

Previously, in “Continuity and discontinuity in the covenants”, I quoted Pascal Denault on the hermeneutical implications of covenant theology versus that of Dispensationalism. Dispensationalism fails to properly and consistently distinguish between the old and new covenants thereby maintaining a special status for unbelieving ethnic Jews and the modern state of Israel as “the apple of God’s eye” even though the old covenant has been abrogated. These *descendants* of Abraham could become *children* of Abraham were they to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby be grafted into the new covenant (Rom. 11:23). Apart from this covenantal relationship, however, neither Jew nor Gentile is entitled to the designation “child of God”. As recorded in the Gospel of John, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). Lacking justification before God through belief in the gospel, ethnic Jews—just like unbelieving Gentiles—are by nature “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Christ is the Mediator of a new and better covenant by which the remnant is saved.

To quote Denault again:

“The dispensationalists, for their part, accentuated the discontinuity between the testaments to the point of separating Israel and the church while giving a status as people of God to Israel while abolishing the old covenant (Israel’s covenant). They then find themselves in a theological impasse: on one hand, they affirm the cessation of the Old Testament system during the era of the church; on the other, they must maintain the permanent validity of this system in order to justify the continuity of the existence of Israel as God’s people. This contradiction is the main ambiguity of dispensationalism: the end of the Old Testament at the same time as the maintaining of it. Their solution consists in separating Israel from the church and temporarily putting the former aside during the time of the church while preserving its initial status. This seems to us to be an artificial construction that does not take into account the definitive abolition of the old covenant without the abolition of its promises. These promises were accomplished, unbeknownst to the majority of the Jewish people, in Jesus Christ in the new covenant and, while they first referred to Israel, they do not exclusively concern it, but extend themselves to all nations.” [original post here]

Following logically from what Denault has exposed as the “main ambiguity” of the Dispensational hermeneutic, we are forced to conclude that the evangelical obsession with “all things Israel” popularized by twentieth-century evangelicalism is without theological

justification. It is at this point that my Dispensational brethren will often engage in the typical logical fallacy known as abusive *ad hominem*, denouncing such a proposition and its proponents as “anti-Semitic”. But such is not at all the case since the issue at hand is simply a matter of regarding the superiority of the new covenant over and against the old, as well as the abolition of the latter.

To begin with, I challenge the Dispensationalist to find any antisemitism, liberalism, or “spiritualizing” in the following exegesis of Romans 11:16-24 provided by Waldron and Barcellos:

“Here Paul likens the people of God to an olive tree. The root of the olive tree is the covenant promise made to the Jewish patriarchs. The natural branches are the Jews. Now what happens when Christ comes? Does God uproot the old olive tree? Does He plant a new fig tree beside the old olive tree? Does He perhaps plant a second olive tree? The answer to all these questions is a resounding no. This passage plainly teaches that the same old olive tree continued, but its unbelieving Jewish branches were broken off and new branches, believing Gentiles, were grafted in. What’s the point? Classic Dispensationalism teaches that the Church and Israel are distinct, separate, two different peoples of God. The Bible’s viewpoint is in stark contrast. It teaches that the Church is not a new olive tree. It is the old olive tree, but with new, believing branches. It is Israel, New Israel. Paul appears completely insensitive to ‘dispensational distinctions’ in this passage.”[1]

It is from the perspective of a covenantal hermeneutic that Protestants have historically affirmed the fulfilment of covenantal promises (along with their types and shadows) in Christ and the new covenant. The Dispensationalists’ common charges of antisemitism, liberalism and spiritualization of the text therefore hold no water and are only used to dismiss critiques rather than interact with arguments. With that in mind, let us consider some of the fruit of Dispensationalism and its intrinsic predisposition to *wrongly* divide the Word of truth.[2]

The Balfour Declaration and Christian Zionism

One of the implications of Dispensationalism’s hard and fast distinction between Israel and the church—refusing to recognize the church as the New Israel and the end of the old

covenant—is a tendency toward Christian Zionism. The eschatological scheme of premillennial Dispensationalism and its Judeo-centric futuristic speculations have produced a troubling number of unbiblical ideas and motivations within evangelicalism. This includes a view toward foreign policy in which the modern state of Israel must be defended at all costs because the ultimate restoration of literal physical Israel is supposedly the fulfilment of prophecy, before our very eyes. Recent events attest to the ascendancy of this eschatological delusion.[3]

As previously noted, prior to the rise of Dispensationalism, covenant theology was the dominant view within Protestantism. God's dealings with man have always been by way of a covenant relationship. This view is reflected in a 2013 issue of *Protestant Truth*:

“In the Word of God, covenant is at the very heart of redemptive history. God deals with his people in covenants. Our salvation comes to us by means of a covenant framework (Luke 1:72; Jer. 31:33-34). The divine covenants are the framework of redemptive history, and therefore all of the divine covenants have an organic and thematic unity.

