "deceiving the nations" (Rev. 20:2-3) serves well as a description of the present age, in which the gospel is being spread to all the peoples of the world. In previous ages, the message of redemption was essentially confined to the borders of a single nation of the world. But now all nations are the privileged possessors of God's saving grace. Indeed, Satan is not yet destroyed.<sup>49</sup> But Jesus himself referred to the binding of Satan in**

*49 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 352, notes the argument that a number of passages in the New Testament indicate that Satan is quite active in the present age, not "bound." But these passages fall far short of proving that Satan is not now restrained. Luke 22:3 says Satan entered Judas, but Jesus kept all*

*the other disciples from falling. Acts 5:3 says Satan filled the heart of Ananias and Sapphira, but the final outcome of the incident was that "great fear seized the whole church" (v. 11). Second Cor. 4:3-4 says that the god of this world has blinded the minds of those who do not believe, but he has not blinded the minds of the many who have believed. Eph. 2:2-3 says that all of us were once under the influence of Satan, but now we are not. First*

Thess. 2:18 says that Satan once stopped Paul from making a visit, but Paul

## **162 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

**connection with the overthrow of his evil kingdom during his own earthly ministry (Matt. 12:28-29). His disciples rejoiced in the fact that even the demons were subject to them (Luke 10:17-18). When Greeks came to him, Jesus declared that "now" the prince of this world would be cast out, and that when he was lifted up, he would draw all men to himself (John 12:31-32). Clearly the power of the Devil to deceive the nations has been broken. Satan has not yet been destroyed, but he has been bound so that he cannot continue with his wholesale deception of the nations.<sup>50</sup> This description suits the present age, in which Christ's kingdom is spreading through all the nations of the world.**

**4. The reference to the souls of those who have been martyred, who have not worshiped the beast (Rev. 20:4), and who now are seated on thrones, well describes the state of Christians who have died during this present era.<sup>51</sup> Their souls are in heaven, where they reign with Christ until the final resurrection. It is not without significance that the description cen-**

**ters on the state of their "souls." Although the term *soul* may refer to a person's "life" in a more general sense, it may also be**

remains confident that he will make his divinely appointed journeys (Rom. 1:10; 15:28). Second Tim. 2:25-26 says that some are in the trap of the Devil, but Paul expresses the hope that God will lead them to repentance.

First Peter 5:8 describes Satan as a "roaring lion" seeking whom he may devour, but the saints cannot be devoured by him. Satan is still active today, but he does not have the power to blind the nations that he once possessed.

50 It has been argued that the description of Satan's being "locked and sealed" in the Abyss (Rev. 20:3) indicates that he has no power at all during the millennium. Yet those making this argument also explain that during the millennium many people will continue in their rebellion against Christ and will have to be forcibly subdued.

51 The NIV translation of Rev. 20:4 treats the faithful as a single category, which gives the impression that only martyrs are described in the verse.

But the untranslated "and those who" in the middle of the verse suggests a second category of people alongside those who have been martyred. For support of this view, see Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, 167.

## **T H E K I N G D O M 163**

used to indicate more specifically the soul as distinct from the

body, which is the case here. This analysis is supported by the reference to the "thrones" that John saw. The word *throne* occurs forty-seven times in the book of Revelation, and in every case it refers to a throne in heaven, except for Satan's throne and the throne of the beast (2:13; 13:2; 16:10).<sup>52</sup> So the likelihood is that the thrones in Revelation 20 refer to the places of honor accorded to faithful believers who have died in the present age, and whose souls have gone to be with Christ in heaven.

5. The "first resurrection" (Rev. 20:4-6) associated with the millennium is best understood as referring either to the renewal of life that occurs at conversion or to the transfer of the believer's soul from earth to heaven at death. Significantly, the same author who penned these words about the "first resurrection" also reports Jesus as saying, "A time is coming and *has now come* when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). This resurrection of the soul that occurs as the consequence of hearing the words of Jesus is immediately set in contrast to a final resurrection of the body: "A time is coming [but has not yet come] when all

who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:28-29). These two resurrections in the gospel of John correspond to the two resurrections found in Revelation 20. First there is the resurrection of the souls of believers. This renewal of life is experienced only by the blessed who have been redeemed (Rev. 20:4-6) . The rest of the dead do not live until the thousand years is ended. But then the general resurrection occurs, which involves all people and includes both body and soul (Rev. 20:11-15). So just as John in his gospel speaks of two resurrections, so John in Revelation writes about two resurrections. It would seem likely that the first of these resurrections in both

52 Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 236.

## **164 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

cases would refer to the present age of gospel proclamation. As a consequence, the period of one thousand years in which Satan is restrained from deceiving the nations would coexist with the present age. The souls of those who hear the voice of Christ come alive so that they experience a "resurrection,"



both as they believe and at the time of their death, when their souls are transferred to heaven. Either of these events would fit the reference to the "first resurrection" in Revelation 20:5. In this state of restored life, they reign with Christ throughout the present era. In this most natural way, the message of the book of Revelation is found to agree with the message of the gospel of John.

6. The idea of a middle phase in the coming of the kingdom, during which, for a thousand years, Christ physically subdues his enemies from an earthly throne located in Jerusalem, would be sadly anticlimactic in the experience of the Christian.<sup>53</sup> Already the believer is seated with him in heavenly places. Already he experiences the richness of life in the Spirit. Already he is aware that Christ rules over all the nations. Already he communes in prayer with the resurrected and reigning Christ. What then would be the advantage of an earthly throne from which Christ would subdue his enemies, and to which the believer would have to come for a special audience with his Lord? In other words, the present state of blessing for the believer is already so rich that nothing less than the con-

summate state would be "worthy to be its sequel."<sup>54</sup>

For all these reasons, the reference in Revelation 20 to a thousand-year reign of Christ is best understood as a description of the current period of gospel proclamation. In this era, the souls of those who have died while remaining faithful to Christ reign along with him in his heavenly throne. At the same time, Satan is restrained so that the good news of salvation can spread throughout all the nations of the world.

53 Cf. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 235.

54 Ibid.

#### T H E K I N G D O M 165

In conclusion, the point that is particularly relevant to the present discussion may be noted once more. There is little in this passage that suggests a distinctive role for Israel in this final phase of the coming of the messianic kingdom. The only possible suggestion of a distinctively Israelite role is the reference to "the beloved city," which presumably is Jerusalem (Rev. 20:9 **NASB**) . But this phrase explains the immediately prior reference to "the camp of the saints," which indicates rather clearly that the reference is not to the literal city of

Jerusalem.<sup>55</sup> Whatever may be one's view of the specifics of this chapter, it would be difficult to establish that the Jews are described as having a distinctive role to play.

This absence of a distinctive role for Israel in the coming of the consummate kingdom of the Messiah characterizes the whole book of Revelation. Nowhere in this book are the Jewish people described as having a distinctive part in this kingdom. For this reason, Romans 11 once again assumes critical importance. If Israel is to be understood as having a distinctive role in the coming of the messianic kingdom beyond the role it currently plays, that point will have to be established from Romans 11. It is that section of Scripture that must be considered next.

<sup>55</sup> For a succinct discussion of this reference to "the beloved city" in the context of various millennial viewpoints, see Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 237.

## SIX THE ISRAEL OF GOD

in romans 11\*

The establishment of the state of Israel in the twentieth century has fueled a new high in speculation about God's plan for the Jews. There have always been some who have boldly de-

clared that ethnic Israel would play a distinctive role at the end of the church age. But with the formation of the state of Israel, this expectation has reached new intensity. In these circumstances, few have dared to deny the likelihood of a special providence for ethnic Israel in the days of the end time. The view that God still has special plans for ethnic Israel is assumed to be supported by Romans 11 more than by any other passage in the Bible.

This chapter will evaluate the evidence that might be interpreted as supporting that view. Two matters will be examined:

(1) evidence that Romans 11 deals with God's present intention for ethnic Israel, and

(2) possible references in Romans 11 to God's intention to deal distinctively with ethnic Israel in the future.

1 This chapter is a revision of an article entitled "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?" in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker,

1979), 209-27.

## **168 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

### **A. Evidence That Romans 11 Deals with God's**

#### **Present Intention for Ethnic Israel**

In many places in Romans 11, Paul discusses God's purpose for the Jew in the present age. Indeed, this theme is important throughout Romans. When Paul begins this great epistle, he emphasizes the present significance of the Jew. The gospel of Christ is currently the power of God for salvation "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16 **NASB**). Chapters 9 and 10 also emphasize the present significance of Israel (see 9:1-5, 24; 10:1, 11-13). It would be surprising indeed if Romans 11, which fits so integrally into the unit of Romans 9-11, would entirely omit any reference to Israel's present situation.

