

Israel & the Church: the Fulfilment of Promise

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Introduction

Ronald E. Diprose writes that, to him, the question of Israel had become “some kind of theological football that opposing teams of theologians kicked about in accordance with their particular agendas.”¹ The challenge for me in writing on the subject is to avoid becoming yet another footballer, giving this particular ball yet another boot towards the opposition. However, the diversity of view among Christians on the subject of Israel and the Church, and its emotive nature given the events of the 20th century (the Holocaust and the establishing of a national State of Israel) should not deter one from tackling the issue (forgive the footballing pun!). On the contrary, it is because of such things that we are compelled to engage in the dialogue.

Broadly speaking the diversity of views has resulted in a widespread lack of clarity among ordinary Christians about the place of ethnic Israel in Christian theology. Has the church replaced Israel? Does Israel have a divine claim upon land in the Middle East? Is the establishing of the State of Israel the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy and a sign of an imminent battle of Armageddon? Do sincere Jews have to believe in Jesus in order to be ‘saved’? Should the church be working towards and anticipating a widespread revival among the Jews?

The lack of clarity in answering these questions demands our attention since if *we* do not influence those in our churches, others certainly will. Furthermore, whether apparent or not, it must be understood that the issues at stake are of a most fundamental nature and the consequences are huge. Theologically, ones’ view on this matter is directly related to ones’ attitude towards such themes as: the Church, the future, worldwide mission, and the interpretation of Scripture, to name a few. In addition, opinions on Israel have at the very least influenced, if not actually determined, national foreign policies towards the Middle East which could have devastating consequences for the region.

The question of Israel in Christian theology is therefore most important and one that we, and those in our churches, must be able to answer clearly and biblically. We will begin by briefly exploring the consequences of two events in the 20th century which have shaped recent dialogue on the subject of Israel: the Holocaust, and the establishing the State of Israel in 1948.

The next section reviews the primary Christian positions on Israel and the Church, based largely upon their hermeneutical frameworks. Each will include a statement of the position followed by a brief critique of it.

Finally, we will consider two key issues in the debate: Israel’s claim to a *divine right to the land*, and whether Scripture predicts a widespread *revival among the Jews*. These sections will draw from the various positions just reviewed but will explore key biblical texts and their practical application in more depth.

¹ Diprose, Ronald E. *Israel and the Church* (Bletchley: Authentic 2004) xiii

Post-holocaust theologising

With regard to Israel, two events in the 20th century have had colossal impact upon how the Jews are perceived as well as upon theological discussion: The atrocities of the Holocaust, and the establishing of the modern State of Israel.

Firstly, the Holocaust has impacted the church in that it has forced it to face up to the consequences of its historical anti-Semitism. David Holwerda says “The haunting memory of the Holocaust looms large over every discussion and claim. Israel is now Israel-after-the-holocaust, and the contemporary church encounters modern Israel with a guilty conscience. Although the church did not directly perpetuate the Holocaust and individual Christians often assisted individual Jews, the Holocaust would not have happened had it not been for the prior history of Christian persecution of the Jews.”² Similarly, Hans Küng wrote: “Nazi Anti-Judaism was the work of godless anti-Christian criminals ... but without the almost two-thousand-year-long pre-history of ‘Christian’ anti-Judaism ... it would not have been possible.”³ This is a very important point of which we must take note.

It is at times shocking to us to read statements by reputable Christian leaders of history who advocated hostility towards and persecution of the Jews. And while we must hesitate before judging those of a very different age to our own, we must surely distance ourselves from such comments. For instance,

John Chrysostom - “The Jews are the odious assassins of Christ and for killing God there is no expiation possible, no indulgence or pardon. Christians may never cease vengeance, and the Jews must live in servitude forever. God always hated the Jews, and whoever has intercourse with Jews will be rejected on Judgement Day. It is incumbent upon all Christians to hate the Jews.”

Augustine – “The true image of the Hebrew is Judas Iscariot, who sells the Lord for silver. The Jew can never spiritually understand the Scriptures and forever will bear the guilt for the death of Jesus because their fathers killed the Saviour.”

Thomas Aquinas – “It would be perfectly licit to hold the Jews, because of their crucifying the Lord, in perpetual servitude.”

Finally, *Martin Luther*, who was repeatedly quoted by Adolf Hitler in support of his actions, although early on commended Israel for their contribution to Christianity, when they failed to convert he turned on them with a venom that is hard to comprehend. In his tract *Concerning Jews and their Lies* he wrote “Set their synagogues on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered or spread over with dirt so that no-one may ever be able to see a cinder or stone of it... in order that God may see that we are Christians... their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed... They should be put under one roof or in a stable, like gypsies, in order that they may realise that they are not masters in our land as they boast, but miserable captives...”⁴ He continues “To sum up, dear princes and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you and we may all be free from this insufferable devilish burden – the Jews.”⁵

² Holwerda, David E. *Jesus & Israel* (Leicester: Apollos 1995) 6

³ *Ibid.* 7

⁴ All quotes from Chapman, Colin *Whose Promised Land?* (Oxford: Lion 2002) 44

⁵ Hagee, John *In Defence of Israel* (Lake Mary: Frontline 2007) 28

Not surprisingly, given such a history, “the cross is for the Jews not a symbol of redemption but a horrible sign of oppression” which, Holwerda continues, “complicates enormously any writing on the subject of Jesus and Israel.”⁶ We must not underestimate the impact the Holocaust has had upon the Jews and the increase in sympathy towards the Zionist cause, and therefore the corresponding determination in the Church to avoid *all* accusations of Anti-Semitism. As Sizer writes “the fear of being accused of Anti-Semitism for challenging the Zionist agenda is enough to keep many evangelicals under their beds.”⁷ Nevertheless, we must recognise that the (possibly subconscious?) desire to alleviate the church’s “guilty conscience” is a very dangerous presupposition when forming doctrine.

This has not prevented some from suggesting that if Christians are to avoid anti-Semitism they must abandon traditional New Testament doctrines. For instance, the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide, insists that the following 3 ‘errors’ must be rejected: “that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel, that he was rejected by the Jews, and that he in turn has repudiated them.”⁸ Holwerda claims that such reinterpretations of the Christian message “violate the boundaries of traditionally orthodox Christianity”⁹ and lest we think such ‘violations’ remain only in scholarly circles, John Hagee who features regularly on Christian TV, claims “The Jews did not reject Jesus as their Messiah... There is not one verse of Scripture in the New Testament that says Jesus came to be the Messiah... [and] The Old Covenant is not dead.”¹⁰ While each of these statements might be more nuanced than they appear it is at least evident that we must tread carefully if we are to find a pathway which avoids anti-Semitism on the one hand and yet does not compromise essential Christian doctrines on the other.¹¹

The second event of the 20th century which has had huge effect upon theology concerning Israel was the establishing of the State of Israel in 1948. In 1917 the British Government issued the Balfour Declaration expressing support for ‘*a national homeland for the Jewish people*’, and after the First World War the British were given a mandate by the League of Nations to establish a Jewish state and administrate Palestine and Trans-Jordan for the benefit of all its inhabitants.¹² Through the 1920’s and 1930’s there occurred violent clashes between Jews and Arabs resulting in Britain handing responsibility back to the UN (successor to the League of Nations) in 1947 who established the Partition Plan resulting in the State of Israel in 1948.