...In the case of the divine covenants, they are unilateral promises made by God, which he certified by an oath. God's redemptive activity is unilateral. Redemption originates in God's sovereign activity. God has promised with a sacred oath that he will save his people.”[4]

2017 marks the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration, and I encourage you to read Jeremy Hammond's article in *Foreign Policy Journal* as to why this is significant. Dispensationalists have frequently referenced this landmark “prophetic” event, being keen to fit it within their eschatological scenarios. However, enthusiasm for the anniversary of the declaration came from an unexpected source as well. The same UK publication cited above which recognized covenant theology as being “at the very heart of redemptive history” ran the following in the November-December 2017 issue:

“Arthur Balfour...was not to see the State of Israel come into being, yet on his deathbed he declared that aiding Jewish restoration was possibly the most worthwhile thing he had done....”

In 1967, Israel celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration by issuing two stamps, one depicting Balfour...and the other, [Chaim] Weizmann. On the reverse of each stamp, derived from Jeremiah 31:17, is written 'Your children shall come back to their own country'".[5]

The article speaks glowingly of the work of Balfour and Weizmann. And while this sentiment is to be expected from the dispy crowd, it is curious why a reformed publication which recognizes that "God deals with his people in covenants" (not in dispensations) has shown such high regard for this 1917 declaration, even alleging along with the Dispensationalists that such is a fulfillment of prophecy which would ultimately culminate in a regathering of ethnic Jews into the modern state of Israel. Since, as Kim Riddlebarger rightly notes, "most Protestants regard chiliasm [millennialism] as incompatible with Reformation orthodoxy"[6], is it possible, then, that Christian Zionism has so infected both theology and politics that its proponents are unaware that this view depends upon premillennial Dispensationalism as its necessary foundation?

Even Mearsheimer and Walt (whom, to my knowledge, do not claim to be Christians), in their controversial book, *The Israel Lobby*, acknowledge that

"The origins of Christian Zionism lie in the theology of dispensationalism, an approach to biblical interpretation that emerged in nineteenth-century England, largely through the efforts of Anglican ministers Louis Way and John Nelson Darby. Dispensationalism is a form of premillennialism.... Dispensationalists believe that...the return of the Jews to Palestine is a key event in the preordained process that will lead to the Second Coming. The theology of Darby, Way, and their followers influenced a number of prominent English politicians and may have made British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour more receptive to the idea of creating a Jewish national home in Palestine."[7]

In his PhD thesis, Bernard Regan addresses the strategic impetus behind the 1917 declaration:

"The Balfour Declaration constituted an agreement between British imperialism and organised Zionism which was the establishment of a symbiotic relationship

emerging from the coalescence of two interdependent political goals.”

*... I analysed the significance of Palestine for British imperial strategy, its location providing a base from which to oversee their interests in the Near East and control the Suez Canal. The government decision in late 1917 to support the project for the creation of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine was **motivated by a self-interest which coalesced with the ambitions of the Zionist movement**. The task was to integrate this project into the goal of sustaining the British Empire without appearing to replicate imperialist expansionism and colonisation. The British government was conscious of French hopes to bring parts of the Ottoman Empire under its hegemony and consequently sought to avoid provoking a rupture with either its French allies or the anti-Ottoman Arab forces.*

*...The British sought to advance their interests in a world in which anti-imperialism began to flourish stimulated by seismic events and the accelerating demand for self-determination in countries under imperial rule. In the midst of this maelstrom the interests of the British government found a congruence with the aspirations of Zionism. **Zionist settlement provided a convenient surrogate**, effectively implementing colonisation under the guise of national reconstruction. Zionism developed from being a peripheral political movement even within the Jewish community into being an important adjunct of British imperialist strategy in the Near East. The apogee of Zionist political achievement was the adoption by the British Cabinet of the Balfour Declaration proposal for the creation of a homeland for the Jews in Palestine.”[8]*

The prospect that a nineteenth-century theological system and its corollaries have so impacted the minds of evangelicals and politicians alike (or at least been utilized by the latter) to the point where national Israel continues to be the focus of many sermons and many foreign policy deliberations, including UN resolutions, is cause for concern. We may not be responsible for the political entanglements of the state and the agenda-driven interventionist policies of Christ-denying civil magistrates, but we are responsible for defending and promoting sound doctrine. Ideas have consequences.