Most commentators are well aware of the references in Romans 11 to God's current saving activity among the Jews. However, the pervasiveness of these references, as well as their significance for the total thrust of the chapter, is generally overlooked. Several key verses should be noted, particularly for their emphasis on the present significance of Israel in the plan

of God:

*I ask then: God has not rejected his people, has he? Let it never be! For even I am an Israelite, from the seed of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1\*).*

In answer to the question, "Has God rejected his people?"

Paul identifies himself as living proof that God's purposes for Israel are being realized in the present era. He himself is a trophy of the grace of God.

Paul does not respond to his own question by specifically asserting that God has not cast off his people Israel with respect to some distinctive future reserved for them. Rather, the apostle specifically points to concrete evidence of God's present activity among the Jews. He himself is an Israelite, thus indicating that the grace of God is currently working among Jews.

R O M A N S 1 1 169

*So also, even at the present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace (Rom. 11:5\*).*

Paul emphasizes the present position of Israel with the

phrase "at the present time" (*en to nyn kairo*). In the current situation, a remnant of Israel remains.

These two verses orient the first paragraph of Romans 11 (vv. 1-10) to the question of God's dealing with Israel in the present hour. Paul's discussion of the remnant as it has been preserved throughout redemptive history is intended to alleviate his readers' concern for the present condition of Israel.

Not all Jews currently believe the gospel, to be sure. But it has never been God's purpose to save the totality of ethnic Israel.

*Now I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry so that somehow I may arouse my own people to jealousy and save some of them (Rom. 11:13-14\*).*

The "arousing to jealousy" and the "saving" of some in Israel must be understood in the context of God's present dealing with the nation. Paul is describing the desired consequences of his ministry to the Gentiles. As a result of his current ministry, he hopes to see Jews moved to jealousy when they see Gentile believers sharing in the blessing of the messianic kingdom.

This reference to the present saving of some in Israel by the provoking of them to jealousy (vv. 13-14) is immediately connected with the "receiving" of the Jews in the following

verses (vv. 15—16). The "for if '>(ei gar) of verse 15 connects the "receiving" of the Jews with the present ministry of the apostle Paul in the gospel era. By his present ministry among the Gentiles the apostle hopes to move the Jews to jealousy and thereby save some of them. Their "saving" as described in verse 14 corresponds to their "receiving" in verse 15. In each case, Paul describes what he hopes will be the consequence of his current ministry.

## **170 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

So a major concern of the middle section of this chapter is the current results of Paul's ministry. The possibility of there being a reference to a distinctive future role for Israel will be considered in the second section of this chapter. But let it be noted at this point that current saving activity among the Jews is a central feature throughout this section.

The third major paragraph of Romans 11 (vv. 17-24) also presents the expectation of Israel's positive response to the present preaching of the gospel. Paul's kinsmen will be "grafted in" just like the Gentiles. "If they do not continue in unbelief' (NKJV) they will participate in the promises. This par-



ticipation by being "grafted in" cannot be postponed to some future time, while Gentile believers immediately experience the blessing of the covenant. Just like every present Gentile believer, every present Jewish believer will be grafted in. Like the previous sections of Romans 11, this paragraph emphasizes the present significance of the Jews in fulfilling God's purposes of salvation.

*For just as you once were disobedient to God, but have now received mercy as a consequence of their disobedience, so they too now are become disobedient with the consequence of your receiving mercy, in order that they also may now receive mercy (Rom. 11:30-31\*).*

The threefold "now" (*nyn*) of these concluding verses indicates that Paul's central concern continues to be the present response of Israel. Gentiles *now* have obtained mercy, and Jews *now* have been disobedient, that they also *now* may obtain mercy.<sup>2</sup> The summary statement of verse 32 strengthens the emphasis on the current significance of the Christian gospel for Jews as well as Gentiles: God "has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all" (NASB).

2 The textual problem of the third *nyn* is rather difficult. However, the combination X B and the uncertainty of the reading in p46 support its genuineness.

## **R O M A N S 1 1 171**

The argument of Romans 9—11 is essentially no different from the argument of Romans 1—3. The gospel is the power of God for salvation first for the Jew and also for the Gentile.

The point originally indicated may be reiterated. The references in Romans 11 to God's present intention for Israel are pervasive and are highly significant for the total thrust of the chapter. These references do not necessarily exclude parallel references to some future purpose of God for Israel. However, they warn the exegete against assuming too hastily that the entirety of Romans 11 deals with Israel's distinctive future. Furthermore, since references to the present role of Israel are found in each section of the chapter, the exegete must take into account the significance of the present role of Israel, regardless of the particular section of the chapter under consideration.

### **B. Possible References in Romans 11 to God's Intention to Deal Distinctively with**

## **Ethnic Israel in the Future**

References in Romans 11 to God's present dealings with Israel have by and large been ignored. At the same time, portions of the chapter that could be understood as referring to a special purpose for Israel in the future have been made the focus of attention. But a more careful examination of these passages may lead to a different understanding of the thrust of the chapter. Several sections in particular deserve special consideration:

*I ask then: God has not rejected his people, has he? Let it never be! For even I am an Israelite, from the seed of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew (Rom. 11:1-2\*).*

Paul's denial that God has cast off his people is generally understood as indicating that God still intends to deal distinctively with Israel in the future. This interpretation is based on a

### **172 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

particular reading of the apostle's question. Paul's query, "Has God rejected his people?" is read to mean "Has God rejected ethnic Israel with respect to his special plan for their future?"

Obviously, such a construction immediately prejudices the

case in favor of those advocating a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. Once the question has been assumed to have this thrust, Paul's "Let it never be!" simply verifies what is inherent in the assumed form of the question.

But the context of the apostle's question suggests an entirely different understanding of its thrust. Paul's inquiry is more radical than many have assumed. He asks, "Has God rejected ethnic Israel *altogether* as they might relate to his purposes of redemption?" Is there any hope for the continuation of a saving activity of God among Israelites? Have they stumbled so badly that they will fall (altogether) (v. 11)?

Ethnic Israel had rejected their Messiah. They had crucified the Christ. Would it not therefore be quite logical to conclude that God would reject ethnic Israel? If a Gentile rejects Christ, he is lost. Israel as a nation rejected Christ; so should not the nation be lost? Why should God continue to act savingly among the Jews? They received all the special favors of the Lord (Rom. 9:4-5) and yet rejected his Christ. Why should they not be cast off completely?

The evidence cited by Paul in Romans 11:1 to support a

negative answer to his question indicates the actual thrust of his thought. Has God cast off his people? No, for the apostle himself is an Israelite!

In order to answer his question, Paul does not marshal evidence that relates to the future of the Jews. He points instead to the reality of God's working in the present. He himself is an Israelite, thereby establishing that God continues to include Jews in his purposes of redemption. The apostle's answer deals not with the nation of Israel in the distant future, but with the condition of Israel in the present age. The apostle himself is an Israelite, and he shares in the salvation brought by the Messiah. Romans 11:5 further summarizes Paul's answer to the ques-

### **R O M A N S 1 1 173**

tion posed in verse 1. Has God justly cast off ethnic Israel, so that no hope of redemption within the nation remains? No, for "even . . . at this present time," in conformity with God's dealings with Israel in the past, "there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (NKJV).

Paul's answer to his own question does not spell out the details of a massive turning of the Jews to Christ at some future

date. Rather, his answer deals with the present condition of Israel in the gospel era. Indeed, the apostle's answer does indicate that ethnic Israel has a future. But this future is an integral part of the current era of gospel proclamation.

*Now if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! . . . For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (Rom. 11:12, 15\*).*

Clearly the apostle is describing a temporal sequence in these verses. The Jewish people reject their Messiah; then the Gentiles believe; then the Jews are provoked by jealousy and return in faith; then the world receives even richer blessing as a consequence of this return of the Jews.

One interpretation of these contrasting experiences of Israel assumes that their "rejection" coincides with the present gospel age, while their "acceptance" will occur subsequently, either at the very end of the present era or after the present age of gospel proclamation has ended.

However, this temporal sequence may be viewed from another perspective. The whole cycle could be considered as having

fulfillment in the present era of gospel proclamation. In context, Paul compares the experience of Israel to the experience of the Gentiles. According to verse 30, Gentiles once were disobedient, but now have received mercy. In the same manner, Israel is now found disobedient, that they may also now receive mercy. For both Gentiles and Jews, the full cycle of movement from a state of disobedience to a state of mercy occurs in the present age.