This event, and the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967, are seen by many as the fulfilment of the Old Testament promise to Abraham when God said ‘I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God’ (Gen 17:8). So, David Brickner states “I believe the modern day state of Israel is a miracle of God and a fulfilment of Bible prophecy.”¹³

⁶ *Op. Cit.* 7

⁷ Sizer, Stephen *Zion’s Christian Soldiers* (Nottingham: IVP 2007) 19

⁸ Lapide, Pinchas *Jesus in Two Perspectives* (Minneapolis; Augsburg 1985) 24 See Holwerda *Op. Cit.* 7

⁹ *Op. Cit.* 18

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.* 135ff cf Sizer *Op. Cit.* (2007) 11

¹¹ Cf Holwerda *Op. Cit.* 18f

¹² That said, in practice Britain emphasised the rights of the Jews’ right to the land while seemingly ignoring Palestinian claims. See Wagner, Donald E *Dying in the Land of Promise* (London: Melisende 2003) 101ff

¹³ Quoted in Sizer *Op. Cit.* (2007) 75

In the next section we will explore the variety of ways the prophecies of the Old Testament are understood to be fulfilled, suffice to say at this point that any theology on Israel must have some explanation for the existence of the modern *State* of Israel. Furthermore, modern Israel currently only possesses part of that land promised to Abraham (although the biblical borders are variously defined¹⁴) and therefore it seems to me that claims of a divine right to the land must also acknowledge Israel's claim to large parts of Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, however its fulfilment might come about. It is evident that *theological* positions quickly become *politically* loaded.

Various Perspectives

As stated earlier, there is considerable diversity regarding the place of ethnic Israel in Christian theology. We will explore this diversity using the three categories of *dispensational Zionism*, *classical Zionism*, and *Fulfilment Theology* accepting that there is a range of views even under these headings.

Dispensational Zionism

Dispensationalism as a system began in the UK with J.N. Darby in the 19th Century although was popularised in the US early in the 20th Century by Cyrus Scofield and his *Reference Bible*. Under this system there are seven ages or 'dispensations' where God relates to humanity in a different way after the previous way had failed. Thus concerning Israel and the Church, David Pawson explains "[the sixth age] is referred to as 'the church age' (from the first coming of Jesus to the second, and mainly gentile) and [the seventh age is] the 'kingdom age' (the thousand years of his 'millennial' reign, after his second coming and mainly Jewish." He continues that "[Darby] made a division between Israel and the church. That is, he saw no continuity between the physical people of God (all Jewish) and the spiritual people of God (some Jews but mostly Gentiles). Believing their separateness would extend into eternity, when the Jews would inhabit the new earth and Christians the new heaven, he called them respectively God's 'earthly' and 'heavenly' peoples."¹⁵

Modern writers like John Hagee continue this idea drawing a parallel from the promise of Abraham: the church is the stars in the sky and Israel is the sand on the shore, since "stars are heavenly, not earthly. They represent the church, spiritual Israel. The 'sand of the shore' on the other hand, is earthly and represents an earthly kingdom with a literal Jerusalem as the capital city. Both stars and sand exist at the same time, and neither ever replaces the other. Just so, the nation of Israel and spiritual Israel, the church, exist at the same time and do not replace each other."¹⁶ (This interpretation is despite explicit Biblical evidence to the contrary! See Neh 9:23.) So, Sizer concludes that for dispensationalists "the Jews remain 'God's chosen people', while the church is merely 'a parenthesis' to God's future plans for the Jews."¹⁷

This understanding of the millennial age, which follows the rapture of the church into heaven and when Jesus will reign on the earth from Jerusalem as King of the Jews, means that the unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament made to the ancient Israelites are interpreted quite literally and remain in force for their Jewish descendants today.

¹⁴ See Chapman *Op. Cit.* 124-126

¹⁵ Pawson, David *Defending Christian Zionism* (Bristol: TerraNova 2008) 26-27

¹⁶ Hagee, John quoted in Sizer *Op. Cit.* (2007) 42

¹⁷ *Op. Cit.* (2007) 43

Such literal fulfilment is very apparent from the numerous Zionist writers who make bold and extremely dogmatic claims about OT prophecies being worked out in contemporary events. For instance, Derek Prince writes, concerning Jeremiah 16:15-16 'I will send many fishermen ... and afterward I will send for many hunters': "All this was exactly fulfilled in the years following 1933. First, God sent 'fishermen'... who warned the Jews of Germany... After that, in fulfilment of his prophetic warning, God released the 'hunters' – the Nazis."¹⁸ And again of Isaiah 43:5-6 '... I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth' Prince makes the claim that "[the 'north' is] the western half of the former Soviet Union [and the 'south' is] the eastern half of Africa. In the years since 1989 there has been a dramatic fulfilment of these particular prophecies. By the end of 1991, almost 400,000 Jews had returned to Israel from the former Soviet Union and 20,000 from Ethiopia."¹⁹ Similarly Lance Lambert asserts that the promise in Ezekiel 36:8-9 'But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home.... and you shall be tilled and sown', has "come to pass in our own day: the Lord had spoken it and the Lord has done it" since "the land has been tilled again, and vineyards, orchards and gardens have once more been planted."²⁰ Such speculative dogmatism is rife among dispensationalists who do not even qualify their assertions with a '*might it be that this fulfils that*'. Such authoritarian claims have done little to help the dialogue on Israel since to question their opinion is tantamount to heresy and anti-Semitism.²¹

This literal fulfilment of Scripture in ethnic Israel has resulted in Christian Zionists investing huge amounts of energy and finance into supporting Israel supposedly in order that they may speed the end of the age (*and the battle of Armageddon!*), the return of Christ and the new heavens and earth. Some of this support seems extremely misguided, if not downright foolish, and, as Sizer points out, could be a "self-fulfilling prophecy."²² For instance, at the inaugural event of *Christians United for Israel*, and before four US Senators and the Israeli Ambassador to the US, John Hagee declared "The United States must join Israel in a pre-emptive attack against Iran to fulfil God's plan for both Israel and the West... a biblically prophesied end-time confrontation with Iran, which would lead to the Rapture, Tribulation, and the Second Coming of Christ."²³ Such talk is inflammatory to say the least and while it might please militant Jews, the alignment with the broader Zionist agenda is a substantial hindrance to the evangelisation of Arabic peoples. As David Wagner points out: "[through television and radio broadcasts] Christianity is projected into a predominantly Muslim world as a Western, Zionist religious movement rather than an indigenous Arab religious community that predates the arrival of Islam. When the identity of Christianity becomes that of a Western, Zionist fundamentalism, local Palestinian Christians (and other Middle Eastern Christians) find their identity and historic continuity under suspicion."²⁴ Thus, extreme forms of Christian Zionism

¹⁸ Prince, Derek *The Destiny of Israel and the Church* (Milton Keynes: Word 1992) 84

¹⁹ *Op. Cit.* 107

²⁰ Lambert, Lance *The Uniqueness of Israel* (Eastbourne: Kingsway 1992) 57-9

²¹ Eg Prince *Op. Cit.* 63-64 See also by Prince *The Last Word on the Middle East* (!) There is a question whether Zionists like Prince & Lambert are dispensational or not since they do not make it clear. However, their literal hermeneutic, pro-Judaism and apparent negative view of the church puts them closer to dispensationalism than classical Zionism.

²² *Op. Cit.* 146

²³ In Sizer *Op. Cit.* 142

²⁴ *Op. Cit.* 31

emphasise a particular understanding of OT prophecies and promises for Israel while riding roughshod over the great commission to 'Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations* ...' (Mt 28:19).

In addition and perhaps most fundamentally, little or no allowance seems to be made by dispensationalists for how the NT reinterprets the OT which is surely a guiding hermeneutical principle for Christians. For example, Prince writes "We are left with only two possible conclusions: either these [OT] predictions are to be fulfilled in the destiny of Israel, or God has uttered prophecies that will never be fulfilled."²⁵ Prince, and many Zionists like him, leaves no room for interpreting the OT in the way that the NT writers seem to do so. Repeatedly the patterns and types of the OT are seen in the NT to be fulfilled in Christ and in the Church: the Passover sacrifice, the Law, the temple, the city, the priesthood, the children of Abraham, the 'people belonging to God', one could go on and on. Even if one concedes at this point that there *may* be some continued fulfilment in ethnic Israel as believed by non-dispensational Zionists, the NT sees the primary fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant in and through *the Church*. It is my belief that the fulfilment of the Abrahamic Covenant in Israel and through the Mosaic Law was 'but a shadow of the heavenly things' (Heb 8:5 10:1) which has been 'rendered obsolete' (Heb 8:13). It is worth noting at this point that many Zionists are confusing in their terminology since they refer to the Abrahamic Covenant as 'the Old Covenant' whereas the Bible uses this to denote the Mosaic Covenant.²⁶

It may now be apparent that this view inevitably results in a positive view of Israel and often a negative, or at least critical, view of the church. This is not at all surprising since at the heart of the dispensational system is the view that each age comes to an end because it fails to deliver what God had hoped. Only in the final Millennium, the Kingdom (Jewish) Age, will people relate to God in the way he intended they should. Thus writings by dispensationalists are generally pessimistic about the future of this age (See for instance, the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye) and critical of the church in general, making little of Paul's theology in Romans and Ephesians of the equality and unity of Jews and gentiles in one magnificent community of God.

