

# “Who Are the Real Heirs to the Land Promises of Holy Scripture?”

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## The challenge facing covenant theologians

A gigantic effort is underway today to convince the evangelical citizenry of the United States of America that the political state of Israel rightfully owns *in perpetuity* the so-called “Holy Land”<sup>1</sup> at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea by virtue of God’s bequeathing it to Abraham and his descendants in the Old Testament. This effort is being made not so much today by the secular leadership of the state of Israel as by self-acclaimed *Christian* scholars who claim to speak for over seventy million evangelical Christians but who ought to know better, including Assemblies of God preacher and televangelist John Hagee, founder and pastor of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas,<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Copeland, televangelist, Paul and Matt Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), Jack Hayford, founder and pastor of the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California and president of the Foursquare Gospel Church, Benny Hinn, pastor of the yet-to-be-built World Healing Center Church in Dallas, Texas, Rod Parsley, pastor of the World Harvest Church in Columbus, Ohio, Pat Robertson, founder and chief executive officer of Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and the Bible teacher on the 700 Club,<sup>3</sup> and Jerry Falwell, founder and pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church and founder of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia—all purveyors of that erroneous system of hermeneutics known as dispensationalism. Apparently convinced by this effort, President Clinton, after citing the words of his desperately ill Baptist pastor to him: “If you abandon Israel, God will never forgive you,” declared before the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem on October 27, 1994<sup>4</sup>: “...it is God’s will that Israel, the biblical home of the people of Israel, continue forever and ever,” a statement that enters deeply into biblical hermeneutics concerning the nature of the Church and the

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<sup>1</sup>I say “so-called” because the phrase “holy land” occurs only twice in Scripture (Ps 78:54; Zech 2:12) and in both instances the word “land” must be supplied. Apart from the holy God’s manifested presence in it there is nothing holy about the “Holy Land.” But wherever God manifests his presence that place is holy as God taught Moses at the burning bush in Sinai (Ex 3:1-6).

<sup>2</sup>According to Julia Duin, “San Antonio Fundamentalist Battles Anti-Semitism,” in *The Houston Chronicle* (April 30, 1988), 1, Hagee does not believe that Jews must trust Christ in order to go to heaven: “The Jewish people have a relationship to God through the law as given through Moses. I believe that every Gentile person can only come to God through the cross of Christ. I believe that every Jewish person who lives in the light of the Torah...has a relationship with God and will come to redemption.” This *radically* dispensational statement is heretical in its denial that faith in Christ is *universally* essential for salvation.

<sup>3</sup>Pat Robertson stated on public television on January 5, 2006 that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel suffered his massive stroke at the hand of God because he was in the process of giving a portion of Israel’s land to the Palestinians in exchange for peace. He later apologized for his statement.

<sup>4</sup>See *Vital Speeches* 61, no. 3 (November 15, 1994): 70, 3.

Kingdom of God not to mention biblical eschatology (note his “forever and ever”). President Clinton concluded his speech by saying: “Your journey is our journey, and America will stand with you now and always,” a statement that illustrates this nation’s deep involvement in both Middle East politics in general and its specific political commitment to Israel in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in particular in a way that cannot but affect the course of world politics for the foreseeable future.

In my opinion, President Clinton’s statement is bad politics based on equally bad theology. I say this because, as I shall argue in this paper, all of God’s land promises to Israel in the Old Testament are to be viewed in terms of shadow, type, and prophecy in contrast to the reality, substance, and fulfillment of which the New Testament speaks. Consequently, contrary to John Hagee who insists that “Israel has a Bible mandate to the land, a divine covenant for the land of Israel, forever...[and] Christians have a Bible mandate to be supportive of Israel,”<sup>5</sup> I will argue that it is we Christians as members of Christ’s messianic kingdom who are the real heirs to the land promises of Holy Scripture but in their *fulfilled* paradisaical character.<sup>6</sup> Hagee terms this view “replacement theology” because, he says, it “replaces” in the economy of God the Jewish people who are, he says, “God’s centerpiece” and “the apple of his eye” (Zech 2:8) with the church of Jesus Christ. Of course, Hagee’s perception of ethnic Israel is in error because *ethnic* Israel *per se* was *never* the centerpiece of God’s covenant program since, according to Paul, God’s promises *always* encompassed only the true spiritual Israel (that is, elect Israel) within ethnic Israel (Rom 9:6-13) and the land promises of the Old Testament, as we will show, were *always* to be viewed typologically. Nevertheless, Hagee has thrown down the dispensational gauntlet; and it is high time that covenant theologians picked it up and responded to him biblically. This is what I propose to do now. But I offer a word of caution and it is this: Reflect carefully upon what you hear before you accept or reject it since I may say some things you have not heard before. With that caveat I will begin with a discussion of

### **The Abrahamic covenant as the antidote to the error of dispensationalism**

With the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 the covenant of grace established in Genesis 3:15 underwent a remarkable advance. The instrument of that advance is the covenant that God made with Abraham that guaranteed and secured soteric blessing for “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). So significant are the promises of grace in the Abrahamic covenant, found in Genesis 12:1-3, 13:14-16, 15:18-21, 17:1-16, and 22:16-18, that it is not an overstatement to declare these verses, from the covenantal perspective, the most important verses in the Bible. The fact that the Bible sweeps across the thousands of years between the creation of man and the call of Abraham in only eleven chapters, with the call of Abraham coming in Genesis 12, suggests that God intended the information given in Genesis 1-11 to be preparatory “background” to the revelation of the Abrahamic covenant. Revelation subsequent to it discloses that *all that*

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<sup>5</sup>John Hagee, “Most evangelicals are seeing the error of ‘replacement theology,’” Online edition of the *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>I happily acknowledge my great debt to O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), 3-31, for many of the thoughts in this address.