Land promises are to be understood typologically

The heart of the issue is the Dispensational hermeneutic which forces a wooden literalism upon texts which are interpreted in the NT as typological. Let's consider a few helpful observations regarding land as a type and shadow in Scripture which points to a heavenly fulfillment much greater than the physical land of Canaan. O. Palmer Robertson writes:

"It has been rightly observed that the idea of the 'land' as a theological concept has been largely overlooked by both Judaism and Christianity. Except for eschatological speculations concerning the return of Israel to the land, the whole concept of the land as presented in Scripture has been generally neglected...."

The concept of a land that belongs to God's people originated in Paradise. This simple fact, so often overlooked, plays a critical role in evaluating the significance of the land throughout redemptive history and in its consummate fulfillment. 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."

In subsequent pages, Robertson goes on to explain that "In speaking of Israel's land under the old covenant, it is necessary to think in categories of shadow, type, and prophecy, in contrast to reality, substance, and fulfillment under the new covenant." [9]

Brandon Adams, in a thorough refutation of the Scripture-twisting propaganda of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews notes:

"Throughout the Old Testament, Israel was identified as the physical descendants of Abraham who received the physical promise of the land of Canaan. But now with the fuller revelation of Jesus Christ, Paul is able to explain that the physical promise of land was only a shadow of the true promise made to Abraham: Christ. Therefore,

Paul says that Israel, Abraham's offspring, is actually Jesus Christ and His body. Christians are the Israel of God (Gal 6:16).

*...God the Holy Spirit explains that there were **two Jerusalems**: One stemming from the Mosaic Covenant - the earthly city of the earthly descendants of Abraham; the other stemming from the New Covenant - the heavenly city of the spiritual descendants of Abraham. God even goes so far as to explain that the earthly Jerusalem and her people have been "cast out"! To agree with IFCJ's interpretation of Psalm 122:6 by financially supporting the organization and the modern state of Israel is to deny the explicit teaching of the Holy Spirit."^[10]*

Sam Waldron:

*"Our claim is that the Church is the New Israel under the New Covenant, the elect remnant of Israel, the one olive tree of blessing, and the eschatological Israel which inherits all God's promises. There are really **two Israels**.^[11] There always have been—only the contrast is now clearer. There has always been the external nation and the elect remnant. For the Church—the New, Elect, Believing, Messianic, and Eschatological Israel, God's blessings remain. God's curses are for those external Jews who finally reject their Messiah."^[12]*

*[The glorious kingdom that awaits us] will not be less than what the Jews were promised. **It will be infinitely more than the Old Testament types and shadows could convey.** The meek will not simply inherit the land. They will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5; Ephesians 6:1-3). A New Jerusalem—much better than the old one—will come down out of heaven from God."^[13]*

Robert Reymond:

"...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 and ascension, and reigning until all his enemies have been put under his feet."^[14]

Richard Barcellos:

“The New Testament interprets Christ’s coming as the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes (e.g., Luke 1:26-38, 46-55, 67-79; 2:25-38; Acts 26:19-23). The New Testament also understands the church as the fulfillment of the eschatological Israel of Old Testament prophecy (e.g., Acts 2:14-21; 15:13-21; 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11-22; Heb. 8:7-13). The Lord’s servant, Jesus Christ, unlike Old Covenant Israel, was faithful and became a ‘light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:23), just as ‘the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place’ (Acts 26:22).

Old Testament Israel was a means to an end. The end is not Palestine. The end is not an earthly, Jerusalem temple at which animal sacrifices are offered. Ancient Israel was chosen by God to be a means through which the last Adam would come. She was also a means through which His Person, His work, His people, and His kingdom were typified. Israel has connections with the first man, Adam, and the last Adam, Jesus Christ.”[15]

Elsewhere Barcellos concludes that

“...Israel is a recapitulation of Adam in the garden on a corporate and typological level. Like Adam, Israel was God’s son in God’s place under God’s rule and like Adam, they broke the covenant with God and were exiled—Adam from the garden and Israel from the holy land. Adam was God’s protological and prototypical son, Israel was God’s corporate and typological son, and our Lord is the eschatological and antitypical Son. Our Lord recapitulates various aspects of Adam’s history and Israel’s history, providing what the types never did. This argues that the Bible from the outset is a book about Christ.”[16]

