

## **Messiah and Israel: The Implications of Promise and Inheritance**

The question this essay pursues is a seemingly simple one: Does Israel have a future in the program of God that includes not only her as a people but her as a state with a land? My paper is concerned with this narrow theological question. It is a core issue. If Israel has the right to the land as a gift of promise from God in a speech act, then the implication is her right to exist as a nation and a people in the Middle East. If this gift was nullified by later teaching, some form of disobedient activity, or was non-existent, then the question to whom the land belongs is open.

Virtually all Jewish and Christian interpreters agree that initially Israel was promised land by God, starting in Genesis 12. The question is whether the arrival and fulfillment in Christ changed anything. So we have what is primarily a New Testament discussion and whether developments in the progress of revelation changed or clarified what had been promised. In the broadest outline three positions exist.

(1) That Israel has been replaced in the plan of God by the church. The church now is the beneficiary of promises that come through Christ. Since all benefits come through him, Israel has lost her place in the program of God through unbelief. This is truly what is called replacement theology, although many use the term for the next category as well, probably less than accurately. Promises made in the Old Testament to Israel are realized in the church through Jesus, through whom all blessing comes. Israel has now become the church, which is the new Israel. God keeps his Old Testament promises through the

Messiah, who more than realizes what was promised on earth to Israel by the new heaven and earth he will bring. To quote Bruce Waltke, who sees fulfillment of the abomination of desolation in Titus' taking of the temple in AD 70, "...after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, these institutions [land and temple] become spiritualized, transcendentalized, and eschatologized in the kingdom brought through Christ."<sup>1</sup>

(2) The church now inherits salvation and covenant promises through Christ. However a day is coming when masses of Jews will believe in Messiah as Romans 9–11 argues. People in this view may or may not hold to an intermediate earthly kingdom, often called the millennium. Believers will become a part of the church. So Israel has a future as an ethnic people, but that does not include a role for Israel as a nation and as a people with a land. It is most important that those engaged in eschatological discussion appreciate this position and the distinction it has from the previous position. Strictly speaking it is not replacement theology in the fullest sense of that term, for masses of Jews are included ultimately in blessing and they share in promises originally made to ethnic Israel. Any replacement is strictly at an institutional level as the church in Christ is where the benefits reside, even as the people of Israel ultimately are included. What is lost is any national hope for Israel as a people in a land. In that narrow sense only it is like the previous view.

(3) The church now inherits salvation and covenant promises through Christ. The church is the institution through which Christ works in this era to bless. However a day is

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 552. He goes on p. 559 to call the land "the most difficult biblical motif to track" and seems to imply land has become the whole earth in the NT, citing Romans 4:13.

coming when Jesus returns to consummate his rule in an intermediate kingdom that precedes the new heaven and earth. That kingdom, known as the millennium, is not strictly speaking the church, but a new, distinct structure when Christ rules over the earth with a visible presence on earth. That rule will include a return to Jerusalem and a restored role for Israel. God's program has a role for Israel as a people *and* a nation at the head of a grand reconciliation that Christ completes with his return in line with promises made to Israel long ago.<sup>2</sup> That fulfillment reflects a display of the faithfulness and grace of God in line with Old Testament language about what God will do ultimately in salvation. It is rooted in the divine speech act of promise of an eternal right to the land given in Genesis. This becomes a promise God keeps, not as a matter of Israelite obedience, but out of his grace and faithfulness to his own commitments.

It is important to note the points on which all of these distinct views agree. All accept there was an original physical land promise. All see the locus of blessing as residing in Jesus who fulfills the promises of God and makes blessing available to people of all nations. Covenant realization and blessing flows through Christ and the positive response to him. There is no dual covenant idea in any of these views.<sup>3</sup> Salvation's goal in part is

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<sup>2</sup> In his response to the original draft of this paper, Mark Kinzer helpfully notes a variation on this option I should also raise. This view is that without an intermediate kingdom, Israel has a future as a people and in the land as part of the eternal new heaven and earth. Though this position is not very common, it does fall within this view as a conceivable option.

<sup>3</sup> Another helpful question Kinzer raises in his response is the question of whether there is an abiding covenantal relationship with Jews in the period after Christ and before the end, what is the current period. This question needs a nuanced answer in my view. Since ultimate covenantal blessing comes through Christ and he triggers covenantal benefits tied to salvation through the forgiveness and gift of the Spirit that comes from him, there is no current soteriological benefit to Israel because of her past covenantal connection. As

to bring a reconciliation between God and people and between Israel and the nations. All three views claim that the Old Testament is realized in how they read the end. It is the different ways the three views get to that claim that is up for discussion.