*God has done savingly in grace since the revelation of the Abrahamic covenant is the result and product of it.* In other words, once the covenant of grace came to expression in the salvific promises of the Abrahamic covenant—that God would be the God of Abraham and his spiritual descendants (Gen 17:7) and that in Abraham all the families of the earth would be blessed—*everything that God has done since to this present moment he has done in order to fulfill his covenant promises to Abraham* (and thereby the eternal plan of redemption).

If this representation of the salvific significance of the Abrahamic covenant seems to be an overstatement the following declarations from later revelation should suffice to justify it:

1. It is the Abrahamic covenant and none other that God later confirmed with Isaac (Gen 17:19; 26:3-4) and with Jacob (Gen 28:13-15; 35:12).
2. The Scriptures state that God redeemed Jacob's descendants from Egypt in order to keep his covenant promise to the patriarchs: "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Ex 2:24; see 4:5).
3. Again and again throughout Israel's history the inspired authors of Scripture trace God's continuing extension of grace and mercy to Israel directly to his fidelity to his covenant promises to Abraham (Ex 32:12-14; 33:1; Lev 26:42; Deut 1:8; 4:31; 7:8; 9:27; 29:12-13; Josh 21:44; 24:3-4; Ps 105:8-10, 42-43; 2 Kgs 13:23; 1 Chr 16:15-17; Mic 7:20; Neh 9:7-8).
4. When we come to the New Testament it is no different. Both Mary and Zechariah declared the first coming of Jesus Christ, including the very act of incarnation, to be a vital constituent part of the fulfillment of God's gracious covenant promise to Abraham.

Mary in Luke 1:54-55 said: "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers."

Zechariah in Luke 1:68-71 said: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come...to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham."

I may note in passing that, whereas Christians today mainly celebrate only the Incarnation of God's Son at Christmas time, Mary and Zechariah, placing this event in the covenantal metanarrative of Scripture, saw reason in Christ's coming to celebrate the *covenant fidelity* of God to his people. In their awareness of the broader significance of the event and the words of praise that this awareness evoked from them we see biblical theology at its best being worked out and expressed.

5. Jesus, himself the Seed of Abraham (Matt 1:1; Gal 3:16), declared that Abraham "rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

6. Peter declared that God sent Jesus to bless the Jewish nation in keeping with the promise he gave to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, in turning them away from their iniquities (Acts 3:25-26).
7. Paul declared that God, when he promised Abraham that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3), was declaring that he was going to justify the Gentiles by faith and was announcing the gospel in advance to Abraham (Gal 3:8). Accordingly, he stated that all believers in Christ “are blessed [with justification through faith] along with Abraham” (Gal 3:9).
8. Paul also declared: “Christ became a Servant of the circumcision...in order to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom 15:8-9).
9. Paul further declared that Christ died on the cross, bearing the law’s curse, “in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, in order that we [both Jews and Gentiles] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13-14).
10. Paul expressly declared that the Mosaic law, introduced several centuries after God gave his covenant promises to Abraham and to his Seed (Christ), “does not set aside the covenant previously established by God [with Abraham] and thus do away with the promise” (Gal 3:16-17).
11. Paul also declared (1) that Abraham is the “father of all who believe” among both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 4:11-12), and (2) that all who belong to Christ “are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” that God gave to Abraham (Gal 3:29).
12. Finally, Christ described the future state of glory in terms of the redeemed “taking their place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11).

What this all means is that the promise of God, covenantally given to Abraham, that he would be the God of Abraham and of his spiritual descendants after him forever (Gen 17:7-8) extends temporally to the farthest reaches of the future and encompasses the entire community of the redeemed and the renewed cosmos. This is just to say that the Abrahamic covenant, in the specific prospect it holds forth of the salvation of the entire church of God, is identical with the soteric program of the covenant of grace. It also means that the blessings of the covenant of grace that believers in Christ enjoy today under the sanctions of the New Testament economy are founded upon the covenant that God made with Abraham. Said another way, the “new covenant” whose Mediator is Jesus Christ is simply the administrative “extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant”<sup>7</sup> in redemptive history. The church of Jesus Christ, then, *not* ethnic Israel, is the present-day expression of the one people of God whose roots go back to Abraham.

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<sup>7</sup>John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 46.

