

Faith Pulpit

The Israelite Prophecies: A Cause for Rejoicing

Bible-believers differ in how to interpret prophecy. These differences are not merely academic. They affect a person's view of the end times, the Old Testament, the future of Israel and the church, and even God Himself. The opposing viewpoints are characterized under the theologies of covenant theology and dispensationalism. From my study of the Scripture, I am committed to dispensationalism so far as it reflects a consistently literal interpretation of the Scriptures. I believe dispensationalism offers the best framework in which to understand how God interacts with various people groups throughout His revealed history.

From the premise of consistently literal interpretation comes an important corollary: God will keep the promises He made to Israel as revealed in the Biblical covenants.¹ Since the provisions of these covenants have not all been fulfilled yet, especially those relating to the kingdom, there must be a future for Israel.² I see continuity between the kingdom predicted in the Old Testament with the kingdom offered by Christ in the New, but I do not mix the prophecies related to each. I believe the New Testament can add to our understanding of an Old Testament prediction, but it cannot alter it.

Covenant theology takes the promises made to Israel and applies them to the church.³ In so doing, they have to change the content of those prophecies since many refer to specific details surrounding Israel's possession of the land. Therefore literal Israel has no future in God's program in their view. This view also eliminates a future, literal reign of Christ upon the earth. Many theologians embrace this system of theology.⁴ Other theologians embrace some sort of mixture between present and future aspects of a reign of Christ.⁵ Replacement theology has serious implications for our understanding of God's plan.

The approach of replacement theology may be similar to a parent telling his son who has been anticipating a present under the Christmas tree for many weeks: "I know your name is on the gift, but it's not really for you. You see, I realize you are going to be disobedient in the future, and therefore

you are undeserving of it. I'm going to give it to your sister instead." What kind of parent would do that?

Some would say that Israel is undeserving of God's blessing (either because of her idolatry in the Old Testament or her rejection of the Messiah in the New). Implicit in this assessment often is the implication that the church is deserving of God's blessing. My study of the last 2,000 years of the history of Christianity teaches me otherwise. Covenant theologians would say, "But God is gracious toward His church." However, the God of grace in the New Testament is the same God of grace in the Old. The truth must be grasped that neither Israel nor the church is deserving of anything. God has blessed Israel with many significant blessings that He will fulfill to them for no other reason than He said He would. Likewise He has blessed the church with other kinds of blessings, and He will fulfill them for the same reason.

The results, or impact, of covenant theology upon kingdom prophecies leave one with

- a God who does not keep His promises to the people to whom He made the promises;
- a Bible that cannot be taken completely literally or understood normally; and
- a Biblical people of promise without a future (Israel).

Let us return to our passage in Zephaniah 3:8–20. What would a dispensationalist do with this passage? If it was not written to believers in the church age, should we just discard it? I believe all the Scriptures contain wondrous truths for us to examine, apply, and rejoice over. I think it is clear in this passage that God's plans for Israel reveal His character to us. Therefore, the following principle becomes apparent: We ought to rejoice in God's plans for Israel. Why?

First, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because we are included in those plans (Zeph. 3:9, 10). Zephaniah, as well as many other prophecies, includes Gentiles in God's future plans. The New Testament provides many details for the future of church-age saints who have trusted Christ as their Savior, both Jews and Gentiles. We anticipate the blessed hope of His return (Titus 2:11–14), a hope that keeps us from the future judgment (the tribulation period) that will come upon the entire world (Rev. 3:10). Later, church-age saints will return to assist Christ in His earthly reign (Rev. 19:11ff; cf. 20:1–7).

Second, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God is a God of grace (Zeph. 3:11–13). Though Israel is underserving of a restored kingdom ruled by God Himself, she can still anticipate such a kingdom. Can believers today not also rejoice in the fact that God acts toward us in this same way (Eph. 2:8, 9)?

Third, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God has great things in store for those He loves (Zeph. 3:14–17). While the blessings for Israel may be different from those for the church, we can rejoice over the fact that since God keeps His promises, those promises will be fulfilled, no matter how difficult current circumstances are. God loves Israel, just as He does His church.

Fourth, we rejoice in God's plans for Israel because God will reverse the wrongs done to His beloved people (Zeph. 3:18–20). God always sees what happens to His people. Israel has suffered greatly in the past, but she can have hope for her restoration. Some of this oppression has been agonizing throughout history. Christ also told believers to expect persecution (Matt. 5:10–12), but believers today can know that God sees and cares. Believers in the future will likewise experience the same care (Rev. 6:9–11).

Far from being mere academic discussions, the implications of a dispensational approach to prophecy are a source of rich blessings. What a great God we serve!

Works Cited

1. I am referring to covenants revealed in the Bible that have a specific chapter and verse. These covenants include the overarching Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:18–21; 17:1–21 and other passages); the Promised Land Covenant (Deut. 1:6–8; 11:24–32; Josh. 1:4); the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4–17; 1 Chron. 17:10–14); and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 11:19, 20; 36:25–28). These covenants are not to be confused with the theological constructs of covenant theology—the Covenants of Works and Grace (sometimes a Covenant of Redemption is included as well).
2. This conclusion corresponds well with Paul's teaching in Romans 11:1–36.
3. This view is called replacement theology. For an overview of various replacement theologies, see Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *Master's Seminary Journal*, Vol. 4, no. 1 (Sun Valley, CA: Master's Seminary, 2009), 57–69.
4. One such representative is Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1938).
5. See Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). My view of this book is that the author's preoccupation for finding a consensus among Evangelicals obscures the evangelical position that truth is determined by the Word of God alone.

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