#### **174 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

From this perspective, the "acceptance" of Israel would refer to the ingrafting of believing Jews throughout the present era, which would reach its consummation when their "fullness" would be realized. The parallel experience of the Gentile world offers no support to the idea that Israel's period of rejection coincides with the present gospel age, while their acceptance is reserved for a subsequent era.

Crucial to the understanding of these verses is Paul's statement that by his current apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, he hopes to "save some" of the Jews (v. 14). This saving of "some" ought not to be regarded as the deliverance of a pitifully few Jews, hardly worthy to be compared with the "fullness" to be

saved at the end of time.

Quite the contrary, this saving of "some" is integrally related to one of the major themes of Romans 11. As Paul says, there remains at the present time a "remnant" according to the election of grace (v. 5). It is not that the "some" whom the apostle personally hopes to save are the "remnant" that he discusses throughout the passage. But the saving of some and the maintaining of a remnant are interrelated ideas. Paul's hope that some would be saved through his ministry is based on the principle that a "remnant" would remain throughout the ages. A remnant is too readily assumed to be small and insignificant. But the use of the word *remnant* does not by itself determine the proportion of the whole to be saved. It speaks instead of the sovereign intervention of God to effect the salvation of men despite the expectation, humanly speaking, that all might perish.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore quite appropriate to interpret the "full-

<sup>3</sup> Cf. V. Hertrich in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

1967), 204: "If the remnant is preserved only by God's action, the concept cannot be a quantitative one in the sense that the remnant has to be small.



The concept certainly contains a reference to the greatness of the judgment, but not to the small number of those who are delivered (though cf. Deut. 4:27; 28:62; Isa. 10:22)." Hertrich points to Mic. 4:7, in which the

### **R O M A N S 1 1 175**

ness" and the "acceptance" of Israel from the perspective of God's current saving activity. The apostle's argument builds on a principle that has been true throughout redemptive history. Although outwardly it may appear as though God has cast off the Jews, he nonetheless is working sovereignly to save some of them. The "full number" in Israel will be realized by the same process in which Jews are currently being received and added to the number. For the "remnant according to the election of grace" encompasses the same individuals as the "fullness" (i.e., full number) of Israel. The eye of man cannot tell how large this number is. But the eye of faith is confident that the full number is being realized. For this reason, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to posit some future date at which the remnant will be superseded by the full number. The completed "remnant" of Israel is precisely the "fullness" of Israel.

## Romans 11:17—24

This passage, with its reference to the regrafting of Israel, is frequently interpreted in terms of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. It is assumed that the figure of regrafting necessarily implies corporate inclusion at a future time when God will deal especially with Israel.

However, the argumentation of Paul specifically parallels the experience of Israelite believers with that of contemporary Gentile believers. Gentiles currently are being "grafted in" among the people of God to receive the blessings of redemption as they believe (v. 20). Ingrafting occurs when they exercise faith.

remnant is paralleled to a "strong people," and Mic. 5:6-7, in which the remnant is compared to the dew. In passages not specifically describing a remnant of people, the word is applied to the large areas of land "left" to be taken after Joshua's conquest (Josh. 13:1) and to the wood "left over" in the making of an idol (Isa. 44:17, 19). While a remnant may be small, most basically it is simply that which is "left," whether small or great.

## **176 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

What happens to formerly unbelieving Jewish people who believe? As they are provoked to jealousy through the apostle's

ministry, what relationship do they have to the true stock of God? Nothing in the imagery of regrafting suggests a delay in the incorporation of the believing Israelite. As each Jew believes, he becomes a partaker of the blessings of the olive tree. The current ministry of the gospel provides the catalyst for the salvation of Jews in precisely the same manner as it does for Gentiles. The major thrust of the apostle's argument about the grafting process is that Jews experience salvation and incorporation into God's people in precisely the same manner as Gentiles. Nothing in this figure of ingrafting communicates the idea of a distinctive and corporate inclusion of the Jews at some future date.

*For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: hardening in part has happened to Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11 :25-26a\*).*

These verses are the crux of the controversy. They anchor the argument in favor of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel.

Three aspects of this passage should be noted in particular:

1. "Hardening *in part* has happened to Israel" (v. 25). The

phrase "in part" (*apo merous*) is often interpreted as having a temporal meaning. The passage is thus read, "For a while

hardening has happened to Israel." But this interpretation has

little to support it. It is doubtful that the phrase has a tempo-

ral meaning anywhere in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> The phrase de-

clares either that "partial hardening" has happened to Israel

<sup>4</sup> William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1957), 507, find a temporal significance for the phrase

only in Rom. 15:24, but even this case is highly uncertain.

## **R O M A N S 1 1 177**

or that "part of Israel" has been hardened. Either of these un-

derstandings would fit in with Paul's earlier discussion of a

remnant from Israel that will be saved. Probably the apostle is

saying that a part of Israel has been hardened. But in either

case, "in part" does not have temporal meaning. This phrase

does not provide an exegetical basis for the idea that God in-

tends to initiate special saving activity in Israel at some time in

the future.

2. "Hardening . . . has happened . . . *until* the full number of

the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25). Initially it might seem that the word "until" (*achris hou*) implies that the hardening of Israel will stop after the full number of the Gentiles has been realized.<sup>5</sup>

However, the meaning of "until" in Romans 11:25 has been wrongly estimated. As a matter of fact, the term by itself cannot settle the question of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel.

As confirmation of this understanding, the nature of the "hardening" must be considered. Paul uses the terminology of hardening earlier in the chapter. He asserts that the elect in Israel obtained salvation, but that the rest "were hardened" (v. 7). By modifying the phraseology of his supporting quotation from the Old Testament, the apostle underscores divine sovereignty in this hardening. Instead of maintaining the negative form of the assertion in Deuteronomy to the effect that God has not given Israel a heart to know, eyes to see, or ears to hear (Deut. 29:4), Paul turns the phrase into a positive affirmation: "God *gave* them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not" (Rom. 11:8 **NASB**).

Hardening in this earlier verse in Romans 11 is clearly bound up with God's sovereignty in electing some in Israel.

Those who are not chosen are hardened by God.

The same terminology of hardening is found in John

12:40, which explains why the Jews did not believe Jesus' mes-

5 Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 420, n. 113, interprets this "until" as meaning "until that time in which."

But his analysis stretches the phrase beyond its natural significance.

## **178 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

sage: "For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and [hardened] their hearts' " (vv. 39-40).

Other New Testament passages using the terminology of hardening may refer either to men hardening their own hearts in sin or to God hardening their hearts (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14; Mark 3:5; 6:52; 8:17; Eph. 4:18). The situation is similar to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as related in the Exodus narrative, which attributes the hardening sometimes to God and sometimes to Pharaoh himself.

In any case, the "hardening" that has happened to part of Israel according to Romans 11 fits integrally into the historical outworking of the principle of election and reprobation. The

hardening refers not merely to hard-heartedness on the part of Israelites, but instead to the very mystery of election. From among all the people who are dead in their sin, God in the sovereignty of his grace has elected some to everlasting life, while the rest have been hardened.

Since hardening has always been part of God's work of salvation, one should pause before asserting too quickly that it will cease. It ought to be noted that Romans 11:25 does not actually make this assertion. The text does not say, "Hardening shall cease in Israel." Certainly the text is not declaring that the overarching principle of God's election of some and hardening of others will someday have no application in Israel.

Instead, the text affirms a continuation of hardening within Israel throughout the present age. God's decrees of election and reprobation continue to work themselves out in history. As a sovereign distinction was made between the twins Jacob and Esau, so throughout the present age hardening will continue.

But what about the future? Does not the apostle say explicitly that hardening will continue "until" a certain point in

time? Does not this assertion imply an end to the hardening?

The answer to this crucial question hinges on the precise force of "until" in Romans 11:25.

### **r O M A N S 1 1 179**

The phrase rendered "until" (*achris hou*) is essentially terminative. More particularly, it indicates the *terminus ad quem* rather than the *terminus a quo*. The phrase brings matters "up to" a certain point or "until" a certain goal is reached. It does not itself determine the state of affairs after the termination.

The subsequent circumstances can be learned only from the context. The significance of this point becomes apparent when the nature of the termination is analyzed more carefully.