It also highlight the unity of the one covenant of grace and the oneness of God's people in all ages over against the discontinuities injected into redemptive history by the dispensational heresy that lies at the root of all the bad "land theology" being espoused today concerning Israel's so-called "perpetual divine right" to the land of Palestine.<sup>8</sup> That is to say, God's redemptive purpose, first disclosed in Genesis 3:15, once it had come to expression in the terms of the Abrahamic covenant, was *continuously* advanced thereafter by the successive covenants with Israel, David, and finally the New Covenant. Accordingly, in his letter to the Gentile churches in Galatia Paul described those who repudiate Judaistic legalism and who "never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," that is, Christ's church, as "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:12-16). In his Ephesian letter Paul told those Gentile believers that God had in Christ made them citizens of Israel and beneficiaries of the covenants of the promise (Eph 2:11-13). And in his letter to the Philippians Paul declared that those "who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh" are "the [true] circumcision" (Phil 3:3). So clearly, the church of Jesus Christ is the present-day true Israel of God.

I will now turn directly to the issue Hagee raises concerning the ownership of the land of Israel.

### **The garden of Eden the prototypical paradise of God**

O. Palmer Robertson begins his treatise on the significance of the land as a theological idea by stating:

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 its consummate fulfillment. 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. 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.<sup>9</sup>

In the Edenic paradise of Genesis 2 we see God, whose garden it was (Ezek 28:13; 31:8)—which garden became in the history of redemption the prototypical ideal (Gen 13:10) and microcosmic type of the macrocosmic antitypical Paradise of God (Isa 51:3; Rev 2:7), thereby drawing the land promises of Scripture from Genesis 3:15 onward within the sphere of redemption—we see God, I say, placing Adam and Eve within it to tend and to keep it and to enjoy communion with him (Gen 2:8). But the paradisaical nature of Eden was lost in and by Adam's fall and our first parents were expelled from this land of blessing. But the idea of paradise was renewed, first, by God's inaugurating

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<sup>8</sup>For the redemptive implications of this bad "land theology" see Knox Theological Seminary's "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel" posted on the Seminary's website <http://www.knoxseminary.org> under "Wittenberg Door."

<sup>9</sup>Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 4.

with the guilty pair a second covenant—the covenant of grace of Genesis 3:15—and, second, by his covenant with Abraham of Genesis 12:1-3 to redeem a people from their fallen condition and to transform the cosmos. Just as Adam and Eve had known God’s blessing in Eden, so also God would bless his redeemed people in another Eden, a land flowing with milk and honey, that lay somewhere ahead of them in the future.

### **The typological nature of the land promises**

Undoubtedly, temporal, earthly promises of a land were given to Abraham and his descendants in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:18; 17:8). But the land promises were never primary and central to the covenant’s intention, and God never envisioned literal fulfillment of these promises under Old Testament conditions as primary. Rather, the fulfillment of the land promises must be viewed, as we stated earlier, as arising from the more basic and essential redemptive promises, and for their fulfillment they await the final and complete salvation of God’s elect and the recreation of the universe in the Eschaton (Rom 8:19-23). I say this because the Bible declares that Abraham dwelt in Palestine “as in a foreign country” (Heb 11:9) and that he never inherited any land during his lifetime (Acts 7:5), which is just to say that Abraham believed that the fulfillment of God’s land promises lay antitypically in the *eschatological* future.

Was this really Abraham’s understanding of God’s land promise? Or did he think that God’s promise entailed the small portion of land bounded on the west and the east by the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan Valley and generally on the north and the south between the Sea of Galilee and the southern tip of the Dead Sea? Hardly. Was his faith even such that he would have been satisfied in knowing that someday his offspring would inherit the land “from the river of Egypt [not the Nile River but the *Wadi el Arish*] to the great river, the River Euphrates” (Gen 15:18)?<sup>10</sup> Again we must respond, hardly. His entire life experience of walking by faith and not by sight (see the recurring phrase “by faith Abraham” in Heb 11:8, 9, 17) taught him to look beyond the temporal circumstances in which he lived. To understand Abraham’s concept of God’s land promise to him we must give special heed to the insights of the writers of the New Testament. Just as Paul declared that the events of Israel’s redemptive history were “types” for believers during this age (1 Cor 10:6), just as Paul said the religious festivals of the old covenant were “a shadow of the things to come” (Col 2:17), just as the Author of Hebrews stated that the administration of redemption under the old covenant was “but a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1), so also he taught that Abraham knew that God’s land promises in their fulfillment entailed something far more glorious, namely, a better and heavenly homeland whose designer and builder is God, than the land of Palestine *per se* that served only as the type of their fulfillment:

By faith Abraham...went to live in the land of promise, *as in a foreign land*, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God...These

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<sup>10</sup>This particular divine promise has already been literally and explicitly fulfilled by the conquest of the land under Joshua and Solomon’s reign (Josh 21:43-45; 23:14; 1 Kgs 4:24). It does not require some future fulfillment in a Jewish millennium.

all died in faith, *not having received the things promised*,<sup>11</sup> but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and have acknowledged that they were *strangers and exiles on the earth*. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland...a *better* country, that is, a *heavenly* one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb 11:8-16)

Quite plainly, Abraham understood that the land promised to him actually had both its *origin* and its antitypical *fulfillment* in the heavenly, eternal reality that lay still in the future. Possession of a particular tract of land in ancient times might have significance from a number of perspectives with respect to God's redemptive working in the world, but clearly the land promise under the Abrahamic covenant served simply as a type anticipating the future reality of the coming of the messianic kingdom with the Messiah himself assuming the throne of David in heaven and ruling the universe after his resurrection/ascension and reigning until all his enemies have been put under his feet.