Contrarily, Dispensationalism’s refusal to recognize typology in Scripture, its insistence that the NT be interpreted through the lense of OT literalism, and its refusal to accept the infallible NT interpretation of OT passages has had disastrous consequences both theologically and politically. Clarence Bass had this to say about Dispensationalism’s inverted hermeneutic:

“No part of historic Christian doctrine supports this radical distinction between church and kingdom. To be sure they are not identical; but dispensationalism has added the idea that the kingdom was to be a restoration of Israel, not a consummation of the church... In the light of this principle, it is legitimate to ask whether dispensationalism is not oriented more from the Abrahamic Covenant than from the Cross. Is not its focus centered more on the Jewish kingdom than on the Body of Christ? Does it not interpret the New Testament in the light of Old Testament prophecies, instead of interpreting those prophecies in the light of the more complete revelation of the New Testament?”[17]

It may be stated that the defining characteristic of the Dispensational hermeneutic which sets it apart from orthodox Christian interpretive methods is its refusal to allow the NT to comment upon and exegete the OT.

“The major issue in interpretation is, should the New Testament be brought into conformity to the literalism of the Old Testament, or should the Old Testament be interpreted and understood in the light of the New? Dispensational theology makes the Old Testament determinative in interpretation and non-Dispensational theology makes the New Testament determinative and explanatory of the Old. Further, non-Dispensational theology holds that Jesus Christ is presently reigning over the universe as Lord; Dispensational Theology teaches that he will not reign as Lord and Messianic King until the millennial kingdom (Psa. 110:1ff; Acts 2:24-36; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:13-17; Heb. 1:1-4; Rev. 3:21).

The Dispensational approach to Scripture stands diametrically opposed to Reformed tradition....”[18]

Conclusion

Removing the hermeneutically flawed foundation of Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism has nothing upon which to stand. The only hope for the Jew is the gospel. This is the same exact hope for the Gentile. It is patently unbiblical and illogical to insist upon perpetual Jewish entitlement to a piece of land in the Middle East which only served as a temporary

and provisional type until the Antitype would come. Robert Reymond states it plainly:

The modern Jewish state is not a part of the Messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ. Even though this particular political state came into being on May 14, 1948, 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' (Romans 9:6-8; Galatians 4:24-25) and thus is 'Ishmaelitic' to the core, due to its lack of Abrahamic belief in Jesus Christ. It has accordingly forsaken any legitimate Biblical claim to Palestine.

...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 fulfillment at the 'restoration of all things' that will accompany the resurrection of believers at the return of Christ (Acts 3:21; Romans 8:22-23). To interpret these predictions literally would be a retrograde elevation of type over antitype.[19]

But what of the claim that the old covenant land promises were given to the descendants of Abraham "forever"? Alan Morrison responds to this objection:

"...The 'forever' bit can be clearly understood when one sees that the Promised Land was only ever a symbol of heaven, which is eternal. Just as the physical nation Israel pointed to the church, so the physical land pointed forward to eternity. To enter the true Promised Land is to come into eternity. The Israelite patriarchs understood this symbolic aspect of the 'foreverness' of the land very well. Abraham, for example, 'dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:9-10)

...The patriarchs 'confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth' (Heb. 11:13) and they desired 'a better, that is, a heavenly country' (Heb. 11:16). They knew very well that the promise of the land forever was a promise of a spiritual home in eternity.

...We conclude that the Middle-Eastern nation state of Israel today cannot possibly be a fulfillment of Bible prophecy but, on the contrary, is the product of terrorism and international political cabals.”[20]

The only hope for Israel is the gospel, not a regathering of unbelievers into a temporal and provisional plot of land which will shortly be dissolved in the final judgment (2 Peter 3). And while our battle is a spiritual one and we cannot expect to impact foreign policy, we can pull the theological rug out from under any political justification for neo-Judaizing interventionist policies in the Middle East.

“President Clinton...declared before the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem on October 27, 1994: ‘...it is God’s will that Israel, the Biblical home of the people of Israel, continue 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.”[21]

Reymond was right that Slick Willy’s statement was “bad politics based on equally bad theology.” If it is indeed true that Dispensationalism is waning,[22] the fruit of that hermeneutical train wreck still continues to impact the world and church.

So, as political leaders wish to perpetuate the practice of interference in Middle East politics, let them do so without the ability to appeal to Christian theology for support. The demise of Dispensationalism is long overdue.

