

Part 14: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism sermon explores the meaning of the term 'seed of Abraham' and the distinction between natural and spiritual Israel, arguing that the church does not inherit Israel's promises and that Israel has a national future.

Scripture: Romans 9:4-11, Galatians 6:15, Ephesians 2:12, Ephesians 2:15

Topics: "Israel And Covenant", "Premillennialism"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into the debate on whether Israel will continue as a nation, focusing on the meanings of the term 'Seed of Abraham' and 'Israel' in Scripture. He addresses the arguments presented by amillenarians regarding the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant only through the spiritual seed of Abraham, emphasizing the distinction between the physical and spiritual seed. Walvoord highlights the significance of Israel's racial continuity, pointing out the preservation of Jewish identity as a strong argument against denying Israel's future. He explores the distinctions between Israel, Gentiles, and the church, emphasizing the continuation of Israel and Gentiles as separate entities with specific promises and blessings.

Transcript

{Editor's note: Footnotes in the original printed edition were numbered 16-22, but in this electronic edition are numbered 1-7 respectively.}

Will Israel Continue as a Nation?

The point at issue. In previous discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant, it was shown that the term seed of Abraham had three distinct meanings as used in Scripture. It is used (1) of the natural seed of Abraham, limited in some contexts to the seed of Jacob or Israel; (2) it is used of the spiritual seed of Abraham within the natural seed--spiritual Israel; (3) it is used of those who are spiritual seed of Abraham but not natural descendants, i.e., Gentile believers. Premillenarians concede to amillenarians the existence of a spiritual seed of Abraham. The point at issue is that amillenarians insist that the Abrahamic Covenant is fulfilled only through the spiritual seed of Abraham and that therefore Israel racially and nationally has no covenant promises.

The meaning of the term "Seed of Abraham." The usual amillennial position is stated by Albertus Pieters in these words: "Whenever we meet with the argument that God made certain promises to the Jewish race, the above facts are pertinent. God never made any promise to any race at all, as a race. All His promises were to the continuing covenanted community, without regard to its racial constituents or to the personal ancestry of the individuals in it. Hence no proof that those whom the world now calls 'the Jews' are descended from Abraham, if it could be supplied (which it can not), would be of any avail to prove that they are entitled to the fulfillment of any divine promise whatsoever. Those promises were made to the covenanted group called 'The Seed of Abraham,' and to that community they must be fulfilled. What is needed is that one shall bring forward proof of his membership in that group." [1] Albertus Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham*, pp. 19-20. all families of the earth be blessed." Nothing should be plainer than that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob understood the term seed as referring to their physical lineage. While blessing is promised those outside the seed of Abraham if they believe as godly Abraham believed, the particular promises of a great posterity, of possession of the land, and being the channel of blessing to Gentiles is never given to any except the physical seed. Again it should be made clear that God is not undertaking to fulfill the promise to all the physical seed of Abraham, but through some of them, chosen as the line of the seed. While the line of the seed culminates in Christ, who fulfills much of the promise of blessing to the Gentiles, it is clear that all the twelve tribes not only Judah, were considered the seed of Abraham and in particular the seed of Israel.

While Pieters' presentation of the amillenarian position accomplishes about all that could be asked for that viewpoint, it must be rejected as lacking any positive proof. The arguments, however cogently presented, do not prove the point at issue. The Scriptural use of the term seed of Abraham while it justifies the concept of a spiritual seed does not exclude the promises to the physical seed. The amillenarian arguments beg the question by assuming what they are trying to prove. The fact is that Pieters and most amillenarians seem to avoid the real issues and in their discussion of the Abrahamic Covenant do not deal with that aspect that concerns the physical seed.