How was it possible for Abraham to have the view of the land promise that the Author of Hebrews ascribed to him? What led him to "spiritualize" the promise to make it entail future heavenly, kingdom realities? The answer lies in the fact that he took seriously God's promise to him that "in [him] *all the families of the earth* would be blessed" (Gen 12:3).<sup>12</sup> Therefore, he perceived that the promise to him and his offspring, who is Christ (Gal 3:16), entailed that in Christ "he would be heir [not of Palestine but] of the [glorified] world [*kosmou*]" (Rom 4:13). Plainly, Abraham understood that God's land promise meant that God would someday restore the entire cosmos to its former paradisaical glory and in that he placed his hope and patiently waited for it. His faith and understanding would have been satisfied with nothing less!

Moses too, and his contemporaries, wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, and died in faith, not having received the promise (Heb 11:39).

Under Joshua's leadership the Israelites conquered the land, receiving in a limited fashion the paradise God had promised. But it quickly became obvious that this territory could not be the ultimate paradise. Undefeated Canaanites remained in the land as "hornets." And because of Israel's sin throughout the united and divided kingdom periods, finally the land was devastated by the Neo-Babylonians; the Indwelling Glory departed from the Solomonic temple (Ezek 9:3; 10:1-22) which temple was then destroyed; and the people were banished and came to be known as *lo-ammi*, meaning "not-my-people" (Hos 1:9). The once fruitful land took on the appearance of a desert, a dwelling place of jackals, owls, and scorpions. Paradise, even in its old covenant shadow form, was taken from them.

Even the restoration after the Babylonian Captivity under Ezra and Nehemiah, designated by biblical scholars as the Second Temple Period, could not be paradise. But the return to the land and the rebuilding of the temple pointed the way to it. The glory of that tiny temple, Haggai prophesied, would someday be greater than the glory of the Solomonic temple. What did this hyperbolic language mean? It meant that God still had

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<sup>11</sup>Abraham owned only the plot of ground, the field of Mach-pelah, that he purchased from the Hittites living in the land for a burial ground for Sarah his wife (Gen 23).

<sup>12</sup>Paul tells us in Galatians 3:8 that when God made this promise to Abraham he was in effect "preaching the gospel beforehand to Abraham," that is, he was declaring that he would justify the Gentiles by faith.

something better for them than a temporal land and a material temple. The promise of the land would be fulfilled by nothing less than *a restored paradise on a cosmic scale!* As Isaiah predicted, someday the wolf would lie down with the lamb, the leopard would lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion would live in peace, and a little child would lead them. The nursing child would play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child would place his hand on the adder's den, and the earth would be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the places of the sea (Isa 11:6-9). No more would sin and sorrow reign nor thorns infest the ground. Then, writes Paul in Romans 9:25-26:

Those who were not [God's] people [not only from the Jews but also from the  
Gentiles, Rom 9:24] [he] will call "my people,"  
and her who was not beloved  
[he] will call "beloved."  
And in the very place where it was said to them, "You are not my people,"  
There they will be called "sons of the living God."

### **Jesus' teaching about the land and the future of ethnic Israel**

When Christ came 2000 years ago the biblical perspective of the land experienced a radical advance. By inaugurating his public ministry in Galilee of the Gentiles along the public trade route (Isa 9:1, cited in Matt 4:12-16), Jesus was making a statement. *That* land would serve as the springboard to all nations. It is interesting too that after his bodily resurrection from the dead Jesus instructed his disciples to leave Jerusalem and to meet him in Galilee where he issued his Great Commission (Matt 28:7, 10, 16). Clearly, the kingdom of God—the central theme of Jesus' teaching—would encompass a realm that extended well beyond the borders of ancient Israel. As Paul so pointedly indicated, from the new covenant perspective God's promise to Abraham meant that he would become heir of the whole world (Rom 4:13). Jesus' pointing his ministry toward the whole of the world rather than confining it to the land of Canaan cleared the way for the old covenant "type" to be replaced by the new covenant "antitype." Teaching that the Kingdom of God had appeared in its grace modality with his first coming and that it would appear in its power modality at his second coming, he focused the imagery of a return to a land flowing with milk and honey upon a rejuvenation that would embrace the *whole* of God's created order. It was not Canaan as such that would benefit in the establishment of Messiah's kingdom. The whole cosmos would rejoice in the renewal brought about by this newness of life resident in the messianic kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