In many cases, the termination indicated by *achris hou* has a finalizing aspect, which makes irrelevant questions concerning the reversal of circumstances that had previously prevailed.

This is obvious particularly in cases in which physical or figurative termination points are involved. For example, Acts 22:4 states that Paul persecuted Christians "up to" or "until" death.

The point of "until" is not that Paul's activity of persecution ceased after the Christians died. Instead, the point is that he



persecuted Christians "up to" the ultimate point, the point of finalization.

Hebrews 4:12 declares that the sword of the Spirit pierces "until" or "up to" the dividing of soul and spirit. Once more, the significance of "until" is not that the piercing ceases and another condition prevails from that point on. Instead, "until" has a finalizing significance. The piercing continues as far as possible. If there were any possibility of a deeper piercing, the process would continue.

The use of *achris hou* in eschatological contexts also illustrates its essentially terminative character. The phrase carries actions or conditions to the ultimate point in time, without stressing the reversal of prevailing circumstances afterwards. According to 1 Corinthians 11:26, the Christian community is directed to show forth the Lord's death "until" he comes.

The point is not that a day is coming in which the Lord's Supper will no longer be celebrated. Instead, Paul emphasizes that this celebration will continue "until" the end of time.

In Matthew 24:38, the people of Noah's day ate and drank "until" Noah entered the ark. The point of this assertion is not

## 180 THE ISRAEL OF GOD

that a day came in which the people no longer ate and drank, but rather that they continued with their eating and drinking until their "eschaton" arrived.

In 1 Corinthians 15:25, Paul declares that Christ must reign "until" he has put all his enemies under his feet. The point is not that a day will come in which Christ will no longer reign. Instead, the point is that he must continue reigning until the last enemy is subdued.<sup>6</sup>

In the same manner, Romans 11:25 speaks of eschatological termination. Throughout the present age, until the final return of Christ, hardening will continue among part of Israel. Too often "until" has been understood as marking the beginning of a new state of things with regard to Israel. It has hardly been considered that "until" more naturally should be interpreted as reaching an eschatological termination point. The phrase implies not a new beginning after a termination, but the continuation of a circumstance until the end of time.

In any case, "hardening until" does not by itself indicate that in a subsequent period of time the partial hardening of

ethnic Israel will be lifted. The phrase is more naturally interpreted as implying a *terminus ad quern*. At the least, "hardening until" does not by itself indicate whether God will in the future deal with ethnic Israel in a new and distinctive manner.

With this background in mind, attention now focuses on

the crucial wording of Romans 11:26. If a clear reference to a distinctive future for ethnic Israel cannot be found in verse 25

either in "in part" or in "hardening until," such a reference can only be found in the much-disputed statement of verse 26.

3. "*And so all Israel shall be saved*" (v. 26a). The question under consideration is whether ethnic Israel has a future that will

6 Joachim Jeremias, in *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Charles

Scribner's Sons, 1966), 253, makes the following evaluation: "Actually, in

the New Testament *achris hou* with the aorist subjunctive without *an* regularly introduces a reference to reaching the eschatological goal, Rom

11:25; 1 Cor 15:25; Lk 21:24."

### **R O M A N S 1 1 1 7 3**

be different from that which Israel experiences during the

gospel era. Jews have been saved and will continue to be saved

throughout the present dispensation. The question is whether

verse 26 speaks of a distinctive conversion activity of God in

ethnic Israel immediately prior to, or in conjunction with, the return of Christ.

First of all, common misconceptions of this verse must be removed. The passage is often read as though it were saying, "And *then* all Israel shall be saved." The phrase *kai houtos* is interpreted as though it possessed a primarily temporal significance: hardening has happened to part of Israel "until" the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; but *then*, after that, all Israel shall be saved.

Such a rendering of *kai houtos* obviously answers the question at hand in favor of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. The present "hardening" contrasts sharply with a future salvation.

However, the phrase *kai houtos* simply does not mean "and then." Instead, it means "and in this manner" or "and in this way." Of the approximately 205 times in which the word *houtos* occurs in the New Testament, not once does it have a temporal significance.<sup>7</sup> Paul easily enough could have said *kai tote*, "and then." But instead he says quite specifically *kai houtos*,

<sup>7</sup> See Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 602.

Outside the verse under consideration, Paul himself uses the term approximately seventy times. All of these uses are nontemporal, including four cases in Rom. 9-11. Several passages may be cited in an effort to establish a temporal meaning for *kai houtos*. The leading ones include John 4:6; Acts 17:33; 20:11; 28:14. But in each of these cases, a nontemporal meaning provides a better rendering. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963),

222, asserts that the phrase has temporal meaning, but he offers no supporting evidence. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 681, states that following "until," "some temporal weight cannot be excluded from the phrase, although the basic sense is 'thus, in this manner.' " But in the end, should not the weight given to a phrase correspond to its "basic sense."

## **182 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

"and in this manner."<sup>8</sup> A dramatic recoloring of Romans 11:26 emerges as a result of this more precise rendering of Paul's actual words: "And *in this manner* all Israel shall be saved." In such a manner, by such a process, thus, by this means, in the way described, Israel shall be saved.

By the phrase *kai houtos* in Romans 11:26, Paul does not look into the future beyond "the fullness of the Gentiles." Instead, he

looks into the past. He recalls the fantastic processes of salvation among the Jewish people as he has just described them. In accordance with the pattern outlined in the previous verses of Romans 11, "all Israel shall be saved." First the promises and the Messiah were given to Israel. Then in God's mysterious plan, Israel rejected its Messiah and was cut off from its position of distinctive privilege. As a result, the coming of the Messiah was announced to the Gentiles. The nations then obtained by faith what Israel could not find by seeking in the strength of their own flesh. Frustrated over seeing the blessings of their messianic kingdom heaped on the Gentiles, individual Jews are moved to jealousy. Consequently, they too repent, believe, and share in the promises originally made to them. "And in this manner" (*kai houtos*), by such a fantastic process which shall continue throughout the present age "up to" (*achris hou*) the point where the full number of the Gentiles is brought in, all Israel is saved.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the "all Israel" that is to be saved must be identified.

At least five different possibilities have been proposed. "All Is-

8 A good treatment of this question on a popular level may be found in D.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things* (Wheaton: Crossway

Books, 1998), 110.

9 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commen-

tary on the New Testament, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965),

97-98, says that this interpretation of "and so" in Rom. 11:26 leads to the relatively prosaic assertion that elect Israel will be saved. However, Paul is

not simply asserting that all elect Israel will be saved. He is emphasizing

the fantastic manner ("and in this manner") in which this salvation will be accomplished. Paul's explanation of this manner of salvation for Israel is

hardly prosaic.

### **R O M A N S 1 1 1 7 3**

rael" may be (1) all ethnic descendants of Abraham, (2) all

ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a

special working among the Jewish people, (3) the mass or at

least the majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving

activity of God, (4) all elect Israelites within the community of

Israel, or (5) both Jews and Gentiles who together constitute

the church of Christ, the Israel of God.

Since Scripture gives no hint of a "second chance" for sal-

vation after death, the idea that all ethnic descendants of Abra-

ham will be saved must be rejected. This conclusion is explic-

itly confirmed by Paul's assertion that "they are not all Israel that are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6 **NKJV**) .

Perhaps the most popular view today is that "all Israel" refers to the mass or majority of Jews living when the hardening of part of Israel is lifted. "All Israel" would refer broadly to the nation as a whole, but not necessarily to every individual in the nation.<sup>10</sup> However, in this context, "all" can hardly mean "most." The hardening in verse 25 refers to the historical outworking of reprobation, as indicated earlier. As Paul says, the principle of hardening means that "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear" (Rom. 11:7—8). If a day is coming when the principle of reprobation is lifted from Israel, then every single Israelite living at that time will be saved. If even one Israelite of that period is to be lost, then the principle of hardening or reprobation would still be active. If a time is coming when there is no more hardening in Israel, then the result will not be merely the salvation of the "mass." The demise of this principle would have to mean the salvation of "all" in a completely inclusive sense.

Does Paul's declaration that "all Israel shall be saved" then



mean that some day every living Israelite will come to salva-

10 This view is supported by Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 420; Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 681. Morris cites Old Testament passages that use the expres-

sion "all Israel" to refer to the nation as a whole, but not to each and every individual (1 Sam. 12:1; 2 Chron. 12:1; Dan. 9:11).

## **184 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

tion? Such an interpretation seriously complicates matters.