*Assessing the Case against Israel Having a Future in a Land*

I am going to focus on one writer as I interact with this question and these options. This allows me to look at his argument in some detail. I do it because the writer has expertise in Old Testament and his arguments reflect the general direction of the case made against Israel having a future in the land by both views that reject such a future. I do it also because he is a person whose work I deeply respect, even as I seek to challenge his reading. His is among the clearest cases made for why hermeneutically we should not see Israel as having a future in the land. And let there be no doubt about it. This discussion is primarily about hermeneutics, how we put all the pieces of biblical texts appearing in a wide array of books together and whether the later story in Scripture impacts the earlier account by replacement, explanation, elaboration, or fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

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some of the texts we shall cite show, she is in covenantal disobedience having rejected the sent Messiah, which represents a choice not to share in his benefits as long as there is unbelief (Luke 13:34-35). However, she is being preserved for a future as that text and others we shall note suggest. Thus there is a preservative relationship covenant provides and the Hebrew Scripture still has value in pointing us to God, which is why those who followed Jesus retained it as a part of their canon..

<sup>4</sup> The four options noted in this sentence shows how tricky terminology can be. The same phenomena can be described in any of these ways. That choice has implications for the view taken and whether it is seen to be faithful or not to earlier texts.

Bruce Waltke as an Old Testament scholar makes the hermeneutical case for land as a type whose full meaning is exposed in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> He argues that the NT “redefines land” in three ways. Spiritually, the land is a reference to Christ’s person. Transcendentally, it is heavenly Jerusalem. Eschatologically it is the new Jerusalem after Christ’s second coming. The term in the NT is “transmuted to refer to life in Christ.” The real estate has become spiritual food. The land is the banana peel that is pared away to expose the real food. Land is a type of the Christian life in Christ. This is not allegorizing in his view because it is the intension of God in the progress of revelation. This move also reflects an analogy with other NT redefining moves: From covenant people by circumcision to covenant people by doing God’s will, from Sabbath keeping to healing as well as doing good and engaging in spiritual rest, and, finally, from purity laws to what comes out of the heart. He critiques a literal reading that fails to see that staying in this former level of reading is a Jewish, carnal, and ultimately inadequate reading of these texts. He says Jesus has the right to make such changes as God vindicated what he claims is Jesus’ view in the resurrection and in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Waltke goes on to argue that land promises in the NT are realized in the life and ministry of Jesus as the gospels “discredits the Jewish hope for land.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that land prophecies are fulfilled literally in Messiah’s passion with blessing and *shalom*, but figuratively in Messiah’s glory as the whole world ends up being blessed. The Olivet

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<sup>5</sup> Waltke, *Old Testament Theology*. 560-61. Waltke cites Tom Wright from *Jesus and the Victory of God* (274) with approval in making these remarks.

<sup>6</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 563-83. R. T. France and his commentaries on Matthew and Mark are cited with approval for how to read the Olivet Discourse as being about AD 70. It is interesting to note how British interpretation has had a major influence in how these texts are read.

Discourse means that with Jerusalem's destruction the door is open to transmute the kingdom from an earthly kingdom to a spiritual one. John's gospel "Christifies" the land. Jesus' remarks about a mountain not being required as a place of worship anymore in John 4 "transcendentalizes" Jerusalem. Jesus now rules from heaven (Acts 2; Eph 1:20; Col 3:10), not from Jerusalem. In addition, there is no longer Jew or Gentile in Christ (Gal 3).

What is to be said about this kind of argument? Two observations are to be made. First, Waltke has succumbed to an either/or thinking. What prevents one from seeing a both/and here and unifying what takes place in heaven with what takes place on the earth as the language of the Lord's prayer suggests? So, secondly, one can affirm the heavenly connections Waltke sees without giving them the entailments or implications of denial of earthly fulfillment that Waltke attaches to them. In the numerous passages Waltke cites, he either ignores some contextual features or fails to enumerate other key texts that show an earthly expectation. In our rebuttal is the case for seeing Israel in the land as having a future as affirmed in texts tied to Jesus and his coming when revelation has expounded the fullness of promise.

Here are some examples of missing texts.

(1) In citing Peter's speech in Acts 3 about the times of refreshing, Waltke ignores that Peter says those times are defined by what the passages of the prophets say. There is no

indication we are to read these texts differently than what they say when Peter cites the category.

(2) He fails to note the likelihood that the already typological abomination of desolation was rooted in the temple activity of Antiochus Epiphanes and mirrored in the activity of Titus. This past association means we have a pattern prophecy that also depicts what the end is like, and points not just to the coming temple destruction of AD 70. Matthew 24 has the remarks in response to a question about Jesus' coming and the end and includes a description of the second coming of Christ. Efforts to limit this text to that earlier destruction alone are nearsighted and incomplete readings of the pattern. In this short term and long term mirroring, this prophecy is like Day of the Lord imagery which it reflects with its cosmic signs. These texts about the end and judgment possess patterns at many points of history *including* the end time judgment.

(3) Jesus cleanses the temple saying it is to be a house of prayer for the nations in Mark 11:17. This does not look like a work or act that predicts the permanent destruction of the temple as the end of its history, but one which corrects and points to the goal of what the temple should be and will be.