Now what about the future of ethnic Israel in Jesus' teaching? In his parable of the wicked farmers, found in Matthew 21:33-45, Mark 12:1-12, and Luke 20:9-19, Jesus tells the story of a landowner who leased his vineyard to some farmers and then went into another country. When the time arrived for him to receive his rental fee in the form of the fruit of the vineyard the landowner sent servant after servant to his tenants, only to have each one of them beaten or stoned or killed. *Last of all* he sent his son—Luke says his "beloved son"; Mark says "*yet one [other]*, a beloved son"—saying: "They will respect my son." But when the tenants saw the landowner's son, they said: "This is the heir;

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<sup>13</sup>The thoughts expressed in the last four paragraphs I have adapted from O. Palmer Roberson, *Understanding the Land of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966), 7-13.



come, let's kill him and take his inheritance." This they did, throwing his body out of the vineyard. When the landowner came, he destroyed the tenants and leased his vineyard to others. The interpretive intentions of the parable, as Don Carson notes,<sup>14</sup> are obvious on the face of it: the landowner is God the Father, the vineyard the nation of Israel (Isa 5:7); the farmers Israel's leaders, the servants the prophets of the theocracy (Matt 23:37a); and the son Jesus himself.

The central teaching of the parable is obvious—as indeed it was to its original audience (Matt 21:45): After having sent his servants the prophets repeatedly in Old Testament times to the nation of Israel and its leaders to call the nation back to him from its sin and unbelief, only to have them rebuffed, persecuted, and often killed, God, the Owner of Israel, had in sending Jesus, the Second Person of the Godhead, moved beyond merely sending another servant. Listen once again to the pertinent verses in this connection:

Matthew 21:37: "Then *last of all* he sent his son."

Mark 12:6: "...having *one son*, his beloved, he also sent him to them *last*."

From Matthew's "last of all" and Mark's "last" it is clear that Jesus represented himself as God's *last*, his *final* ambassador, after whose sending none higher can come and nothing more can be done.<sup>15</sup> The Lord of the vineyard has no further resources. As God's Son the Son of God is the *highest* messenger of God conceivable. In sum, God had in Jesus *finally* (Matt 21:37: *hysteron*; Mark 12:6: *eschaton*) sent his own beloved Son whom, he taught, the nation would reject. But the rejection of his Son, unlike the rejections of those before him, *was to entail neither God's continuance of dealing with the recalcitrant nation nor a mere change of politico-religious administration*. Rather, *his* rejection, Jesus taught, would eventuate in "the complete overthrow of the theocracy, and the rearing from the foundation up of a new structure [Christ's church] in which the Son would receive full vindication and supreme honor"<sup>16</sup> His very words are as follows:

I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit. (Matt 21:43)

What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. (Mark 12:9; so also Luke 20:16)

Here is a "replacement theology" and it is Jesus himself who enunciated it: *National* Israel, except for its elect remnant, would be judged, and the special standing that it had enjoyed during the old dispensation would be given to the already emerging *international* church of Jesus Christ made up of both the elect Jewish remnant and elect Gentiles. So as

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<sup>14</sup>D. A. Carson, *Matthew* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 451.

<sup>15</sup>This parable also carries implications concerning Muhammad's claim as being the last and greatest of God's prophets, even greater than Jesus. It shows him to be a false prophet.

<sup>16</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (Reprint of 1926 edition; Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 162.

Jesus predicted, in time Israel's rulers rejected him and incited Rome to execute him as an insurrectionist and a false messiah. As he also predicted, the temple was again soon destroyed (see Matt 24:1-35), the people dispersed, and Israel ceased to exist as a political entity as Moses had predicted in Deuteronomy 28:15-68 (see Deut 31:24-29), leading Paul to declare in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 that the Jews who

killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets...displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But God's wrath has come upon them *at last* [*eis telos*<sup>17</sup>]!”

Since Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians in A.D. 50 or 51 it is unlikely that he intended by his phrase, “God's wrath has come upon them,” the destruction of Jerusalem that occurred in A.D. 70. More likely he was referring to the divine rejection of national Israel that Jesus referred to in his parable of the wicked farmers and elsewhere (Matt 23:38; 24:15-28), a rejection that Paul declared in Romans 11 has come to expression in God's hardening the *mass* of Israel save for an elect Jewish remnant. So once again Israel as an ethnic entity has become *lo-ammi*, “not my people,” only now with a finality about it save for an elect remnant (Rom 9:27-29).<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, Paul writes in Romans 11:7-10:

Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking [that is, a righteousness before God (Rom 9:31)]. The elect [remnant] obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written:

“God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.”

And David says:

Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs *forever* [*dia pantos*<sup>19</sup>].”

But because God, as I have already noted, has by no means rejected every Jew, choosing in grace a Jewish remnant (Rom 11:5), today elect Jews continue to be saved by being “provoked to jealousy” (Rom 11:11, 14) by the multitudes of saved Gentiles who are enjoying the spiritual blessings originally intended for them and who accordingly through faith in Jesus Christ, their Messiah, are being grafted back into their own “olive tree” (Rom 11:23-24). The justification of Gentiles is then the primary avenue to the

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<sup>17</sup>BAGD, τέλος, 812γ, properly views this prepositional phrase as an adverbial expression and suggests it should be translated “forever, through all eternity” or “utterly.”