Some have gone so far as to extend the dual fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant (physical Israel, spiritual Church) to the point where Judaism stands alongside Christianity as an equally valid means of being 'saved', albeit only for the Jews.²⁷ Krister Stendahl makes the claim that in Romans 11, "Paul's reference to God's mysterious plan [in 11:25] is an affirmation of a God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held in check."²⁸ In fact, I believe Paul's point to be the very opposite: Judaism has failed as a means of gaining righteousness which can only be obtained, by Jew and Gentile alike, through faith in Christ. Thus Tom Wright concludes "The irony [of the two covenant idea] is that the late twentieth century, in order to avoid anti-Semitism, has advocated a position (the non-evangelisation of the Jews) which Paul regards precisely as anti-Semitic."²⁹

²⁵ *Op. Cit.* 54

²⁶ See Hagee, Lambert et al

²⁷ Hagee *Op. Cit.* ch 10

²⁸ Stendahl, Krister *Paul: Among Jews & Gentiles* 4

²⁹ Wright, N.T. *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1998) 253

Finally, it must be noted that a new group of dispensationalists, calling themselves ‘*progressive dispensationalists*’, has arisen in more recent years who have distanced themselves from a number of aspects of popular and traditional dispensationalism and are gaining a wide following.³⁰ Grudem notes a number of key distinctions made by progressive dispensationalists: “They would not see the church as a parenthesis ... but as the first step towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God... God does not have two separate purposes for Israel and the church... [they] would see no distinction between Israel and the church in the future eternal state... [and] the church will reign with Christ in glorified bodies on earth during the millennium.”³¹ However, it is difficult to see how they avoid separate purposes for Church and Israel since they maintain that the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning Israel will be fulfilled in both ethnic Israel and in the church in quite different ways.³² In practice this progressive position is not far removed from classical Zionism which we will now explore.

Classical Zionism

While historic or classical pre-millennialism is distinctly non-dispensational and therefore does not draw such clear lines between Israel and the church, it maintains that the prophecies of the Old Testament remain in force for ethnic Israel today. Thus while acknowledging a partial and spiritual fulfilment of these promises in the church, it asserts that their literal claims will be fulfilled in ethnic Israel.

Pawson writes “If the Jews are still ‘his people’, then the land must still be theirs. If ethnic Israel is still special, then territorial Israel is as well.”³³ Whether ethnic Israel has a *significant* role to play this side of the millennium is unclear, since, according to Pawson, classical Zionism “primarily associated the return of the Jews to the promised land with the past promises of God and only secondarily with his future promises.”³⁴ On the nature of these ‘future promises’ Pawson does not expand.

Similarly, Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears consider ethnic Israel and the Church to be “different administering institutions of God’s one-kingdom purpose” but restrict the fulfilment of the OT promises to the millennium age and by Christian Jews rather than all ethnic Jews: “The Old Testament prophecies of a national restoration of Israel... will be fulfilled by racially Jewish *Christians in the Millennium*.”³⁵ Nonetheless, according to this position, following a considerable revival in Israel, Jews and Gentiles will take their place alongside each other in the millennial age when Christ will reign from Jerusalem over all the earth.

Pawson terms himself a ‘classical Zionist’ (in preference to Sizer’s label ‘covenantal Zionist’) because “it pre-dated the dispensational and partly because it is the version more characteristic of ‘traditional’ and ‘orthodox’ circles.”³⁶ It is important to distinguish between *dispensational* and

³⁰ Including a number of the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary (traditionally a centre for Pre-millennial dispensationalism), not least, Darrell L. Bock

³¹ Grudem, Wayne *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP 1994) 860 For a fuller explanation see Ed. Blaising, Craig A., Bock, Darrell L. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1992)

³² Ed. Blaising, Craig A., Bock, Darrell L. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1992) 92f 155 et al

³³ *Op. Cit.* 95

³⁴ *Ibid.* 32

³⁵ Driscoll, Mark & Breshears, Gerry *Vintage Church* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway 2008) 58 Emphasis added

³⁶ *Ibid.* 22

classical Zionists since, despite sharing *some* of the same conclusions, their frameworks are quite different and therefore cannot be considered as one. Furthermore, classical Zionists would consider themselves less 'fanatical', as Pawson laments: "Pastors and clergy have frequently told me they would lend a more sympathetic ear to the Zionist case and cause, were it not for one or two 'fanatics' in their congregations (often, I have to add, of the female gender and sometimes, dare I say it, with stronger personalities than their husbands)." ³⁷ Enough said!

Classical Zionists affirm that both Jews and Gentiles are saved under the new Messianic covenant by faith in Christ and must take their place alongside each other in his church. As Pawson states "... the new covenant has established a new people of God, a new humanity... [in which] distinctions of race, gender and class [are] now irrelevant. This new people, constituted by faith in Christ, has superseded his 'old' people, who were constituted by flesh from Jacob, grandson of Abraham and later re-named 'Israel'... It is difficult to avoid the word 'replacement' for this change, in spite of the facts that the link between them is Jesus the Jewish Messiah and many Jews were the nucleus of the new people." ³⁸

In this regard classical Zionists have much in common with many non-Zionists. However, the main area of disagreement is whether and in what way modern ethnic Israel remains God's chosen people and retains a divine claim to land in the Middle East. For instance, *Jews for Jesus* represent a typical Classical Zionist position when they state: "We believe that Israel exists as a covenant people through whom God continues to accomplish his purposes and that the church is an elect people in accordance with the new covenant, comprising both Jews and Gentiles who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and Redeemer." ³⁹

Therefore, while not going so far as dispensationalists, classical Zionists maintain there are two distinct 'people of God'; ethnic Israel and the church. So, despite having said that the new people of God 'supersede' the old people of God', Pawson claims "It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that God can and does have two peoples on earth at the present time – his church, made up of some Jews and more Gentiles, all of whom believe in Jesus, and his people 'Israel', still in an unbelieving state." ⁴⁰ Not only so but they maintain their claim to the land as he continues "the promises of [Israel's] return were only partially fulfilled after the first exile and their full actualisation will take place at the end of the second exile, which is happening in our own time." ⁴¹ Thus, the existence of the modern state of Israel is to be understood as the fulfilment of God's promises and Israel has a divine right to the land ranging from the Euphrates to the Nile.

The challenge to both forms of Zionism has been led most recently in the UK by the Anglican vicar Stephen Sizer who asks "The most fundamental question Christian Zionists must answer is this: What difference did the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus Christ make to the traditional Jewish hopes and expectations concerning the land and people?" ⁴² That is indeed a key question. While classical Zionists accept that for *salvation* Jews must trust in Jesus, the coming of Jesus seems to have made little or no difference to the promises concerning *the land*. So, Sizer concludes that

³⁷ *Ibid.* 75

³⁸ *Ibid.* 74

³⁹ *Jews for Jesus Our Doctrinal Statement* <http://www.jfjonline.org/about/statementoffaith.htm>

⁴⁰ *Op. Cit.* 91

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 105

⁴² Sizer, Stephen *Christian Zionism* (Leicester: IVP 2004) 257

Classical Zionists “seem to be saying that the unconditional promise concerning the land was made exclusively with a racial group descended from Abraham and applies in perpetuity to his physical Jewish descendants apart from faith in Jesus Christ. And I can’t see that proven from scripture.”⁴³ In fact, although they accept that aspects of the Abrahamic covenant are fulfilled in the church – it is believers in Jesus who are children of Abraham, and therefore it is they who will be ‘as numerous as the stars in the sky’ and it is through the church that ‘all families of the earth shall be blessed’ – they understand the aspect of ‘land’ purely in physical terms without reference to the NT condition of faith in Jesus as a requirement of inheriting Abraham’s promises.