(4) Waltke simply fails to cite numerous texts like Luke 13:34-35 or 21:20-24 or Acts 3:18-22 with their mention of judgment against the nation. Here is Luke 13: "Your house is desolate. And I say to you, you will not see me until *until* you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:34-35). Here is Luke 21: "Jerusalem will be

trampled down by the Gentiles *until* the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). Here is Acts 3: “This one heaven must receive *until* the time for the restoration of all that God spoke by the mouths of his holy prophets of old” (Acts 3:21). These are crucial texts. They show Jesus, Peter, and Luke holding out for a role for physical Israel in the future, *including* the city of Jerusalem. These texts evoke language and imagery of the promise of the Hebrew Scripture and carry with them the implication of a physical hope for Israel as a people in the land. Waltke is not alone in bypassing mention of such texts in making the case for a hermeneutical move in the NT. Gary Burge’s *Jesus and the Land* also fails to even mention these passages, as does the recent work on kingdom through covenant by Peter Gentry and Steve Wellum.<sup>7</sup> Such omissions are fatal to making the case for exclusion of hope for Israel, even if what is being affirmed about the scope of promise is correct. The plea, then, is for a both/and hermeneutic where one can see both what the OT and what the NT affirm as part of God’s revelation of his program. To say it another way, Gentile inclusion or heavenly realization or Christocentric interpretation does not mean Israelite exclusion. That last sentence is important and summarizes our key thesis. That thesis is supported in the progress of revelation and in what the *whole* of what the NT says. It is a wholistic view. Gentiles are blessed alongside Jews in Christ. Heaven and earth are redeemed in Christ. Jesus can choose to come to earth and rule from Jerusalem so *all nations* can be honored and blessed. He can keep commitment to Israel and to the world simultaneously. His own teaching suggests as much. This wholistic way of viewing

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<sup>7</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). Burge’s book was published by Baker in 2010. So these are recent treatments.

the promise and the land has important implications for how we apply the promise as we shall see shortly.

*The Case for Israel Having a Future in a Land: What Kind of Future and What Kind of Land?*

In our engagement with Waltke as an example of the case against Israel having a national future with land, we have set the outlines for what the positive case from the NT is. I'd like to make several observations about the nature of this hope and its basic implications.

(1) The death knell of at least ethnic Israel not having a future hope of being drawn to faith in Jesus is Romans 9–11. Here Paul's topic is for those over whom he currently weeps and those for whom he wished he was accursed so they could be saved. This has to be unbelieving Israel. It cannot be spiritual Israel or the church. Romans 11 foresees a day when those cut off, natural branches, are again grafted back into promise. This means option 1 that opened our paper cannot be the biblical resolution of this question.

(2) In saying Israel has the right to the land we should not think of this in the nationalistic terms with which it often is raised. Here is where the lesson is for those who support Israel's right to exist. What is foreseen is not as nationalistic as is often portrayed in how this view works itself out. The imagery I have in mind is like the States of the USA or the nations of the European Union. Each state has its sovereignty, but it also has a unity with a larger entity. There is a context in the end that the land is part of a kingdom Jesus will

exercise authority over that is steeped in the reality of reconciliation his presence will engender that stands at the core of what he seeks to achieve. Jesus will rule from Jerusalem, but all the nations will stream there in peace to worship God as Isaiah 2:2-4 declares. So just as it was different to cross from Germany to France in 1944 versus making the same crossing in 2015, so it will be different for Israel to be in the land, having turned to and experienced her Messiah in the midst of a reconciled rule, versus what we see about the land today. Israel will have her place, God's promise of *shalom* for her will be a testimony to God's faithfulness and grace, but Gentiles will be her *beloved* neighbors. Her inheritance will end up being a blessing for all, a token of the larger peace over the world that the NT also affirms comes with Jesus and a fulfillment of blessing coming to the world through Abraham's seed as originally given in Genesis 12.

The future of the land is one in a context of peace and reconciliation. The land is but a locale in the center of much grander things Christ will bring when he returns, judges and saves the world, vindicating the righteous and righteousness in the process. The land is not spiritualized, transcendentalized, eschatologized, transmuted, or even christofied. It is a token, a picture, a mirror, a microcosm of how heaven and earth are reconciled by Christ's saving work. Blessing will be on earth as it is in heaven. God will be shown to have been faithful to his promises to bless Abraham's seed with a people as numerous as the sands of the sea and stars of the sky, a land of *shalom*, and a blessing through whom also all the nations would be blessed. Israel pictures in miniature what the world itself also receives. This all happens in Christ and because of Christ, because the Christ has come to keep and fulfill the promises of God and give an inheritance to all who turn to

him. As the seed was in Abraham that would bless the world. So the seed is in Christ that receives the blessing God promised Abraham he and his seed would give to the world just as God always said. Israel is formed and nations are blessed, Jew and Gentile reconciled in Christ, living in peace on earth and in heaven, a good material creation fully restored with Israel not in contrast to the nations but alongside the nations in blessing. This is the attitude that is to guide and govern the nation in the land. We are long way from that today because of the messy world we currently inhabit and the failure of people on all sides to embrace such a vision for this land. Yet that is the ultimate promise and hope, one worth proclaiming as the inheritance of the world through Christ as God keeps his promise to Israel as well.