<sup>18</sup>Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 174, fn. 3, rightly contends that the word “remnant” etymologically does not necessarily intend a small, insignificant number but simply that which is “left.” But when Isaiah declares: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sands of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved,” the implication is that God has hardened the *mass* of ethnic Israel.

<sup>19</sup>This phrase may also be translated “continually,” but “continually” conveys the same sense as “forever” in this context.

justification of the Jewish elect, indeed, *in this way (houtōs)* “all Israel” will be saved (Rom 11:26).<sup>20</sup>

### Five propositions:

In light of this biblical data we are now in a position to affirm the following five propositions<sup>21</sup>:

1. The modern Jewish state is not a part of the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Even though this particular political state in God’s providence came into being on May 14, 1948<sup>22</sup> it would be a denial of Jesus’ affirmation that his kingdom is “not of this world order” (John 18:36) to assert that modern Israel is a part of his messianic kingdom. To put it bluntly, modern Israel is not true “Israel” at all but is rather “the spiritual son of Hagar” (Rom 9:6-8; Gal 4:24-25) and thus is “Ishmaelitish” to the core due to its lack of Abrahamic faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> It has accordingly forsaken any legitimate *biblical* claim to Palestine, any partitioning of which should be negotiated today by the claimants to the land, not under *biblical* claims or threats of war and terrorism, but through the political peace process of the law of nations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>For my exposition of Romans 11 see my *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Second edition; Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 1025-30. There I show exegetically that just as God throughout this age is bringing the divinely determined full number (Rom 11:25) of elect Gentiles to faith in Christ, so throughout this age he is also bringing the divinely determined full number (Rom 11:12) of elect Jews (the “remnant”) to faith in Christ so that both “full numbers” are reached *in this age*. While Israel *as a nation* has no salvific covenant with God in this age, standing as it is under God’s wrath, the remnant of elect Jews, as they are saved, are grafted by faith in Christ into the “cultivated olive tree” (Rom 11:17-24), that is, the church; *there* they cease to be “Ishmael” but become the true “Israel of God.”

<sup>21</sup>I have adapted these with additions and alterations from Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 194.

<sup>22</sup>See the appendix for a brief refutation of the Christian Zionist’s claim that this event was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

<sup>23</sup>Modern Israel must face the fact that to be the physical descendants of Abraham and to have Abrahamic blood flowing in their veins means nothing as far as acquiring God’s approbation is concerned. As John the Baptist warned: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matt 3:9). To the Jews who said, “Abraham is our father,” but who were seeking to kill him Jesus said: “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing what Abraham did [that is, you would rejoice to see my day]...you are of your father the devil” (John 8:39-44, 56). Ethnic Jews must recall that Abraham had *two* sons, which means that “not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring”; rather, “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Rom 9:7-8).

<sup>24</sup>In such a partitioning process the United States government should be even-handed in its policy decisions respecting the parties to the conflict, favoring neither the “spiritual Ishmaelites” nor the natural Ishmaelites. For instance, should a coalition of Muslim nations launch a non-provoked attack on the nation of Israel in order to exterminate the Jewish population and to eliminate the Jewish state as a nation in the Middle East as some Muslim leaders have threatened to do, the United States government should condemn that coalition and side defensively with Israel. But should Israel launch a non-provoked attack against her Palestinian enemies or the Muslim world, admittedly much less likely than the foregoing instance, the United States should be just as quick to condemn Israel and to do all that it can to protect the lives of Palestinians and Muslims.

2. The land promise of the Old Testament served in a *typological* role as a model of the consummate realization of the purposes of God for his redeemed people that encompasses “all the nations” (Gen 12:3) and the entire cosmos (Rom 4:13), which means that Christians as members of the messianic kingdom of God are the real heirs along with Abraham of the land promise in its antitypical, consummated character.
3. Because of the inherently limited scope of the land promised in the Old Testament it cannot be regarded as having continuing significance in the realm of redemption other than its function as a model to teach that obedience and divine blessing go hand in hand while disobedience and divine retribution also go hand in hand.
4. The Old Testament predictions about the “return” of “Israel” to the “land” in terms of a geo-political re-establishment of the state of Israel are more properly interpreted as having consummating fulfillment 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).
5. The future messianic kingdom will embrace the whole of the newly recreated cosmos and will not experience a special manifestation that could be regarded *in any sense* as “Jewish” in the region of the so-called “holy land” area or anywhere else.

Peter, the apostle to the circumcision (who surely would have had his ear tuned to any and every future privilege Jews might enjoy), when he wrote of future things in 2 Peter 3, said nothing about a *Jewish* millennium or about a restoration of a *Jewish* kingdom in Palestine but rather divided the whole of earth history into three periods: the *first* period—“the world of that time”—extending from the beginning of creation to the Genesis flood (2 Pet 3:5-6) that was destroyed by the flood; the *second* period—“the heavens and earth that now exist” (2 Pet 3:7)—extending from the flood to the final Day of the Lord at which time the earth will be destroyed by fire (2 Pet 3:7) and the present heavens “will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved” (2 Pet 3:10); and the *third* period—“new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13)—extending throughout eternity future. If he had believed in a Jewish millennium following this present age 2 Peter 3 would have been the appropriate place to mention it but he makes no mention of a millennium, much less a *Jewish* millennium, placing the entirety of earth history within the three time frames that I just mentioned.