First of all, God has never obligated himself to save every single individual in any group of people. God has always saved individuals in and among those externally organized into a covenant community. So a distinction was made between Isaac and Ishmael (Rom. 9:6-9), between Jacob and Esau (9:10-13), between those spared and those destroyed around the golden calf in Moses' day (9:14-16, citing Ex. 33:19), between the faithful remnant and unbelievers in Elijah's day (Rom. 11:2—4), between enemies and companions in David's day (11:9-10), between believers and disobedient in Isaiah's day (9:29; 11:8), and between the saved and the lost of Israel in the present day (11:5, 7). If this pattern were changed in the future, it would introduce a principle foreign to all of God's pre-

vious redemptive activity, including activity under the gracious new covenant.

A further complication arises when "all Israel" is identified as every single Israelite living at some future date. This complication has to do with identifying Israelites. Who exactly is to be included in "all Israel"? Throughout this chapter it has been assumed for the sake of argument that a Jew was to be defined simply on an ethnic basis. But this assumption must now undergo serious scrutiny. Benno Jacob, the noted Jewish commentator on Genesis, insists that ethnic descent was not the ultimate basis for determining participation in the old covenant.

He says,

Indeed, differences of race have never been an obstacle to joining Israel which did not know the concept of purity of blood. Circumcision turned a man of foreign origin into an Israelite (Ex. 12:48).<sup>11</sup>

When God set aside Abraham as his instrument of blessing for the world, it was made plain that any Gentile could join the

<sup>11</sup> Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible, Genesis* (New York: KTAV, 1974), 233.

## R O M A N S 1 1 185

covenant community through the process of proselytism (Gen. 17:12-13). Furthermore, no legislation in Israel forbade the marriage of an Egyptian proselyte to an Assyrian proselyte. The offspring of such a union would be fully Israelite, yet completely non-Abrahamic in ethnic origin. On the other hand, any ethnic descendant of Abraham might be declared a non-Israelite as a result of violating the covenant (Gen. 17:14). For these reasons, "Israel" could never be defined along purely ethnic lines.

But if it is nonetheless true that all those identified with Judaism will one day be saved, should the Christian's perspective on evangelism be changed? If a person rejects the Christian gospel, should he then be encouraged to consider Judaism as an alternative? If a person could be persuaded to convert to Judaism, would he not be assured of eternal salvation if he should be alive at the time when the mighty working of salvation among "all Israel" begins? Since that time appears to many to be close at hand, should not Christians be encouraging as many Gentiles as possible to become Jews if they are unwilling to become Christians? The absurdity of such a suggestion

should be obvious.

Yet if all who are Jews will one day be saved, and if it is possible to become a Jew by the process of proselytism, then how could this procedure be excluded as a possible way of salvation? At the very minimum, the Christian today would have to rejoice at every new proselyte added to the nation of Israel because of the prospect of future salvation which that conversion would hold.

The idea that "all Israel" refers specifically to ethnic Jews is fraught with problems.<sup>12</sup> This concept overlooks many aspects

<sup>12</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 253, is certainly correct to reject the idea of a two-covenant theology in which God keeps his covenant with

Israel intact, while providing another covenant for the salvation of Gentiles. For a representation of this view, see Lloyd Gaston, "Paul and the Torah," in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. Alan Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 66.

## **186 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

of the biblical definition of Israel and contradicts the truth that God does not guarantee that a person will be saved if he

possesses certain external qualifications. These considerations strongly resist any identification of "all Israel" in Romans 11:26 with all ethnic descendants of Abraham living at some future date.

Who then constitute the "all Israel" that shall be saved?

Does the phrase embrace the whole of the church of Christ, including all Jewish and Gentile believers? Or does it refer more specifically to elect Jews who will be saved?

In actuality, a strong case can be made in support of either of these interpretations. Both of these views fit into the context of Paul's argument throughout Romans 11, and both support a valid theological point.

On the one hand, it could be argued that "all Israel" refers to all elect Jews within the nation of Israel. The commitment of God to preserve a select number from within the Jewish community pervades this section of the apostle's argumentation. By the process described in the earlier verses of Romans 11, all elect Jews will be saved. As particular members of the Jewish community are "moved to jealousy" when they observe Gentiles receiving the promises of the old covenant,

they are grafted into the true community of God. On this view, hardening has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and in this manner *all the elect within the community of Israel* will be saved. The fact that in this view the term *Israel* is used in two different ways in consecutive verses (Rom. 11:25—26) should not be disturbing.

When Paul says in Romans 9:6 that "they are not all Israel that are Israel," he is using the term *Israel* with two different meanings in a single verse.

If "all Israel" is understood as referring to those particular Jews from among Israel who have been chosen by God's sovereign grace for salvation, then the "mystery" mentioned in verse 25 may be understood more clearly. This mystery would then be that part of Israel has been hardened while the rest has

R O M A N S 1 1 187

been chosen for salvation. Earlier it was seen that this hardening is not merely a hard-heartedness on the part of some of the Jews, but the judicial hardening by God that stands as the alternative to election. As already indicated, Paul sharpens his Old Testament passage: "God *gave* them . . . eyes so that they

could not see" (Rom. 11:8).

It would be understandable if all Jews were lost, since Israel as a nation rejected Christ. On the other hand, it might be understandable if all Jews were saved in light of God's covenant promises to the fathers. But the fact that some Jews are lost and others are saved remains a "mystery" of God's grace. No one can fully understand this mystery. It remains a part of the hidden purposes of God, and reflects his sovereignty in saving some from among a mass of undeserving sinners and hardening others.

In light of this analysis of Paul's line of thinking, the conclusion may legitimately be reached that "all Israel" refers to all elect Jews. All of the true Israel of God, the elect of the Father, will be saved.<sup>13</sup>

However, further consideration leads to the conclusion that "all Israel" consists not of all elect Jews, but of all the elect of God, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin. The key evidence supporting this view is found in the phrase immediately preceding Paul's reference to "all Israel." He says that hardness has happened to part of Israel "until the fullness of the Gen-

tiles *has come in*" (Rom. 11:25 **NKJV**), and in this manner "all Israel" will be saved (v. 26). The "fullness of the Gentiles" refers 13 This is the position taken by the present author in the original version of

this material. Cf. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things*,

113: The words "all Israel" must mean "the total of all believing Jews in all ages and generations." Interestingly, this previous paragraph states that

"Abraham's seed" is not national, physical Israel. Instead, Abraham's seed is "all the children of faith, all who exercise faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and who belong to Him and who are redeemed by Him." Lloyd-Jones

then proceeds to affirm his personal faith in a mass conversion of the Jews before the end of time.

## **1 8 8 T H E I S R A E L O F G O D**

to the full number of elect people from among the Gentile nations of the world.

But into what do the full number of elect Gentiles come?

The answer is unavoidable. Believing Gentiles come *into Israel!*

Is that not exactly the point made by Paul earlier in this chap-

ter? Gentiles have been "grafted in among" the Israel of God

(Rom. 11:17). They have become additional branches, joined

to the single stock that is none other than Israel. As a conse-

quence, the believing Gentile community has become a "fellow



sharer" (*synkoinonos*) in the rich root of the olive tree that is Israel (Rom. 11:17). In other words, they have become "Israelites."

The same thought becomes a major theme in Paul's later letter to the Ephesian Christians. Once the Gentiles were "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship *in Israel*" (Eph. 2:12). But now these Gentiles have become "heirs together [*synkoinonos*—the same term as in Rom. 11:17] *with Israel*, members together [*syssoma*] of one body, and sharers together [*symmetocha*] in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6).

The full inclusion of the Gentiles into Israel is the other side of the mystery about which Paul speaks (Rom. 11:25; cf. Eph. 3:6). On the one hand, the mystery is that God in the sovereign dispensing of his grace has hardened some in Israel and has saved others. On the other hand, the mystery is that God has incorporated Gentile believers fully into Israel.

It is in this context that "all Israel" in Romans 11:26 reaches its final definition. According to Paul, "Hardness has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in [to Israel], and in this manner all Israel shall be

saved."\* The full number that are the product of God's electing grace, coming from both the Jewish and the Gentile communities, will constitute the final Israel of God. "All Israel," then, consists of the entire body of God's elect from among both Jews and Gentiles. This is the group whom Paul calls "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16, where he insists that Christians must walk according to the rule that no distinction is to

R O M A N S 1 1 189

be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people (v. 15). Here Paul clearly uses the term *Israel* to refer to elect Jews and elect Gentiles as together constituting the Israel of God. If he said otherwise, he would be countermanding his own "rule" for life that no distinction be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people with respect to their possession of the blessings of redemption.<sup>14</sup>

This interpretation of "all Israel" is supported by Paul's citations from the old covenant Scriptures. "All Israel" will be saved because "it is written" (Rom. 11:26b). The apostle then quotes passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah. The deliverer will come "out of" Zion and will turn ungodliness from Jacob (cf.