The concluding point of Pieters, that the Jews have no racial continuity, is an illustration of the extremes to which amillenarians are forced to go to sustain their position. Certainly the world today is bearing witness to the continuing physical strain of Jewish blood, however contaminated by marriage with Gentiles. The Jews themselves acknowledge this physical lineage. Practically all Biblical scholars who are conservative acknowledge it whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. Certainly the Scriptures continue the recognition of this people even after centuries of intermarriage with Gentiles. The Book of Revelation in its prophetic account of things future speaks of the twelve tribes being again identified by God. In modern history we have witnessed the creation of the political state of Israel in Palestine, the persecution of Jews as such in Europe, the continued teachings of orthodox Judaism as well as its reformed counterparts. Anyone in the face of such overwhelming evidence for recognition of the physical seed of Abraham in the world today who in effect denies them right and title to the name Israel is shutting his eyes to some very plain facts. One of the greatest of modern miracles has been the preservation of the identity of Israel as a race and nation, a fact which has been the stumbling stone for the amillennial denial of Israel's future. To deny that Israel has a bona fide existence today is to ignore that which is plain to everyone else.

The term "Israel." The millennial controversy over the meaning of the term seed of Abraham carries over into the term Israel. As a title given to Jacob, meaning prince of God, it has commonly been used to designate the physical descendants of Jacob. While amillenarians tend to deny that the seed of Abraham has any physical reference, as we have seen, they concede that the term Israel has some physical

reference. The question at issue does not concern the Old Testament use of the term so much as it concerns the New Testament meaning of Israel.

Amillenarians characteristically do not agree among themselves on even the essentials of their theology, and their concept of Israel is a good illustration. The older and more familiar type of amillenarians, of which Calvin may be taken as a representative, holds that when Israel rejected Christ they lost their promises and that the New Testament church has become the inheritor of Israel's covenants. The church of the New Testament, they hold, is Israel. Oswald Allis, for instance, is a staunch defender of Calvin's viewpoint and goes so far as to label as extremists all who disagree with him on this point. He states: "Carrying to an almost unprecedented extreme that literalism which is characteristic of Millenarianism, they [the Brethren Movement] insisted that Israel must mean Israel, and that the kingdom promises in the Old Testament concern Israel and are to be fulfilled to Israel literally." [2] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 218. Allis is a little wild in this charge as will be made evident. The idea that Israel means Israel is not unprecedented, nor is it confined to the Brethren movement. It is held in its essentials by the postmillenarian Charles Hodge [3] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 589. and by Professor William Hendriksen of Calvin Seminary, an avowed amillenarian. [4] William Hendriksen, *And So All Israel Shall Be Saved*, p. 33. Allis seems unaware that he himself is the one out of step. The whole tendency of modern theology both conservative and liberal is toward the position of distinguishing rather than merging Biblical Judaism and Christianity.

The newer allennial approach to the meaning of the term Israel is to regard it as always being basically a reference to those physically Israel. They may regard them like Hendriksen as spiritual Israel or elect Israel down through the ages, or like the postmillenarian Charles Hodge as Israelites who become Christians--certainly one of the Biblical usages, but there is no longer much zeal to make the church the inheritor of all Israel's promises.

There are a number of good reasons for this trend away from Calvin and his modern disciple Allis. Obviously the church does not fulfill in any literal way the great bulk of Israel's promises which had to do with repossession of the land, Israel's regathering, and a glorious kingdom on earth. It is much easier and more logical to seal off these promises as conditional and therefore no longer subject to fulfillment. This permits a more logical exposition of the passages without embarrassment by comparison with the history of the church. Further, Israel is promised curses as well as blessings under her covenants. To qualify for the blessings puts the church in a compromising position of being involved in Israel's curses also. Modern amillennialism prefers to stand on New Testament rather than Old Testament promises. and privilege constantly in his epistles. He declares that their peculiar promises include the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, the promises, the fathers, and the privilege of being the people of whom Christ should come (Rom 9:4-5). Now, it is obvious that Paul is referring to Israel in unbelief when he refers to those who have these privileges, for he declares: "I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: who are Israelites..." (Rom 9:3-4). He declares that they even in unbelief "are Israelites," and relates to them all the peculiar privileges of Israel. It is evident that the institution of the church did not rob Israel in the flesh of its peculiar place of privilege before God.