[1] Waldron, S.E., and Barcellos, R.C., *A Reformed Baptist Manifesto: The New Covenant Constitution of the Church*, Reformed Baptist Academic Press, Palmdale, CA, 2004, pp. 23–24.

[2] I am taking a jab at the Dispensationalists’ abuse of 2 Timothy 2:15, of course. It is

common for this passage to be used as the justification for “dividing” Scripture into different dispensations. “Accurately handling” is a better rendering of the text than “rightly dividing”.

[3] “‘What [Trump] did ... was an enormous step in bringing the Temple,’ said Asaf Fried, official spokesman for the United Temple Movement, an association of organizations working towards making the Third Temple a reality. He added, ‘This necessarily had to come from a non-Jew in order to bring them into the process, so they will be able to take their part in the Temple.’ [...]”

“‘The prophets’ words of prophecy are coming forth from the Bible and becoming facts right before our eyes,’ said Likud lawmaker and prominent Temple Mount movement figure Yehuda Glick.” (Thank you to Matt LaGreca for making me aware of this article.)

[4] Covenant Promises (editorial), *Protestant Truth*, Jul.-Aug., **19**(4):61, 2013.

[5] Barnes, R., The Balfour Declaration, *Protestant Truth* Nov.-Dec., **23**(6):107, 2017

[6] Riddlebarger, K., *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (expanded ed.), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2013, p. 30.

[7] Mearsheimer, J.J., and Walt, S.M., *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, NY, 2007, pp. 132–33.

[8] Regan, B., *The Implementation of the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate in Palestine: problems of conquest and colonisation at the nadir of British Imperialism (1917-1936)*, PhD thesis, University of Surrey, 2016 pp. 2; 111-12.

[9] Robertson, O.P., *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2000, pp. 3-4.

[10] Adams, B., International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, Oct 17, 2010.

[11] See Wohlberg, S., The two Israels, *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal* **38**:1-2:20–45, 2014.

[12] Waldron, S.E., *MacArthur's Millennial Manifesto: A Friendly Response*, Reformed

Baptist Academic Press, Owensboro, KY, 2008, p. 114.

[13] Waldron, ref. 12, p. 116—17.

[14] Reymond, R.L., Who really owns the 'Holy Land'? *The Trinity Review*, Jun.-Jul., 2006, Nos. 256-257 p. 6.

[15] Barcellos, R.C., *Better Than the Beginning: Creation in Biblical Perspective*, Reformed Baptist Academic Press, Palmdale, CA, 2013, p. 154.

[16] Barcellos, R.C., *Getting the Garden Right: Adam's Work and God's Rest in Light of Christ*, Founders Press, Cape Coral, FL, 2017, pp. 271—72.

[17] Bass, C., *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1960, pp. 31 & 151, as cited by Stephen Sizer in "The prophetic quest of Dispensationalism", Brooke, T., (ed.) *Pop Prophecy*, SCP Imprints, San Bernardino, CA, 2014, pp. 126—27.

[18] Downing, W.R., *Theological Propaedeutic*, PIRS Publications, Morgan Hill, CA, 2010, p. 266.

[19] Reymond, ref. 14, p. 9.

[20] Morrison, A., The two Jerusalems, *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Journal* 27:2-3:35—36, 2003. In defense of his terrorism charge, Morrison continues: "To say that modern Israel is the product of terrorism is no exaggeration. The former Israeli Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir were both terrorists who fomented murder before Israel was founded as a state. Shamir, leader of the terrorist Lehi group—also known as the Stern Gang—ordered the murder of Lord Moyne who was gunned down in Cairo in 1944. In a recent interview with the Daily Telegraph, Shamir said that he 'would have been happy to kill Lord Moyne himself' (Daily Telegraph, April 18th 1998, p. 20). These men literally bombed their way into office. Shamir actually gave himself the pseudonym 'Michael,' inspired by the IRA leader Michael Collins." (p. 51, footnote 37).

[21] Reymond, ref. 14, p. 2.

[22] In a lecture on Dispensationalism (C410 Baptist Covenant Theology, session #8,

Founders Study Center), Pastor Steve Garrick notes the diminishing presence of Dispensationalism. While it may be true that Christians are becoming less and less acquainted with the terminology and proponents of this school and so may not properly consider themselves Dispensationalists, it is also evident that many components of Dispensational doctrine have been “left behind”, embedded in the theology and ideology of many today, even though these folk may be less inclined to embrace the classical system as a whole.

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