Isa. 59:20-21). According to his covenant with them, he will take away their sins (cf. Jer. 31:33-34).

A comparison of the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the New Testament reveals an interesting emphasis in Paul's analysis of Isaiah's words as they relate to "all Israel." Isaiah originally declared that a redeemer would come "to [or for] Zion." The Septuagint emphasizes that the redeemer would come "for the sake of Zion" (*heneken Sion*), which is an acceptable rendering of the original Hebrew (*lesiyyon*). But Paul modifies this perspective by stating that the redeemer would come "out of" Zion (*ek Sion*). Paul's slight change of perspective suits perfectly the missionary perspective that is found in the immediately preceding verse in Isaiah: "From the west, men will fear the name of the **LORD**, and from the rising of the sun they will revere his glory" (Isa. 59:19).

Paul's whole concept of the process of salvation history may be understood in this light. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, they are enemies "for the sake of" the Gentiles (Rom. 11:28a\*). This mode of expression is very strange indeed, and yet it fits perfectly into Paul's perspective on the relation of Jew and Gentile in

the plan of God. As a consequence of the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, the message of salvation has come to the Gentiles.

14 Cf. the fuller discussion of Gal. 6:16 above, pp. 39-45.

## **^ 190 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

This point finds concrete demonstration in Luke's record of Paul's first missionary journey. When the Jews of Pisidian Antioch began to speak abusively against Paul, he declared, "Since you ... do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). He followed the same pattern later in Corinth: "But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he . . . said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles' " (Acts 18:6).

So the rejection of Jesus by the Jews has brought blessing to the Gentiles. This fact never deterred Paul from presenting the gospel "to the Jew first" (Rom. 1:16). But it also encouraged him to take the same good news of redemption to the Gentiles, so that they might become full participants in the blessings of Christ. But as Paul also reasons, if the rejection of the Jews is the riches of the Gentiles, how much greater enrichment will their

fullness bring (Rom. 11:12). Converted Gentiles in their turn become God's instrument for the turning of elect Jews, which demonstrates that "according to the principle of election" they are still beloved of God on account of the fathers (Rom. 11:28b). By their reentry into the community of God, believing Jews bring great blessing to the whole body of Christ. As a consequence of this marvelous process, Israel is bound to the Gentiles even as the Gentiles are bound to Israel. It is in the fullness of Israel that the nations will experience their richest blessings, and it is in the conversion of the nations that Israel will realize its own God-appointed fullness. For "as Israel because of its disobedience has become a cause of salvation for the Gentiles, so now the Gentiles must provoke Israel to jealousy."<sup>15</sup> So it is possible to speak of an interdependence of Jew and Gentile in experiencing the blessings of the kingdom of the Messiah, of an "undulatory movement of salvation."<sup>16</sup> All this richness comes

<sup>15</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (London: SPCK, 1977), 359-60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

because of the gracious character of God's election and because of Christ, who is the seed of Abraham as well as the second Adam: the one in whom the whole church, Jews and Gentiles together, has become one body and one new man.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, God's gracious activity of calling the elect within Israel to salvation is tied to the present hour by Paul's threefold use of an emphatic "now." Gentiles *now* have been shown mercy; Jews *now* have been disobedient, that they may also *now be* shown mercy (Rom. 11:30—31).

One final point may be noted with respect to the larger question of the future of Israel as it is represented in Romans 11. Nothing in this chapter says anything about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, or of a return to the land of the Bible, or of the restoration of a national state of Israel, or of a church of Jewish Christians separated from Gentile Christians.<sup>18</sup> On the contrary, the redefined Israel of God includes both Jews and Gentiles in one body. In terms of the spread of the gospel today, it is essential that Jewish Christians recognize their fellowship with Gentile Christians to be a vital element in

the conversion of additional Jews. For whatever the wisdom of man might dictate, it is the wisdom of God's mystery that Jews will be converted as they are moved to jealousy when they see the blessings of their God on the Gentiles. At the same time, it is essential that Gentile Christians seek out a binding fellowship with Jewish Christians. For the conversion of Jews will enrich the experience of the gospel by the Gentiles immeasurably. Give all glory to God (Rom. 11:33-35)! Salvation is wholly of the Lord! Grace prevails! Yes, God will see to it that some from Israel are preserved in every generation. But they will be

17 Ibid., 361.

18 Cf. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 221; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979), 579.

## **192 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

joined by a great multitude from every tribe, kindred, and tongue and nation.

For of him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:36 **NKJV**).

SEVEN

concluding propositions

The concept of the Israel of God as it appears in Scripture has been considered from a number of perspectives. "Israel" has been analyzed as a land and as a people. The worship style and the lifestyle of God's Israel have been reviewed. The function of the Israel of God in the past, the present, and the future has been studied. Along the way a number of conclusions have been reached.

Now some practical outworkings of these conclusions relevant to the current situation in the land of the Bible may be noted. Because of the sharp division of opinion among Christian as well as non-Christian people, these practical propositions inevitably will not be accepted by all. But perhaps a small contribution may be made toward resolving the differences that divide Jewish and non-Jewish believers living today in the land of the Bible, even if these propositions provide only a catalyst for further discussion.

With this prospect in mind, the following propositions are offered. Since the basis for them has already been presented in the previous chapters, they will be presented simply in propo-



sitional form:

*Proposition #1:* The church of Jesus Christ, embracing the elect of God from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, is a part of the messianic kingdom of Christ, even though the church does not exhaust the dimensions of Christ's kingdom.

**167**

## **194 THE ISRAEL OF GOD**

*Proposition #2:* The modern Jewish state is not a part of the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Even though it may be affirmed that this particular civil government came into being under the sovereignty of the God of the Bible, it would be a denial of Jesus' affirmation that his kingdom is "not of this world order" (John 18:36) to assert that this government is a part of his messianic kingdom.

*Proposition #3:* It cannot be established from Scripture that the birth of the modern state of Israel is a prophetic precursor to the mass conversion of Jewish people.

*Proposition #4:* The land of the Bible served in a typological role as a model of the consummate realization of the purposes of God for his redeemed people that encompasses the whole

of the cosmos. Because of the inherently limited scope of the land of the Bible, it is not to be regarded as having continuing significance in the realm of redemption other than its function as a teaching model.

*Proposition #5:* Rather than understanding predictions

about the "return" of "Israel" to the "land" in terms of a geo-political re-establishment of the state of Israel, these prophe-

cies are more properly interpreted as finding consummate ful-

fillment at the "restoration of all things" that will accompany

the resurrection of believers at the return of Christ (Acts 3:21;

Rom. 8:22-23).

*Proposition #6:* No reestablished priesthood and no reinsti-

tuted sacrificial system ever will be introduced that would serve

to provide a proper supplement to the currently established

priesthood of Jesus Christ and his final sacrifice.

*Proposition #7:* No worship practices that place Jewish be-

lievers in a category different from Gentile believers can be a

legitimate worship-form among the redeemed people of God.

*Proposition #8:* The future messianic kingdom shall include

as citizens on an equal basis both Jewish and Gentile believers,

even as they are incorporated equally into the present manifestation of Christ's kingdom.

*Proposition #9:* The future manifestation of the messianic

#### C O N C L U D I N G P R O P O S I T I O N S 195

kingdom of Christ cannot include a distinctively Jewish aspect that would distinguish the peoples and practices of Jewish believers from their Gentile counterparts.

*Proposition #10:* The future messianic kingdom will embrace equally the whole of the newly created cosmos, and will not experience a special manifestation of any sort in the region of the "promised land."

*Proposition #11:* Gentile believers should diligently seek a unified ecclesiastical fellowship with Jewish believers, rejoicing when Jewish believers are regrafted into Christ and consequently bring immeasurable blessing to the world.

*Proposition #12:* Jewish believers should diligently seek a unified ecclesiastical fellowship with Gentile believers, rejoicing in God's purpose of bringing additional Jews to faith in Jesus as their Messiah by moving them to jealousy through the blessing of Gentile believers.

In conclusion, the promised messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ has come. Its arrival marks the focal point of all human history. This kingdom of the Messiah is continuing to realize its fullness as elect Jews and Gentiles are added to the community of the redeemed in every generation. The same kingdom will be manifested in its final form with the return of Christ the King in all his glory.