This declaration is given added weight by the fact that in Ephesians 2:12 Gentiles are expressly declared to have been excluded from the promises given to Israel: "That at that time ye [Gentiles] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." The passage goes on to state their privilege as Christians

in the church. It is noteworthy that Paul does not say that the Gentiles came into these same Israelitish promises when they were converted; rather he pictures a work of God bringing Jew and Gentile into a new order entirely--"one new man" (Eph 2:15). It may be concluded without further argument that the distinction between natural Israel and Gentiles is continued after the institution of the church--Israel is still a genuine Israel, and the Gentiles continue to fulfill their part. While this fact of the Scripture is more or less admitted even by the amillennialist, the significance is not adequately realized. The continuance of Israel and Gentiles as such is a strong argument against either one being dispossessed of their own place. Israel is not reduced to the bankruptcy of the Gentiles--to become "strangers from the covenants of promises" (Eph 2:12), and the distinction between the two groups is maintained on the same sharp lines as before the church was instituted. the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?" (Rom 11:12). In other words, if the blindness which has fallen upon Israel nationally during this present age was the occasion for great blessing for the Gentiles, the "fulness" of Israel will bring a richness of blessing which will be "much more." Now, obviously, there can be no fullness of Israel if they have no future. Their fullness will come when the present condition of blindness is lifted.

He takes occasion to warn the Gentiles of their present privileges on the basis of this argument. In Romans 11:15 he refers again to the future blessing of Israel: "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" It is true that he speaks of Israel being broken off that the Gentiles might be grafted in (Rom 11:17-24), but he also speaks of the future ingrafting of Israel back into "their own olive tree" (Rom 11:24). This is contingent upon the "blindness" being lifted, and it is declared that the blindness will continue "until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" (Rom 11:25). The use of the word until signifies not only that the period of Gentile blessing will end, but it also indicates that a future period of Israel's ingrafting will follow. Samuel H. Wilkinson has brought this out: "If and when an 'until' sets a time-limit to any group of conditions, it makes the said group of conditions to be temporary not everlasting, to be preliminary not final. And the change, whatever it be, which is to occur when the time-limit is reached and passed, must surely refer to the same object as that which was submitted to the temporary conditions. With these two reasonable considerations in view, it will be found that all the time-limits described in the New Testament leave room for the full scope of Old Testament prophecy to become in due time realized." [6] *The Israel Promises and Their Fulfillment* (London: John Bale, Sons & Danielsson, Ltd., 1936), p. 78.

The distinction between Israel outside of the church and the church itself, then, is a highly significant fact of Scripture. The Scriptures clearly state that Israel in unbelief is blinded, that this blinded condition is temporary not final, that the blindness will be lifted when the present period of Gentile blessing is concluded. The fulfillment of the covenants with Israel will follow, as Romans 11:26-32 indicates. Not only the fact of Israel's continuance is revealed, but Israel's present program and future blessings are specifically outlined in Romans eleven and other portions of Scripture which need not be discussed at this time.

Spiritual Israel and Gentile Christians contrasted. While the contrasts between Israel, Gentiles, and the church are severally important, the crux of the argument is the contrast between spiritual Israel, that is, those who have become Christians, and Gentile Christians. The twofold origin of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians is obvious to all. In the attempt to disfranchise Israel of her promises, however, some amillenarians claim that the church, composed of both Gentiles and Jews, takes Israel's place of blessing completely. It is pointed out that there has always been an inner circle of Israelites who were the "true

Israel" and that these were the genuine inheritors of the promises, not the nation as a whole. It is the purpose of this discussion to inquire into only one phase of the problem--Is the church ever identified with true or spiritual Israel, that is, are Gentile Christians ever included in the designation Israel? The problem of whether the church actually inherits Israel's promises and realizes them is reserved for later treatment.