## Conclusion

What should we conclude from all this? The twin facts of ethnic Israel’s unbelief and God’s wrath exhibited toward ethnic Israel (1 Thes 2:15-16) pose something of a problem for Christians today. On the one hand, should not our attitude toward these people through whom came not only our Old Testament Scriptures but also our Messiah and Savior according to the flesh (Rom 9:5), indeed, our very salvation (John 4:22) be one of gratitude, and should Christians not do everything in their power to make the lot of the Jewish people more acceptable to the world? On the other hand, were not the Jewish people complicit in the crucifixion of Christ, notwithstanding Roman Catholicism’s

absolution of world Jewry in that event, and has not world Jewry for the most part rejected the Savior of the world, declaring him to be only one in a long line of false messiahs, and do not these same Jews, when pressed, acknowledge that they regard Christians as idolaters, worshiping as they do a “mere man”?

In response to this problem, I would first say that no Christian should advocate anything even remotely resembling discrimination against Jews because of their ethnicity or religion. At the same time, in light of the fact that the only hope of salvation for the Jewish people resides in the provisions of the Christian gospel, it would be wrong, indeed, unloving and unchristian, for Christians to encourage or to support Israel in the establishment and maintenance of its ethnic or religious “Jewishness” that is the ground of its hope of approbation before God. This is simply to take seriously the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ as the only Savior and the only hope not only of ethnic Israel but also of *every* race and *every* nation! The Bible denounces every hope for approbation before God that is not grounded in the person and work of Christ. Such approbation pursued through ethnicity or through good works is futile (Gal 2:16). Therefore, the Jew, if he is ever to know genuine forgiveness by God, must forsake the notion that his racial connection to the patriarchs and/or his allegiance to Torah make him acceptable to God (Rom 2:17-29; Gal 5:3-4).

It is a strange twist of thinking, if not downright disloyalty to the gospel, for Christians to aid and abet Israel in the retention of its ethnic/religious distinctives that provide the ground of its hope for divine approbation, the holding on to which only solidifies Israel in its unbelief. And yet, in order that the blessing of Genesis 12:3 might be theirs and in order to escape the threatened curse enunciated in the same verse, many Christians fervently believe that they must support Zionist causes whatever the cost and must rejoice with every “Israeli advance” in the world, failing to realize as they do so (1) that as long as they encourage the Jew to continue to hold his unbiblical perception of what constitutes “Jewishness,”<sup>25</sup> and (2) that as long as he continues to hold to Judaism as his religion (contra John Hagee), just so long will he continue to reject Jesus Christ who is Israel’s only hope and thus be eternally condemned. The Roman Catholic Church, in its modern efforts at *aggiornamento*, has not helped here either, declaring in its 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that because the faith of the Jewish People—catechetically described as the “the first to hear the Word of God”—“unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God’s revelation in the Old Covenant” (paragraph 839),<sup>26</sup> because to the Jews belong all the privileges outlined in Romans 9:4-5 (paragraph 839), and because with Christians they “await the coming of the Messiah” (!) (para 840), the People of God include the Jewish people. Never mind that the Jewish people for the most part deny the deity of Jesus Christ and thus the doctrine of the

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<sup>25</sup>In no uncertain terms Paul declared that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, and not by the letter” (Rom 2:28-29). Moreover, he taught that “the present Jerusalem,” the enslaved and doomed city, is the “son of Hagar” bearing children for slavery whereas Christians have “the Jerusalem above” for their mother (Gal 4:25).

<sup>26</sup>Theirs is indeed a response, a *negative* one, to God’s revelation in the Old Covenant. To suggest that the faith of Christ-rejecting Jews is in any sense a proper response to the Old Testament revelation is surely an inaccurate appraisal of the situation. In light of the fact that the only hope of salvation for Jews resides in the provisions of the Christian gospel, it is simply gross wrong-headedness to encourage or to support them in their “Jewishness” or in their Zionist causes.

Trinity; never mind that they for the most part rejected their Messiah the first time he came as a misguided prophet at best and a blasphemer at worst and had him crucified and accordingly believe today that Christians are idolaters because we worship him whom they contend was simply a man; never mind that they see no need for Christ's substitutionary atonement. According to Rome's teaching they are still related salvifically to the People of God and may go to heaven!