Furthermore, the way the NT interprets and applies the OT with regard to land is again given little attention. For instance, Paul seems to develop the original promise ‘I will give to you *this land*’ (Gen 17:8) changing it to ‘the promise to Abraham and his offspring [was] that he would be heir of *the world*’ (Rom 4:13) and yet this doesn’t seem to warrant a serious explanation by Zionists, classical or dispensational.

Pawson does attempt to trivialise the ‘spiritualising’ of the promises of land saying rather patronisingly “I cannot help wondering how Abraham, Isaac and Jacob feel about their misunderstanding of God’s oath to them! The poor things thought the real estate was a permanent legacy, not a temporary loan!”⁴⁴ The writer to the Hebrews addresses this very concern when says of Abraham and his descendants, despite *having arrived in* the ‘land of promise’ 11:9, they ‘did not receive the things promised; they only saw them ... from a distance’ v13 because they were ‘seeking a homeland’ v14 which is ‘a better country, that is, a *heavenly one*’ v16, concluding that ‘all these [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Samuel and the prophets] were commended for their faith [but] *did not receive what had been promised...* so that only *together with us* would they be made perfect.’ (Heb 11:39-40 NIV) It would seem that Zionists seem to value the land more highly than the ‘poor things’ the Patriarchs themselves to whom the promises were given and who were looking to a ‘heavenly country’. This matter will be explored further in a later section, suffice to say at this point that I do not believe the patriarchs will be disappointed that the promise of land is fulfilled in their inheriting “the whole cosmos” (Rom 4:13).

Finally, a key theme of classical Zionism is the expectation of a great end-time revival among the Jews to the point where it could be said ‘all Israel’ has been saved. Since this point is not unique to classical Zionists but is also held by many in the Fulfilment Theology ‘camp’ it will be dealt with separately.

Fulfilment Theology

I have given the third position the title of fulfilment theology since it asserts that the promises of the Old Testament find their true and complete fulfilment in Christ and his Church.

A challenge for those holding to this position is that all are tarred with the brush of *Replacement theology* or what is sometimes termed *supersessionism* named after the idea that the church has *superseded* the nation of Israel as the people of God.⁴⁵ This challenge has been particularly acute

⁴³ Debate on Premier Radio David Pawson and Stephen Sizer <http://www.sizers.org>

⁴⁴ *Op. Cit.* 110

⁴⁵ Worth noting is that Pawson concedes “the new people [of God] ... has *superseded* his ‘old’ people... [and] it is difficult to avoid the word ‘replacement’ for this change.” *Op. Cit.* 74 (my italics)

since WWII largely because it is seen as the source of the church's historical anti-Semitism and therefore, at least indirectly, the Holocaust.

However, we cannot dismiss anything that is not Zionism so easily. Firstly, we must be clear as to what actually constitutes *anti-Semitism*. Surely it would be naive to suggest that all criticism of Israel is purely on the basis of race (or even theology) and has nothing to do with the actions of the Israeli government or their record on human rights issues? It seems that all too often Israel is still - considered simply as a *victim* and her occupation of Palestine and the oppression of Palestinian people, overlooked and ignored. As the *Jewish* philosopher Asher Ginzberg wrote: "Palestine is not an uninhabited land and can offer a home only to a very small portion of the Jews scattered throughout the world. Those who settle in Palestine must above all seek to win the friendship of the Palestinians, by approaching them courteously and with respect. But what do our brothers do? Precisely the opposite. They were slaves in the land of their exile, and suddenly they find themselves with unlimited freedom. This sudden change has aroused in them a tendency to despotism, which is what always happens when slaves come to power. They treat the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, rob them of their rights in a dishonest way, hurt them without reason and then pride themselves on such actions; and no one attacks this despicable and dangerous tendency."⁴⁶ Though this sounds remarkably contemporary, it was actually written in 1891, sixty years before the holocaust! As Wagner concludes "it remains a mystery how Israel consistently violates legal instruments [in the Geneva Convention, 1949] designed to prevent many of the atrocities committed against Jews by the Nazis."⁴⁷ One could expound this point considerably, suffice to say we must be clear: not all criticism of Israel or Zionism should be considered anti-Semitic.

Moreover, it is irrational to argue that all forms of fulfilment theology should be dismissed simply because one form has in the past been misapplied and resulted in abuse. It is all too common for a crude or even false caricature of fulfilment theology to be held up as a straw man then knocked down by Zionists making sweeping criticisms of beliefs that few, if any, hold.⁴⁸ For instance, Lance Lambert writes "I most seriously question the view that this promise of God [of the land] has been cancelled by the New Covenant. To me, it casts doubt upon the literal veracity of God's word... I am confused when I am told that God did not mean [what he promised]."⁴⁹ Similarly, Driscoll and Breshears state "Some Reformed theologians see Israel as having been replaced by the church... But that would mean that God reneges on his promises to the ethnic children of Abraham."⁵⁰

But who is actually suggesting that the OT promises are 'cancelled' by the new covenant or that God 'reneges on his promises'? The typical language of non-Zionists regarding OT promises is not that of *cancellation* but of *fulfilment*. Similarly, it is too easy to assume that all non-Zionists believe that there is no continuity between Israel and the church and even that *Gentiles* have replaced *Jews* as the people of God. These are false accusations that do not do justice to the biblical scholarship underpinning alternative frameworks. So, in the same way that we must distinguish between classical and dispensational Zionists, the same courtesy must be extended in distinguishing between

⁴⁶ Quoted in Wagner *Op. Cit.* 89

⁴⁷ *Op. Cit.* 175

⁴⁸ See Sizer *Op. Cit.* 16 Hagee *Op. Cit.* 35 121 132 "Most evangelicals believe ..." 134

⁴⁹ *Op. Cit.* 50

⁵⁰ *Op. Cit.* 58

caricatured or even traditional replacement views and contemporary and more nuanced fulfilment theologies.

In his commentary on Romans 11, Douglas Moo points out “The picture Paul sketches reveals the danger of the simple and popular notion that the church has ‘replaced’ Israel. For this formula misses the stress Paul places on the historical continuity in the people of God... Perhaps a better word to describe the movement from OT Israel to NT church is the same word that the NT often uses to denote such relationships: ‘fulfilment.’”⁵¹ This sense of *continuity* between the testaments and the *fulfilment* of the promises is contrary to replacement theology⁵² but is at the heart of what Sizer calls ‘covenantalism’ and which I have termed ‘fulfilment theology.’ As Sizer says “It is not that the church has replaced Israel. Rather, in the new covenant church, God has fulfilled the promises originally made to the old covenant church.”⁵³ To my mind, David Bosch is very helpful at this point: “Paul never surrenders the continuity of God’s story with Israel. The church cannot be the people of God without its linkage to Israel... The gospel means the extension of the promise beyond Israel, not the displacement of Israel by a church made up of gentiles. Paul therefore never explicitly says that the church is the “new Israel”, as becomes customary from the second century onward, for instance in the writings of Barnabus and Justin Martyr. Indeed, the church is not a new Israel, “but an enlarged Israel” and gentile Christians should never lose sight of that.”⁵⁴

Moreover, as noted earlier, it is vital that we are clear about the nature of the various biblical covenants and in particular how they relate to the *new* covenant. An essential distinction is that the new covenant *supersedes* the old (Mosaic) covenant but is the *ongoing fulfilment* of the Abrahamic covenant. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of the ‘first’ or ‘old’ covenant being rendered ‘obsolete’ and being replaced by the ‘second’ or ‘new’ covenant (Heb 8:7-13). Of course, if we are to be precise, the Mosaic covenant which is clearly what is in view here, actually follows the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants and is therefore not technically ‘first’. Nonetheless, it is evident that the two covenants in view are the Mosaic covenant which Paul states was to ‘Tutor’ Israel ‘*until Christ came*’ (Gal 3:24), and the new covenant which is now established in its place. On the other hand, the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Israel) remain and are not annulled but are *fulfilled* in and by the new covenant.