The Jewish people have always played a role in the coming of the messianic kingdom. They will continue to have a vital part in the Messiah's reign throughout the present age and into eternity. Yet not all Jews will experience the blessing of participation in this kingdom, for "they are not all Israel who are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6 **NKJV**). It will always be a remnant that is saved.

The present state of Israel is not a concrete realization of the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, a day should not be anticipated in which Christ's kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives either by its location in "the land," or by its constituency, or by its distinctively Jewish practices.

Instead, this present age will come to a climactic conclusion with the arrival of the final phase of the kingdom of the Messiah. At that time, all eyes will see the King in his glory. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

index of scripture

Genesis

13:5—8, 12

25:4—9

1:28—34

***14:10ff.—89***

***25:23—8, 31***

2—24n

15:24—89

32:30-32—88

2:7—24

16:3ff.—89

33:12-16—88

3:15—34

17:2ff.—89

10:8-12—61

17:12—36

Numbers

12:1—7

18:25—100

1—155

12:2—34

19-24—88

2:32—16

12:18-13:2—10

19:1-24:18—87

llrlff.—89

14—58

19:5—9

13:17-14:31—88

14:20—14

19:15—155n

13:27—8,12

15:5—34

20:12—28

14:20-35—87

17:1—20

23:20—102

15-19—88

17:12-13—185

24:11—93

15:22-25—88

17:14—185

24:18—125

16—88

18:17-19—23

25-31—88

16:1 Iff.—89

22:1-2—14

30:12—100n

21:5ff.—89

22:5—23

33:3—8,12

26—155

25:23—37

33:19—184

26:25—9

25:29-34—31

34:28—125

26:64-65—87

28:10-15—115

40:36—105

27:15-23—88

50:25—23

32:13—87

Leviticus

35:34—12

Exodus

1-27—88

3:5—11

18:25—12

Deuteronomy

3:6—23



18:28—12

1:1-5—90

3:8—8,12

20:18-21—88

1:15—100

3:17—8, 12

20:22—12

1:19—91n

9:29—9

20:24—8,12

1:26-27—91n

12:48—184

25:2—9

1:31—91n

**197**

**198**

**INDEX OF SCRIPTURE 1981**

1:33—91n

10:16-19—15

37:22—18

1:40—91n

11:7-8—15

37:27—18

2:1—91n

11:14—15

37:29—19

2:7—91n

11:22-23—15

37:34—19

2:15—91n

11:22-25—15

51—53

4:27—174n

12:29—156n

67:7—134

6:16—91n

17:17-24—22

72:8—134

8:3—90

78-96-97

8:15—91n

2 Kings

78:54—11

9:9—125

4:18-37—22

95—59, 96-97

9:11—125

13:20-21—22

105—96

9:22-24—91n

17:22-23—15

105-6—96

10:10—125

23:13—15

105:2—96

10:14-15—9

25:21—15

105:39-41—96

11:12—11

106—96

14:22—9

## 1 Chronicles

106:6—97

18:15-18—88

28:18—15

106:47—97

21:22-23—12

110—59, 68-69, 71,

23:3-4—91n

## 2 Chronicles

73-74, 140

26:9-15—9

3:1—14

110:1—59, 79

28:9-10—37

12:1—183n

110:4—55, 57, 59, 62,

28:62—I74n

69, 70-71, 74, 76,

29:4—177

Ezra

**81-82**

32:10—91n, 93n

1:1-3—16

135—96

2:61-63—67

135-36—96

Joshua

2:64—16

136—96

5:9—14

3:10-12—16

13:1—175n

Isaiah

24:2—35

Nehemiah

1:26—131

7:63-65—67

4:5\_6—91n

9:1—29

## Judges

9:7—131

13:5—93n

## Psalms

10:22—I74n

2:7—143

11:15-16—91n

## 1 Samuel

2:8—134

19:19—20

1:11—93n

16—140

19:20—20

12:1—183n

16:9-11—23n

19:22—20

17:15—23n

19:23—20

## 1 Kings

18:10—16n

19:24—21

4:21—13

19:4—134

25:6-8—23n

4:25—13

37—18

26:19—23n

8:10-11—15

37:9—18

35:1—95

10:13—15

37:10-11—18

35:5-10—91n

## **198 INDEX OF SCRIPTURE 1981**

35:6-7—92, 95

31:1-6—93

9:11-12—131,143

40:3—102

31:33-34—189

9:12—37

40:3-5—91n , 92

33:14-18—131

41:17-20—92

50:19—131

Micah

41:19—95

4:4—13

42:16—92

Ezekiel

4:7—174n

42:21—93

1:15ff.—16

5:6-7—175n

42:24—93

5:5—11

43:14-21—91n

9:3—15

Haggai

43:19—92

20:5-20—91 n



2:9—17

43:19-21—92

44:17—I75n

20:10-20—92

44:19—175n

20:33-38—93

Zechariah

48:17-18—93

26:19-20—94

2:1-5—17

48:20—134

37:7-10—24

**2:12—11**

48:21—92

37:12-14—21

3:10—13

49:8-12—91n

37:14a—23

9:9-10—131

49:9-11—92

38:12—11

9:10—134

49:10—92

51:7—93

Daniel

Malachi

51:9-10—91n

4:34-35—112

1:2-3—37

54:10—45n

9:11—183n

3:1—102

55:1-2—93

12:2-3—23n

55:3—93

Matthew

55:13—92

Hosea

2:6—117

59:19—189

1:8-9—36

2:15—5

59:20-21—189

1:9—16

2:17—5

2:14—92

2:23—5

Jeremiah

2:14-15—93n

4:12—29

2:2—93n

2:14-23—91

4:12-17—29,118

2:6-7—91n , 92

3:4-5—131

5:5—26

4:15—156n

9:8—37

8:8-12—124

4:23—94

9:9-10—37

8:10—120

4:26—94

9:11—37

9:1—29,118

6:14-15—131

9:12—37

10:5-6—118

7:22-26—91n

11:11—131

10:30—113

8:16—156n

12:28—132

19:1-13—120

Joel

12:28-29—162

23:5-8—131

**2:28—128**

12:32—159

25:11—36

13:14—5

29:10—36

Amos

13:35—16

31—100

2:9-10—91n

13:54—29,118

31-34—93

9:7—37

15:14—119

## **198INDEXOFSCRIPTURE1981**

15:24—119 1:67-68—117 22:30—157n

16:21—113 1:80—117 24:21—119

17:22-23—113 2:25—117 24:25-26—135

18:31-33—113 2:32—117 24:25—126n

19:28—119, 157n 2:34—117 24:44-47—126n

21:43—37, 121 3:16—125 24:46-49—126

22:23-32—22 3:22—125

22:29—22 4:1—125 John

22:32—23 4:14—125 1:1—149n

24:14—141n 4:18—125 1:11—150  
24:26—100 4:25-27—120 1:12-13—150  
24:30-31—113,116 4:43—123 1:14—5,13,105  
24:38—179 7:9—120 1:43—150  
26:52—50 7:28—123 1:47-51—115  
26:54—5 8:1—123 1:51—5  
26:56—5 9:2—123 2:4—152  
27:9—5 9:45—135 2:11—150  
27:25—121 9:60—123 2:12—150  
27:45—12 9:62—123n 2:17-19—150  
28:18-20—121 10:9—123 2:23-25—150  
28:19-29-30 10:17-18—162 3:3—150  
10:21—125 3:5—24  
Mark 11—123 3:10—24  
1:2-3—102 11:2—123, 128 3:14-5-6  
1:3—102 11:13—125 3:16—150  
1:4r—102 11:20—116, 132 4:6—181  
1:9-13—103 12:10—159 4:21—47  
1:14—104 12:32—123n 4:21-24—17  
1:15—113 12:57-59—128n 4:24—47

3:5—178 13:28-29—124 4:42—150

4:33—135,157n 13:29—121 4:45—151

6:52—178 16:16—123 5:18—151

8:17—178 17:21—123 5:25—163

9:32—135 18:16-17—123n 5:28-29—23n, 163

10:29-30—159 18:34—135 6:49-51—5

21:24—180n 6:51—6

Luke 21:27-28—113 6:65—151

1:16—116 21:31—123 7:1—151

1:23—74n 22:3—161n 7:6—152

1:32-33—123 22:16—123 7:37—6

1:35—125 22:18—123 7:40-41—151

1:54—117 22:29-31—119,124 7:50-51—151

## **198 INDEX OF SCRIPTURE**

### **198**

8:12—151 2:33-35—141 17:33—181n

8:30—151 2:36—141 18:5-6—13

*1*

6

8:44—154 3:15—122n 18:&—190

8:59—151 3:19—141 19:8-137-38,140

10:14—151 3:19-20—141 19:9-10—138

10:16—153,157 3:19-21—110,135n 20:11—181n

10:19-21—151 3:21—113, 141-42, 194 20:25—137,139-40

10:40—151 3:22—142 21:38—loo'