Again, the Christian is often told today that in his witness to his modern Jewish friends he may assume that the Jew to whom he speaks already believes the Old Testament and that it only remains to show him that Jesus Christ is the one about whom the Old Testament prophets spoke. This is surely an inaccurate appraisal of the actual situation. The great mass of world Jewry today neither believes that the Old Testament is the inspired, inerrant Word of the living God nor does it have a clue about what the Old Testament teaches. We must think more carefully here, for can one truly believe the Old Testament and not acknowledge Jesus Christ to be the Messiah, Savior, and Lord revealed therein? The real truth of the matter is that no one who has heard of the Messiah and his atoning work and then rejects him believes the Old Testament. Jesus himself expressly declared: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me" (John 5:46). When the modern Jew claims that he believes and follows Torah, even though he may even say that he sees grace taught therein, but who at the same time also believes that he must live a certain way if he is to merit and remain a "son" or "daughter" of Torah, he does not believe the Old Testament and is denying the saving provision of which Torah actually speaks through the elaborate protocols of its Levitical sacrificial system that pointed to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

The sooner Christians realize that to bring ethnic/religious Israel to the Christian faith they must show it the futility of any and every hope for God's approbation that is related to the fact that Jews have Abrahamic blood flowing in their veins (Matt 3:9; John 1:13) or that they are physically circumcised (Rom 2:25-29; Gal 5:2-4; 6:15) or that they are practicing "sons and daughters of Torah" (Rom 2:17-24; 3:9; Gal 3:10; 4:21-5:1), the sooner their witness to ethnic/religious Israel will become effective.

Thus we must conclude that just as for God "as far as the gospel is concerned, [Jews] are [regarded as his] enemies [for the salvific sake of non-Jews]; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs" (Rom 11:28), so also for Christians they should love ethnic/religious Jews in and by whose elect remnant God will fulfill his elective promises to the patriarchs. But Christians must also do everything they can, without being arrogant toward them (Rom 11:28), to bring ethnic/religious Israel to the place where they will forsake any and every Jewish ethnic/religious distinctive in which they rest their hope for salvation. Christians must do this for the sake of ethnic Israel and out of loyalty to the cause of the gospel.

## Appendix

### **A Brief Refutation of the Claims of Christian Zionists that Modern Israel Is the Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies**

Christian Zionists claim that the establishment of Israel as a nation on May 14, 1948 fulfilled biblical prophecies. The following Old Testament prophecies are samples only from a larger group that these biblical interpreters say were fulfilled by the event of 1948:

1. Jeremiah 29:14, it is said, predicted the founding of the modern state of Israel. But the context of Jeremiah 29 makes it clear that the predicted “restoration” after the completion of the seventy years of Babylonian exile (29:10), refers to the return from exile under Zerubbabel in 536 B.C.
2. Isaiah 11:11, it is said, speaks of a “second time” that God would restore the remnant to the land, the first being the return from Babylon in 536 B.C., the second being the establishment of modern Israel in 1948. But the context of Isaiah 11 makes it clear that Israel’s first deliverance was from Egypt under Moses (11:16) with its second restoration being from the nations into which the Jews of the Assyrian/Babylonian captivity had spread over time during the Second Temple Period that typically pointed forward to the antitypical rejuvenation of the entire cosmos in the Eschaton.
3. Zechariah 8:7, it is said, predicted that God “will save [his] people from the east country and the west country, and...bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem.” It is, however, a reach to see this prediction as referring to the modern state of Israel. In fact, the passage speaks of the faithfulness and righteousness of the inhabitants of Jerusalem in that day (8:8), something that is definitely not true of present Jerusalem. Much more likely is it that Zechariah was predicting the return of exiles during the day of Ezra, Nehemiah, and after (see Ezra 7:1-10; Neh 11:1-2) that, again, pointed typically forward to the antitypical new Paradise of God.
4. Ezekiel 36:24-26, it is said, predicted that Israel would be restored to the land “in unbelief” which agrees with the situation in Israel today. But the passage does not speak of a restoration “in unbelief.” God does not reward disobedience! Verse 33 states: “On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited,” clearly implying that those who are “restored” have first been spiritually cleansed, thereby meeting the requirement of Leviticus 26:40-42: “...if they confess their iniquity...; if their uncircumcised heart is humbled..., then I will remember my covenant...and I will remember the land.”
5. Amos 9:14-15, it is said, declares that conditions of permanent victories and national establishment would someday prevail that simply were not true of any Old Testament restoration. But Jeremiah 18:18-19 makes it clear that what on the surface might appear to be an unconditional promise is in fact conditional upon obedience. (Ron Kilpatrick insightfully notes that this conditionality also applies to Eli’s apparently

permanent priesthood (1 Sam 2:27-36), to the apparently unconditional promise made to David in 2 Samuel 7:10, and to the apparently permanent “peoplehood” of ethnic Israel in 2 Samuel 7:24.) Moreover, it must not be forgotten that James in Acts 15:16-17 applied the prophecy immediately preceding these two verses to the church of this age.

The bottom line of all this is that biblical prophecy says nothing about modern Israel. In fact, far from the formation of modern Israel being a fulfillment of biblical prophecy, it is, if anything, a major instrumentality in the hand of God to sustain Israel in its divinely imposed hardening!

I strongly urge anyone interested in reading further on this subject to consult O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Prophets* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), chapters 10, 11, 12.