Not only so but, as Holwerda claims, there is “an amazing universalizing of the promises. Promises made originally to the particular people Israel in the Old Testament now in Jesus Christ universally embrace the nations of the world. Promises associated with a temple made of stone located in a particular place now find fulfilment in a universal temple composed of human persons living among the nations. And Jerusalem is already a universal city whose citizens are gathered from the nations of the world.”⁵⁵ This is the essence of fulfilment theology – all the types and motifs of the Old Testament find their fulfilment in Christ and the church, contrary to Zionism who find partial fulfilment in the church but believe the promise of land to be an exception which will find fulfilment in ethnic Israel.

⁵¹ Moo, Douglas *The Epistle to the Romans NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) 709

⁵² At least, as commonly portrayed

⁵³ *Op. Cit.* 17

⁵⁴ Bosch, David *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis 2001) 164

⁵⁵ *Op. Cit.* 179

Finally, a key question for those adopting a fulfilment theology is what to make of the establishing of the State of Israel. Hagee makes the bold claim that “On May 15, 1948, a theological earthquake levelled replacement theology when national Israel was reborn after nearly two millennia of wandering.”⁵⁶ It is an absurd overstatement to suggest that the establishment of the State of Israel has ‘levelled replacement theology’, nonetheless we all acknowledge the sovereignty of God in the rising and falling of nations and the drawing of their boundaries. Therefore, can fulfilment theologians sensibly claim that the rebirth of the state of Israel is purely incidental and has no theological significance?

2 key issues:

Having outlined the three most common perspectives on Israel and the Church we will now consider two key areas that require us to examine a number of biblical texts in some depth. Firstly, whether modern ethnic Israel has a divine right to some land in the Middle East, or whether it is fulfilled more widely under the new covenant. The second issue is the place of the Jews themselves and in particular whether we should be expecting a widespread Christian revival among ethnic Israelites.

The land

The question of land is at the centre of theological debate concerning Israel and is one that carries with it significant consequences, both politically and missiologically. As we have already seen, views on this subject are quite polarised. On the one hand we have Zionists like Derek Prince claiming that “God attaches far more importance to [the land of Israel] than most of us imagine”⁵⁷ and that “the land is given *eternally* to Israel.”⁵⁸ At the other extreme, we have Stephen Sizer suggesting that “In the New Testament, the land, like an old wineskin, had served its purpose. It was, and remains, irrelevant to God’s ongoing redemptive purposes for the world.”⁵⁹ So, what may we say about the land God promised to Abraham?

Firstly, there is no doubt that God promised a piece of land to Abraham and his descendants. Gen 15:18 says “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites...”” and in 17:1-8 the covenant is confirmed “... I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”” This covenant is then repeated in 26:2-4 to Isaac “... to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father” and in 28:13-15 to Jacob “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring... Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” So, God promised a piece of land (albeit rather vaguely defined⁶⁰) to Abraham and his descendants.

⁵⁶ *Op. Cit.* 149

⁵⁷ *Op. Cit.* 62

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 66

⁵⁹ *Op. Cit.* (2007) 96

⁶⁰ Worth noting is that the boundaries of this land were far from clear and various different descriptions are given. Cp Gen 15:18 Ex 23:31 Dt 11:24 34:1-3 Jos 1:4 1Kings 4:24-25 2Chron 9:26 Chapman concludes “The

Nonetheless it was always *God's land* and Israel had no claim to the land apart from their walking with Him. As God said to Moses "the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me" (Lev 25:23). In this regard many rightly make the distinction between *promise* and *possession*. Although no conditions were initially attached to the promise of the land – it was purely on the basis of God's sovereign grace - "entrance into the land was denied to those who lacked faith, and Moses himself was denied entrance because of Israel's disobedience. Therefore, it is apparent that important conditions were attached to possessing the land. Just as faith and the obedience that flows from faith were necessary to enter the land, so faith and obedience are necessary to maintain possession of the land."⁶¹ While recognising that possession of the land was conditional despite the promise being seemingly unconditional, we must at this point be clear: to even discuss whether modern Israel meets the OT conditions is to presume the promises retain at least an element of physical fulfilment. Nevertheless, it must be said that *if* the OT promises are being fulfilled in the modern state of Israel (and I do not believe this to be the case) it is highly questionable that modern secular Israel meets the requirements of faith and obedience and thus the promise of being vomited out of the land (Lev 18:28) would appear far more probable than continued possession.⁶²

However, what is clear is that these conditions, imposed under Moses, do nothing to abrogate the original promises to Abraham and his descendants. Consequently the NT never suggests that the new covenant *annuls* the Abrahamic covenant, on the contrary it is repeatedly seen as its fulfilment. So, for Paul, Abraham is the father of "all those who believe" (in Jesus), both Jews and Gentiles (Rom 4:16) and those who "are Christ's are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:7, 29) and so on. The Abrahamic promises find their fulfilment in Christ and the new covenant he establishes. As stated earlier, while the new covenant *supersedes* the inadequate and obsolete Mosaic covenant, it is the *ongoing fulfilment* of the Abrahamic covenant. As a result, the issue is not *whether* the OT promises remain but *how* they are to be fulfilled.⁶³ Thus, for those looking for a literal fulfilment it is naïve to say "We simply believe the Bible."⁶⁴ The issue is not that some believe the Bible when others do not! Rather the question is whether the promises are fulfilled in terms of land in the Middle East or (perhaps 'and/or') more widely in all the earth.

The first difficulty with seeing the pledge of *land* as being fulfilled through ethnic Israel is that the *land* is inextricably bound together with the *city*, the *temple worship* and a *Davidic king*. As Heschel writes "Jerusalem to the Prophet is the quintessence of the land corresponding to the people... Jerusalem is called the mother of Israel, and she is also used as a synonym for Israel."⁶⁵ Similarly Holwerda claims "in the prophecies of Isaiah... Jerusalem becomes the essence of Israel and the

considerable variety in these descriptions makes it hard to believe that anyone – Jew or Gentile – could use the Old Testament to define the area of land in which Jews returning to the land since the nineteenth century should have a right to live." *Op. Cit.* 126 cf Holwerda *Op. Cit.* 89

⁶¹ Holwerda *Op. Cit.* 90

⁶² Regarding the 'everlasting' nature of the promise to Israel, there are other 'everlasting' promises in the OT which most Christians would understand to be fulfilled in spiritual rather than physical terms: *circumcision* Gen 17:13; *a King on David's throne* 2Sam 23:5 Is 55:3; *God's sanctuary in Israel* Ezek 37:28. Why then should the land be treated differently?