11:45—151 3:25—143 22<sup>4</sup>—179

11:48—151 3:25-26—143 22:21—136

11:54—151 3:26a—142 26-20—136

12:23-24-152 5:3-161n 28-14-181n

12:31-32—162 5:32—122n 28-23—137 139

12:32-152 7-105 2\*28-136'

12:36-152 7:2-4-106 28:30-31-139

12:37-152 7:9-106 28-31-140

12:39-40—177 7:9\_i0—106 31—137

12:40—177 7:14-15—106

12:42-43—152 7:29-38—106

14:15-17-128 7:36-45-106 f "

14:26—128 7:38—105 : ,7,

15:26—128 7:39-42—106 1:5—134

18:30—152 7:39-43—105 1:10—162n



18:36-194 7:44-105 1:16-140,168,190  
19:6—152 7:46-48—106 2:28-29—154  
19:11—152 7:48-50—106 2:29—44n  
8:12-137-38 3:1-2—38, 147  
Acts 8:14-136 4:11-12-39  
1:1—122n 8:17—138 4:13—10,26  
1:3—122, 125,128n, 8:21—142 8:22-23—26,194  
129-30, 134, 140 10—137 9—168  
1:4-127 10:9-23-136 9-11-168, 171, 181n  
1:5—127, 128n, 129n 10:39—122n 9:1-5—168  
1:6—129, 141 10:41—122n, 127n 9:3—147  
1:7—132 13:26—136n 9:4-5—147, 172  
1:8—29, 129n, 131n, 13:30-31—122n 9:6—41, 115,183,186,  
132-33,143, 145 13:33—143 195  
2:17—113 13:46—190 9:6-9—184  
2:24-32—23n 13:46-48—136, 142 9:10-13—37, 184  
2:25-29—140 13:47—142 9:14-16—184  
2:30—30,74n 14:22-137-38 9:24—168  
2:32—122n 15:1-35—136 9:29—184  
2:33—128,141 15:16-17—143 10—168

## 198 INDEX OF SCRIPTURE 1981

10:1—147,168 11:33-35—19

4:28—43

1

n

10:11-13—168 11:36—192 4:29—43n

11—112,148,165, 14:17—146

5:2—31

167-68, 170-71, 15:8-12—120

5:2-3—39

174,177-78, 182, 15:16—6

5:19-21—146

186,190 15:24—176

6:12—3

n

9

11:1-37-38,168, 15:28—162n

6:14—39

172-73

6:15—39,189

11:1-2—171 1 Corinthians

6:15-16—44n, 45n

11:1\_10—169 4:19-20—14

6:16—31

5

, 40-41, 115,

11:2—147 6:9-10—146 188,189n

11:2-4—184 15:4—23n

11:5—38, 147, 168, 15:6—160n

Ephesians

172, 174, 184 15:23-26—160n 1:4—115

11:7—177, 184 15:24—160n 1:7—115

11:7-8—183 15:25—180

1:13—12

n

8

11:8—177,184,187 10—105,107

1:13-14—115

H:9\_10\_184 10:3—107 2:2-3—161n

11:11—172 10:3-5—10

2:12—30

7

, 188

11:12—173,190 10:4—107

2:14—38

11:13-14—169 10:6—5

2:19—38

11:14—169,174 10:26—10

2:28-29—39

11:15—120,169, 173 11:26—179

3:6—137,188

11:15-16—169 15:25—180 4:18—178

11:17—188 15:50—14

5:5—14

6

5

11:17-24—170,175

6:3—28

11:20—175 2 Corinthians

11:20-21—38 3:14—178 Philippians

11:25-176-78, 180, 4:3-4—161n

3:3—44n

183, 186-88 6:16—109n

11:25-26a—176

Colossians

11:25-26—186 Galatians

1:13—146

11:26—147, 180-82, 2:11—42n

2:17—5

186-88 3:13—12 4:10-11—147

11:26a—180 3:14—128

11:26b—189 3:15—20n 1 Thessalonians

11:28a—189 3:21—20n 2:12—146

11:28b—190 3:26-29—4

2:14-16—14

9

7

11:29—38 3:29—43n, 44n

2:18—161n

11:30-31—170, 173, 4:4—113

191 4:25—2

2 Thessalonian

9

s

11:32—170 4:26—17, 30, 82

1:5—146

## **INDEX OF SCRIPTURE 203**

2 Timothy

7:7—64, 76

11:16—6, 14, 23

2:25-26—162n

7:8—64

11:19—23

3:8-9—109n

7:9-10—65

11:22—23

4:1—146

7:11—67

12:1-2—109n

7:11-15—58, 66

12:13—109n

Hebrews

7:12—68

12:16—31

1:2—114

7:13-14—68

12:18—109n

2:5—114

7:15—69

12:18-24—89, 108

2:10-3:6—108

7:15-17—14

12:22—17, 30, 109n

3-4—105

7:16—70

12:22-24—82

3:1-6—108

7:16-19—58, 70

13:4—155n

3:7-19—90

7:17—71

13:7—109n

3:7-4:7—91

7:18-19—71

13:15-16—108

3:7-4:10—108

7:19—76

3:11-12—91

7:20—73n, 74n

James

3:11-4:11—59

7:20-21—73

1:1—157

4:1-9—95

7:20-22—73n

4:9—108

7:20-25—58, 73

1 Peter

4:9-11—89

7:21—73n, 74n



1:1—157

4:10-11—95

7:22-75-76

1:5—114

4:11-13—108

7:23-24—76

1:13-2:10—109n

4:12—179

7:25—77

1:20—114

4:13—55

7:26—78

2:5—157

4:14-16—55, 90

7:26-27—14 -

5:8—162n

4:14-5:10—108

7:26-28—58, 78

5:1-10—55

7:27—80

## 1 John

5:7—77

7:28—80

1:1—149n

6—56

8:1-6—89

3:2—23n

6:1-2—56

8:5—5, 54

6:3—56

8:8-13—89

## Jude

6:4-8—56

9:23-26—13

5—109n

6:9-20—57

9:25-26—89

6:17—74n

9:26-28—114

## Revelation

6:20—57

10:1—5

1:9-3:22—153n

7—55, 57, 105

10:19—109n

2:9—154

7:1—5, 58

10:19-25—108

2:13—163

7:1-10—58, 66

10:22—109n

2:14—155

7:1-28—108

10:33—109n

3:7-8—154

7:2—60

11—109n

3:9—154

7:3—5, 61

**11:1—108**

3:12—154

7:4—62

11:6— 109n

4:1-7:17—153n

7:5-6—63

11:10—13, 23, 31

5:5—156,161

## **204 INDEX OF SCRIPTURE**

7:3—155 13:5—161 20:1-22:5—153n

7:4-155-56 14—161 20:2-3—161

7:9—156 14:3-4—155 20:3—162n

8:1-11:19—153n 14:4—155n 20:4—158, 162

8:2—161 15:1—161 20:4-6—163

11:2-3—161 15:5-16:21—153n 20:5—164

11:15—158 16:1—161 20:9—165

12—154 16:10—163 20:11-15—163

12:1-5—153 17:1-19:21—153n 21:lff.—159n

12:1-15:4—153n 19:11—159n 21:4—23n

12:6—109n,161 19:13—149n 21:12—157

12:10—154 19:16—158 21:13-14—157

12:14— 109n 20—158, 159n, 160, 21:22—25n

13:2—163 163-64 22—160n

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- [Introduction](#)
- [One - Its Land](#)
- [Two - Its People](#)
- [Three - Its Worship](#)
- [Four - Its Lifestyle](#)
- [Five - and the coming of the kingdom](#)
- [Six - in Romans 11](#)
- [Seven - Concluding Propositions](#)
- [Index of Scripture](#)

# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
One - Its Land	
Two - Its People	
Three - Its Worship	
Four - Its Lifestyle	
Five - and the coming of the kingdom	
Six - in Romans 11	
Seven - Concluding Propositions	
Index of Scripture	