Two principal passages are the foundation for the discussion. In Romans 9-11 the problem comes up repeatedly. In Romans 9:6 it is revealed: "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." Those who have opposed a future for Israel find in this passage a proof-text for their theory that only a portion of Israel, that is, those who are "spiritual," inherit the promises, and the rest are excluded from the promises. An examination of this passage, however, will reveal that the real contrast is not between those who inherit Abraham's promises and those who do not. It is rather that the promises to Abraham are classified as belonging either to Israel according to the flesh or Israel which enters into the spiritual promises by faith--which are given also to Gentile believers (Gal 3:6-9, 14). It is not, therefore, a contrast between those who are excluded and those who are included, but rather a contrast between those who inherit only the national promises and those who inherit the spiritual promises. The line of national promises is narrowed to Isaac and his seed (Rom 9:7), and the line of spiritual promises is narrowed to those who believe. In the present age, Israel as a nation is blinded, which blindness will be lifted. As individuals, Israelites who believe belong to the election of grace (Rom 11:5-10). Both Israelites in the flesh (unbelievers) and Israelites who believe are genuine Israelites. They are sharply distinguished as to present blessings. Unbelieving Israelites are lost and blinded, while believing Israelites come into all the present blessings of the church. The distinction is always on the ground of whether or not they believe in Christ, not on whether they are true Israelites.

The second principal passage is found in Galatians 6:15-16, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God." It has been alleged on the basis of this passage that the church as such is specifically called the "Israel of God." To this is opposed the fact that everywhere else in the Scriptures the term Israel is applied only to those who are the natural seed of Abraham and Isaac, never to Gentiles. If it can be sustained that in this passage the church is called Israel, it would, of course, be an argument for the identification of the church with Israel in the present age--though by no means conclusive, in the face of constant use of the term Israel in the Scriptures in reference to unbelieving Jews. An examination of Galatians 6:15-16, however, instead of proving any such identification is rather a specific instance where Jewish believers are distinguished from Gentile believers, and this by the very term Israel of God. Old Testament. It had always been limited to those who were genuine believers in the true God. Further, the "kingdom of God" is not to be identified with the millennial kingdom prophesied for Israel and the Gentile nations, though the millennial kingdom is an important manifestation and phase of the kingdom of God.

The declaration of Christ in this passage resolves itself into an affirmation that the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees would never be saved because of their rejection of the "son" of the "householder," and that others would take their place. Gaebelein suggests that the "nation" which will take their place will be other Israelites: "The nation to whom the Lord promises the Kingdom is not the Church. The Church is called the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, the Habitation of God by the Spirit, the Lamb's Wife, but never a nation. The nation is Israel still, but that believing remnant of the nation, living when the Lord comes." [7] A. C. Gaebelein, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Our Hope, 1910), II, 138.

The second major passage bearing on this problem is Romans 11:1-32. This chapter deals with the question whether God has cast off Israel. To this leading question Paul replies in positive terms, "God forbid." His argument may be summarized as a denial of this question. God has not cast away His people. There has always been a remnant in every age true to God. The unbelief of the nation Israel has never caused God to cast off His people as a whole (Rom 11:3-4). There has always been a continuing program for Israel as witnessed in the present election of grace. Some Jews are being saved. While unbelieving Jews are blinded now, their present blindness will be lifted and replaced by sight and faith. When this glad day comes "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom 11:26), meaning a group or national deliverance in contrast to the individual salvation offered now. At that time God's covenants with Israel will be fulfilled, for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance, sure and irrevocable. The whole tenor of the chapter is against either the idea that Israel has lost all future hope of fulfillment of their promises through cancellation or that the church has received these promises and Israel is disinherited.

On the basis of this brief study of terminology, the evidence has been examined and found to produce nothing indicating that the term Israel is ever used of Gentiles. Rather it is used of the godly remnant in all ages, Christian Jews, and the future national entity anticipated through the Scriptures. None of these usages support the amillennial contention that Israel has no national future. With this as a foundation, Israel's precise promises relative to the land, her regathering and repossession of it, may be considered.

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