⁶³ Contrary to the common claim by Zionists that all a-millennialists assume the Abrahamic covenant to have been 'revoked' eg Prince *Op. Cit.* 62

⁶⁴ International Christian Embassy quoted in Sizer (2007) *Op. Cit.* 81

⁶⁵ Heschel, A.J. *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 1969) 15

land. Jerusalem lies at the center of the promises and becomes their content.”⁶⁶ Likewise, the prophecies concerning the land include the expectation of a rebuilt city and temple, and the re-establishing of Judaic cultic life. For instance, Zionists are quick to turn to Jeremiah 32:21-22, 37-38 “... you gave [your people] this land, which you swore to their fathers to give them... [and] the Lord says ‘Behold I will gather [my people] from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger... I will bring them back to this place.’” But Jeremiah does not stop with a return to the land continuing with the declaration that *Jerusalem* will “be a glory before all the nations of the earth” 33:9; that a *Davidic King* shall return to the throne of Israel 33:15-17; and that the “Levitical Priests shall ... offer burnt offerings ... and make sacrifices forever” 33:18. Thus the promise of *land* is tied to the promises of the city, the temple and the King so that they share a common fulfilment. Therefore, to expect a return to the land apart from a return to Jerusalem, the rebuilding of the temple, the re-establishment of cultic practice and the appointment of a Davidic King to Israel’s throne, is an inconsistent application of the OT promises. Either they *all* have physical fulfilment or none of them do, but we cannot arbitrarily isolate the promise of land.

Secondly, for Christians, the basis for rightly interpreting the OT promises is the foil of the NT. It is worth noting that few Zionist writers make much of the NT interpretation of the OT seemingly presuming that the promises are unaffected by NT theology.⁶⁷ For instance, Parsons defends Dispensational Zionism on the basis that it is “consistent with the ways Orthodox Jews understand their Bibles.”⁶⁸ But the point is not how orthodox Jews understand their Bibles, which, of course, is unaffected by the coming of Jesus, but how do the *NT writers* interpret the OT? So, what do Jesus and the Apostles have to say about the Abrahamic covenant and the aspect of land?

As Chapman points out “Jesus had very little to say specifically about the land... [which] is all the more surprising when we see his message against the background of typical Jewish hopes and expectations of the first century AD, in which the land played a vital role.”⁶⁹ In fact, there is only one clear reference in Jesus’ teaching related to the land and it is found in Mat 5:5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” This phrase repeats Psalm 37:11 where the usual Hebrew word for land (*eret*) is used and translated with the Greek *gē* in the LXX as here in Mat 5:5. It is interesting to note that most translations choose the English word ‘earth’ rather than ‘land’⁷⁰, because as Verbrugge explains “It is frequently difficult to decide whether a passage is speaking of a particular country (esp. the land of Israel) or of the populated earth as a whole.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, there are many times when it can only sensibly mean ‘the whole earth’. For instance, Mt 5:18 ‘... until heaven and *earth* pass away ...’; 6:10 ‘... your will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven’; 6:19 ‘do not lay up for yourselves treasures on *earth*’; 9:6 ‘the Son of Man has authority on *earth* to forgive sins’ *et al.* So, while *gē* is used of the ‘land of Israel’ (Mat 2:20) we must ask whether the context justifies such a use in this case.

⁶⁶ *Op. Cit.* 97

⁶⁷ Cf Sizer, Stephen *Christian Zionism* (Leicester: IVP 2004) 257

⁶⁸ Parsons, John J. *Israel and the Church* from www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Israel/israel.html 15

⁶⁹ *Op. Cit.* 154

⁷⁰ Exceptions are DRB and YLT

⁷¹ Article on γῆ - NT Usage in Verbrugge, Verlyn D. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2000) 106

In the first instance, it would be to reinterpret the whole beatitudes to suggest that only the *Jewish* meek shall inherit and be blessed. Moreover, in 4:24-25 Matthew states that the crowd Jesus addressed comprised of those from Syria, the Decapolis and from 'beyond the Jordan' which almost certainly included Gentiles. Thus, if the meek includes both Jews and Gentiles then it is they *both* who inherit the 'earth/land' – which makes little sense if taken purely in terms of the land (of Israel) but is better understood, in the light of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God (Jn 6:15 18:36), to mean the renewed earth. As Sizer writes "The kingdom that Jesus inaugurated would, in contrast to their narrow expectations, be spiritual in character, international in membership and gradual in expansion. And the expansion of this kingdom throughout the world would specifically require [his disciples'] exile from the land. They must turn their backs on Jerusalem and their hopes of ruling there with Jesus in order to fulfil their new role as ambassadors of his kingdom."⁷²

Perhaps we can see this 'turning their backs on Jerusalem' in the early chapters of Acts when, following Jesus' 'speaking on the kingdom of God' for forty days (1:3), those first disciples who were 'owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet' (4:34-35). What did Jesus teach about the Kingdom of God that resulted in Jews selling their birthrights to land and giving the proceeds to the advance of the gospel? At least initially they continued to look for the national and political restoration of Israel (1:6), but Jesus clearly lifts their gaze to higher and bigger things. Whether Jesus' response contains an implicit rebuke is debatable, what is clear is Jesus' commission to take the message of the kingdom beyond the boundaries of Israel 'to the ends of the earth' (1:8). The concern of the early church does not appear to be Israel and its land (despite continued occupation) but building the church and being 'a light to the nations'.⁷³

This indifference to the land and focus on 'all the earth' is maintained in the Apostolic teaching. For instance, Paul makes the explicit claim that 'the promise to Abraham [was] that he would be heir of the *world* (Gk *kosmos*)' (Rom 4:13) which is a most striking development of the promise of 'land'. In the same way, Paul notes that the command to 'Honour your father and mother' is attached to a promise: 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long on the earth' Eph 6:2-3. Although some translate this 'in the land' ESV, more notable is what Paul omits: 'the land *the Lord your God is giving you*' (Ex 20:12), again demonstrating that the land *of Israel* is no longer important. As Tom Wright says "... the Land no longer functioned as the key symbol of the geographical identity of the people of God, and that for an obvious reason: if the new community consisted of Jew, Greek, barbarian alike, there was no sense in which one piece of territory could possess more significance than another. At no point in this early period do we find Christians eager to define or defend a 'holy land'."⁷⁴ This is not to say that physical land/earth is unimportant and that it has been 'spiritualised away'⁷⁵, as Holwerda explains "The people of God, Israel, is still a flesh and blood historical reality, although now a universal people... The land is still the actual land under our feet, but now it refers to the entire created earth."⁷⁶

⁷² (2007) *Op. Cit.* 91 This seems to be based on John Stott's commentary on Acts 1:6f Stott, John *The Message of Acts* (Leicester: IVP 2000) 40

⁷³ Cf Bruce, FF *The Book of Acts NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1988) 35-35

⁷⁴ Wright, NT *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK 1993) 366

⁷⁵ Contra Driscoll/Breshears *Op. Cit.* 58

⁷⁶ *Op. Cit.* 179

Similarly, physical Jerusalem is not portrayed as being at the centre of God's purposes for the future but as being 'in slavery with her children'. Paul continues, 'the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother' (Gal 4:21-31). The focus of the apostles was not on the physical land or city but on 'Mount Zion and ... the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem' (Heb 12:22) who will one day '[come] down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev 21:2). This is the true fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant.

So, in conclusion, Israel, the OT people of God who inherited the land, are a pattern of the NT people of God, the church, comprising of both Jews and Gentiles, who alongside Abraham and by faith in Christ, inherit the promises of a new heavens and new earth but no longer make a particular claim to land in the Middle East. What then of the establishing of the State of Israel in 1948? Given what we have said, it is my belief that the State of Israel is not the fulfilment of OT prophecies since they are fulfilled in Christ, in the Church and in the earth. However, we would want to acknowledge the sovereignty of God in the rising and falling of nations and therefore I would suggest it is perhaps part of God's purposes to remind the Jews of their history that perhaps they might seek and find the true Messiah.

The Future of ethnic Israel

Finally, having said that the 'promised' land no longer has a significant role in God's purposes, should we conclude that God has finished with the people of Israel? This is exactly Paul's question in Romans 11:1 'I ask, then, has God rejected his people?' to which he answers 'By no means!' and continues by explaining how God has always retained a 'faithful remnant' (11:1-5) who truly 'belong to Israel' (9:6) and who are the 'children of Abraham' (9:7).

Chapters 9-11 in Paul's letter to the Romans are central to discussion on the future of ethnic Israel, although it must be said that the *whole letter* repeatedly addresses the issue of Jew/Gentile relations as was recognised by Ferdinand Baur in the C19th and this section is by no means merely a parenthesis. However, while we recognise the need for a thorough study of this portion of scripture, space permits us to only note some of the main points, a difficult task because, as Wright comments "Romans 9-11 is as full of problems as a hedgehog is full of prickles."⁷⁷

The obvious thrust of these chapters is that God has *not* abandoned Israel and replaced her with either the church or gentiles. As Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. claims "To argue that God replaced Israel with the church is to depart from an enormous body of biblical evidence."⁷⁸ However, a clear distinction is made between *ethnic* Israel and those who will inherit the promises of Abraham. Simply being born a Jew does not make you part of the people of God. As Wright says, "Paul makes it abundantly clear that there is no covenant membership, and consequently no salvation, for those who simply rest on their ancestral privilege."⁷⁹ His argument is based on God's sovereignty in election where Isaac is chosen over Ishmael and Jacob is chosen over Esau. Therefore, while it might *appear* that ethnic Israel is the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, since they are 'as numerous as the sand of the sea', in fact 'only a remnant of them will be saved' (9:27).

⁷⁷ *Op. Cit.* (1991) 231

⁷⁸ Source unknown. Similarly, "I think we do not attach sufficient importance to the restoration of the Jews. We do not think enough of it. But certainly, if there is anything promised in the Bible it is this." C. H. Spurgeon

⁷⁹ *Op. Cit.* (1991) 246

So, while the door has been opened wide for the Gentiles to come into the people of God, now on the same basis as Jews, namely faith in Christ (1:16 2:25-29 3:22 28-30 *et al*), the Jews have not been rejected.⁸⁰ This Jew/Gentile equality and the need for faith and obedience by all, is contrary to the two covenant proposal which brings separation rather than unity and impedes the very evangelisation of the Jews which Paul encourages.

However, in our day as in Paul's, there remains a 'partial hardening [of] Israel' (11:25) in order that the gospel might go to all nations (11:11) that they might be grafted into the 'olive tree' of the people of God (11:17-24). This 'olive tree' metaphor is vital since it reminds us that the 'people of God' began with Israel, (the 'cultivated olive tree') and has been extended to all nations, (the 'wild olive tree') who have been grafted in. To graft the 'wild' onto the 'cultivated' is, of course, 'contrary to nature' and is therefore a warning to Gentiles who, if they presume upon the kindness of God, may suffer Israel's fate in being cut off. Furthermore, Paul argues *a fortiori* for the *certainty* of the re-grafting of the Jews into the one 'olive tree'.⁸¹ We should therefore be anticipating and working towards the conversion of Jews at least as much as the conversion of other nations. (*I would suggest at this point that, perhaps over-reacting to militant Zionism, we tend to be wary of meeting to pray for Israel or of missions to Israel in a way that we are not of other nations.*) Moreover, we must take note of Paul's point that the (mainly gentile) church should be so exhibiting the life of God (with much humility) 'so as to make Israel jealous' (11:11). It is doubtful that this is currently the case and given the Church's chequered past there is much ground to make up!

Having established that we should be expecting the conversion of some Jews to Christianity, we must turn to the question of numbers. Should we expect a Christian revival among the Jews to the point where we may claim 'all Israel [has been] saved'. Is this what Paul means in 11:26? Is Jonathon Edwards correct in his assertion "Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews in Romans 11"⁸²?

The argument largely hangs on an interpretation of *pas Israēl* in 11:26 and there are 2 main positions:

1. *The Church: Jews and Gentiles* – John Calvin wrote "I extend the word Israel to include all the people of God... The salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be drawn from both [Jews & Gentiles], will thus be completed."⁸³ It is argued that the change in meaning for 'Israel' is not impossible given Paul's use in 9:6, so Wright states "It is impermissible to argue that 'Israel' cannot change its referent within the space of two verses... Paul began the whole section with just such a distinction of two 'Israels', and throughout the letter as well as elsewhere... God's method of saving 'all Israel' is to harden ethnic Israel ie not to judge her at once, so as to create a period of time

⁸⁰ I would at this point differ with Pawson in his claim that Israel continue to be 'God's chosen people' alongside his 'other' chosen people, the church. *Op. Cit.* 82-92 The NT teaches that the Church is 'God's chosen people' which includes believing Jews. 1Pet 2:9ff

⁸¹ Note Sanday and Headlam on the olive tree: "[the tree] is the Church of God, looked at as one continuous body; the Christian church being the inheritor of the privileges of the Jewish Church." The roots are the "Patriarchs, for whose faith Israel was originally chosen." The branches are "the individual members of the Church who derive their nourishment and virtue from the stock or body to which they belong." *Romans* 327 quoted in Blaising/Bock *Dispensationalism* 207

⁸² Source unknown

⁸³ Calvin *Commentary on Romans* 255 Similarly Berkhof, Louis *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1998) 698-700 Sizer *Op. Cit.* (2007) 57-62

during which the gentile mission could be undertaken, during the course of which it remains God's will that the present 'remnant' of believing Jews might be enlarged by the process of jealousy, and consequent faith... This whole process is God's way of saving his whole people ..."⁸⁴

2. *Large numbers of Jews* - It is often argued that throughout the preceding context Paul has used 'Israel' to mean *ethnic* Israel and therefore it takes this meaning here. But, if Paul is speaking of *ethnic* Israel, what do we make of the phrase 'all Israel' – Does this mean every single Jew will be saved? Such a view would seem unlikely given all that Paul has said throughout Romans regarding the nature of sin and the need for faith. However, both this phrase (11:26) and the thrust of chapter 11 as whole is in expectation of a significant number of Jews being converted. As Moo rightly points out: "... the present 'defeat' of Israel, in which Israel is numerically reduced to a small remnant, will be reversed by the addition of far greater numbers of true believers: this will be Israel's destined 'fullness.'"⁸⁵ The question then within this position is one of numbers: Is it a majority or simply an unspecified significant number?

Some understand the word/phrase to mean the majority of Jews, for instance, F.F. Bruce claims that "All Israel' is a recurring theme in Jewish literature where it need not mean 'every Jew without exception', but 'Israel as a whole'."⁸⁶ Similarly, Pawson interprets the phrase as "Israel 'en masse'"⁸⁷. Consequently, it is argued that there will be a widespread revival among the Jews since this majority are currently unsaved (being 'hardened' apart from a 'remnant'), thus logically this reverse will be both significant and evident.

While Paul does at times use the term 'Israel' less precisely than '*ethnic* Israel' (possibly Gal 6:16) there seems little to suggest he means 'Jews and gentiles' in this context given his previous use of the word throughout the passage. Similarly, to claim that the phrase 'all Israel' in this context means '*the majority* of Jews' is far from convincing and places an inordinate weight on a particular interpretation of the word 'all'. Paul's argument is that God has been faithful to his election promises but that the recipients were precisely not 'all Israel' but the true Israel – the remnant of believing Jews – by implication, a minority. To then presume the 'remnant minority' becomes 'Israel as a whole' merely on the use of 'all' without any explanation and accepting that there is little temporal flow through this section is not persuasive.

In the light of 9:6 'not all Israel are Israel' and Paul's teaching on the remnant in 11:2-6 the most probable suggestion is that Paul simply means 'all *the true* Israel'. This fits with Paul's previous usage of 'all', for instance in 5:18, where the 'all's are evidently not coterminous but mean 'all in the category'.⁸⁸ So, in this case, 'all Israel' means 'all the elect in Israel' without reference to numbers. As

⁸⁴ Wright *Op. Cit.* (1991) 250

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 690 I would however disagree with his assertion that 11:26 means "the salvation of the nation as a whole." 713 cp Wright "Paul is envisaging a steady flow of Jews into the church, by grace through faith." *Op. Cit.* (1991) 249

⁸⁶ Bruce, F.F. *Romans Tyndale* (Leicester: IVP 1985) 209 Also Stott, John *The Message of Romans* (Leicester: IVP 1994) 303

⁸⁷ *Op. Cit.* 89 His argument that the OT phrase 'all Israel' never means "every single Israelite" is not at all persuasive as the majority of occasions do appear to mean just this, or at least more than merely 'a majority'.

⁸⁸ Also, it must be appreciated that the *a priori* form ('how much more') is primarily a *logical* expression, an emphatic 'if ... then', 'if this ... then *surely* this', rather than necessarily having a quantitative sense. Thus, the focus of the *a priori* argument in Rom 5 is not the number of recipients (both are 'all/many') but that grace will 'abound' to sinners *no less certainly* than the decree of judgement followed Adam's sin. Not only is it

Steve Motyer writes “‘All Israel’ in 11:26, I believe, is the entire company of those ‘from the Jews’ whom God wills to call ‘my people’, in fulfilment of his purposes of election.”⁸⁹

What then of the word ‘fullness’ (Gk *plērōma*) which the ESV translates ‘full inclusion’⁹⁰ in 11:11? Stott says “[this] seems to mean not only [Israel’s] conversion and restoration but also her increase in numbers until the remnant has grown into a substantial majority.”⁹¹ But to interpret *plērōma* as ‘large numbers’ or even ‘majority’ is surely conjecture and contrary to typical NT usage which is ‘completeness’ or ‘fullness’. Furthermore, the same word is used in 11:25 which would force us to conclude that a majority of Gentiles will also be saved, something that is far from clear, at least from this text alone.⁹² To be fair, Stott is consistent when he says on 5:15f “Christ will raise to life many more than Adam will drag to death. ... Granted that the ‘many’ does not mean ‘all’ ... it certainly means ‘a very great multitude’, in other words, a majority.”⁹³

Moo argues that *plērōma* can (albeit extremely rarely) have a numerical sense⁹⁴, but this seems to miss the point. The question is not whether *plērōma* is numerical but whether its referent is all *ethnic* Jews or all *elect* Jews. So, is the ‘fullness’ a proportion of all Jews or all the elect? I see nothing in the text to presuppose this means *a majority of all ethnic Jews* especially when considered alongside his use of the word in 11:25 where it is clearly all *elect* gentiles.

Jesus himself stated that ‘the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are *many*. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are *few*’ (Mt 7:13-14). While we might long for it to be the case that more will be saved than lost, even that most will be saved, it is far from explicit in scripture that this will be so. If we give *plērōma* its usual meaning of ‘complete’, then Paul is simply saying that ‘the salvation of the *complete number of elect Jews*’ will mean blessing for the Gentiles and that Israel has been hardened until the ‘*complete number of elect Gentiles*’ are saved, without reference to their proportion among all ethnic Israel.

Finally it must be noted that that the Greek grammar of 11:25-26 does not suggest a chronological order, as Wright explains: “Paul’s meaning is not a temporal sequence – first the Gentiles, *then* the Jews. Rather, it is the interpretation of a particular process *as* the salvation of ‘all Israel’.”⁹⁵ Certainly the word *houtōs* which connects v25 to v26 means ‘*thus*’ rather than ‘*then*’ and carries logical rather than temporal meaning which is reflected in the translations.⁹⁶ Pawson agrees, saying “Zionists are prone to think and even quote as if the word is ‘then’. That is, after the full number of Gentiles is in,

conjecture to suppose that the ‘much more’ is exclusively numerical, it is nonsensical. The ‘many’ saved cannot exceed the ‘many’ that exist so Paul’s meaning of ‘much more’ cannot be quantitative but can only be in some sense qualitative.

⁸⁹ Motyer, Steve *Israel in the Plan of God* (Leicester:IVP 1989) 157 Also Prince “All Israel will be the remnant...” *Op. Cit.* 44

⁹⁰ ‘fullness’ NIV ‘full number’ Holman – also used in 11:25 translated ‘fullness’ ESV

⁹¹ *Op. Cit.* (1994) 296

⁹² Note GNB Rom 11:12 ‘...when *the complete number* of Jews is included’ and 11:25 ‘until *the complete number* of Gentiles comes to God’ (italics added)

⁹³ *Op. Cit.* (1994) 161

⁹⁴ *Op. Cit.* “... rare and entirely absent in biblical Greek elsewhere.” 691

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 249-250

⁹⁶ ‘And so ...’ KJV NKJV NIV ASV NASB BBE DRB; ‘And in this way ...’ ESV TNIV (note change from NIV) Holman; ‘And that is how ...’ NCV GNB

then all Israel will be saved. But their critics are right to point out that the word is ‘thus’ rather than ‘then’.”⁹⁷ So, whatever Paul means by the phrase ‘all Israel’ he is *not* saying that Israel is partially hardened until the complete number of Gentiles is saved and *after that* there will be a revival in Israel.⁹⁸ Whether Israel’s hardening is permanent or temporary⁹⁹ it gives time for the evangelising of Gentiles which in turn may provoke Jews to jealousy and hopefully faith in Christ and ‘*in this way* all Israel will be saved’.

Conclusions

Firstly, as noted at the start, there is considerable diversity of views on the subject of *Israel and the Church*. At one extreme, ethnic Israel is at the centre of God’s purposes for the world and Christians must work to restore Israel to her former glory. At the other extreme, ethnic Israel no longer has any place in God’s purposes since they have been replaced by the gentile church. Rather than settle for a vague ‘Aristotle’s mean’ between these extremes it is vital that we form a clear theology on the subject and, given the strong influence of the Zionist movement, must teach our congregations well.

Nonetheless, bearing in mind the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and the subsequent holocaust, we must take great care to communicate our theology clearly and graciously without compromising fundamental truths. It must be noted that the promises of land to Israel extend far beyond its current boundaries and theological positions carry huge political import. Therefore, while we would make every effort to avoid actual anti-Semitism, any position that is not fervently Zionist or that criticises Israel’s political or military policies may well find itself accused of anti-Semitism. Correspondingly, if the Church identifies itself too closely with Zionism (as is often the case) it profoundly hinders its mission to reach Arabs with the gospel. We must therefore walk a fine line as we reach out even-handedly with the gospel to both Jews and Arabs.

In summarising the three main positions, Dispensational Zionism, Classical Zionism and fulfilment theology, I hopefully demonstrated the importance of reading the OT through the foil of the NT. All too often in theologising on Israel, the coming of Christ seems to have little or no impact on the interpretation of OT promises. However, the NT writers have a huge amount to say on how Christ and his global church of Jews and Gentiles do not abrogate the OT patterns and promises but are their very fulfilment.

Thus, promises of a small piece of land in the Middle East to Abraham and his descendents find their fulfilment in all God’s people, reconciled both to God and each other in Christ, who will together inherit all the earth. Our expectation based on Romans 9-11 is that currently Israel is hardened and only a remnant believe so that the gospel could go to gentiles and, provoked to jealousy by the life of God in the church, significant numbers of Jews will, in the future, come to faith in Christ.

This then should breed humility in both Jews and gentiles because both inherit God’s blessings solely on the basis of his grace. By grace alone Israel received ‘the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the

⁹⁷ *Op. Cit.* 90

⁹⁸ Moo is unclear at this point: “... *houtos*, while not having a temporal *meaning*, has a temporal *reference*.” How are meaning and reference different in this context? *Op. Cit.* 720 Diprose insists on a temporal meaning *Op. Cit.* 63 Wright is dogmatic “There is, therefore, no justification for taking Romans 11, as a whole or in its parts, as a prediction of a large-scale, last-minute salvation of Jews.” *Op. Cit.* 251

⁹⁹ Cf Wright *Op. Cit.* (1991) 251ff and Moo *Op. Cit.* 716ff

giving of the law, the worship and the promises...' (Rom 9:4-5). Similarly, by grace alone, gentiles who believe have been 'grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree' (11:24). Thus, neither have any reason to boast over the other, but we must all celebrate the unity found in the 'one new mankind' which is 'a dwelling place for God by the Spirit' (Eph 2:15-22).

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