

Part 16: The Abrahamic Covenant and Premillennialism

by John F. Walvoord

The Abrahamic Covenant and the promises of God for Israel's continuance as a nation assure Israel's restoration, which will be fulfilled subsequent to the return of her Deliverer.

Scripture: Genesis 17:7, Jeremiah 31:3, Luke 1:32, Acts 1:6, Romans 11:25

Topics: "Israel Restoration", "Abrahamic Covenant"

Description

John F. Walvoord preaches on the restoration of Israel as a nation, emphasizing the prophetic promises of Israel's future glory and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. The restoration of Israel is based on God's faithfulness to His promises, including Israel's continuance as a nation, regathering after dispersion, and possession of the promised land. The New Testament affirms Israel's restoration, with Romans 11 highlighting the future salvation of Israel and the removal of their spiritual blindness, pointing to a glorious future for the Jewish people.

Transcript

Will Israel Be Restored as a Nation?

Most of the prophets of the Old Testament with enraptured gaze contemplated the glory of a millennial kingdom in which Israel would be restored and be head of all nations. In the darkest hours of Israel's apostasy and sin, in the very hour of her captivity and disgrace, the prophets uttered their message of hope. Jeremiah's word may be taken as typical: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things.... Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.... And it shall come to pass, that like as I have watched over them, to pluck up, and to break down, and to throw down, and to destroy, and to afflict; so will I watch over them, to build, and to plant, saith the LORD.... Behold, the days come, saith the LORD,

that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.... But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:3-5, 8-9, 28, 31, 33-34).

The Abrahamic Covenant required that Israel continue as a nation forever in order to fulfill the "everlasting covenant" (Gen 17:7) and in order to have the land as "an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8). All the facts discussed previously, to the point that Israel continues as a nation forever, possesses the land forever, is not disinherited, is not supplanted by the church, and that Israel's basic covenants are dependent upon God's faithfulness alone for fulfillment, combine to require Israel's restoration after these centuries of dispersion and chastening. The conclusion that Israel has a future restoration is based upon these facts along with the voluminous testimony of the prophets concerning Israel's coming golden age.

The present discussion must confine itself to the simple question of the fact of Israel's restoration. This fact has been doubted in proportion as expositors have questioned the Scriptures upon which Israel's restoration is based. The opposition has come from two principal sources: those who deny the prophetic portions of the Word of God on the basis of rejection of their inspiration and authority, and those who deny the literal interpretation of these prophecies while accepting their authority and inspiration.

Within the ranks of those who accept inspiration the restoration of Israel is recognized in exact proportion to the degree of literal interpretation allowed. Amillenarians who follow the Augustinian pattern usually spiritualize the restoration of Israel as meaning merely the growth and progress of the church. Into this pattern fall Oswald Allis, B. B. Warfield, and Louis Berkhof. Some contemporary amillenarians such as William Hendriksen and some postmillenarians such as Charles Hodge interpret the promises of Israel's restoration as a picture of the revival of Israel within the church, i.e., the conversion of the Jews to Christianity in large numbers. This tends toward a more literal interpretation as it refers the promises to Israel rather than the church as a whole. Any attempt to interpret the promises given to Israel literally, however, points to a future restoration coincident to the establishment of the millennial kingdom upon the earth at the second advent of Jesus Christ. This future restoration of Israel is in harmony with and supported by the great body of revelation concerning Israel much of which has already been discussed. By way of summary certain leading facts may be mentioned.

Israel's continuance as a nation. The provision of the Abrahamic Covenant for an everlasting covenant relation and the promises of God for Israel's continuance as a nation to inherit these covenant promises combine to assure Israel's continuance as a nation. The thought of Israel ceasing "from being a nation" is as unthinkable to the prophet Jeremiah as the revocation of ordinances of the sun, moon, and stars and as impossible as it is to measure the heavens or search out the foundations of the earth (cf. Jer 31:35-37). The historic fact is that Israel has continued as a recognizable entity in the world in spite of centuries of dispersion and corruption of the physical seed. The twentieth century has witnessed the miracle of this ancient people establishing after the lapse of nineteen hundred years a political state bearing its name and embodying at least a portion of their ancient geographical possessions. This is all the more remarkable because those who are accomplishing this phenomenon are not for the most part believers in the Scriptures and do not recognize the prophetic significance of what they are doing.

Israel's regathering after dispersion. The foundation of the state of Israel in recent years has been a part of the predicted regathering of scattered Israel back to their ancient land. Previous discussion has pointed out the three predicted dispersions of Israel as already having been fulfilled along with two predicted regatherings. The present movement of Jews back to Palestine is apparently the first stage of the third regathering. That over one million Jews are already in Palestine in a movement that parallels in many ways the Exodus from Egypt is tangible evidence which cannot be ignored reasonably. The significance of the re-gathering is that it justifies the literal interpretation of prophecy which anticipated just such a movement. If the regathering is to be taken literally, as present history would indicate, it would naturally follow that the predicted golden age is ahead following the second advent of Christ. Just as the second gathering was the prelude for the first advent of Christ, so the third regathering is the prelude for the second advent.

Israel's possession of the promised land. An integral part of the original Abrahamic Covenant was the promise of everlasting possession of the land. Specific boundaries given to Abraham (Gen 15:18-21) indicate the extent of the promise. Previous discussion of this has shown that these promises have never been fulfilled, that they are unconditionally promised to Israel, that delays, dispersions, and Israel's failures do not abrogate the promises. The present partial possession of the land is a token. The complete possession awaits the coming of Israel's Redeemer. The possession of the land anticipates also Israel's restoration. One is antecedent to the other. The cumulative force of all the Abrahamic promises strengthened and enlarged by extensive prophetic portions of Scripture focuses upon the conclusion that Israel is to be restored as a nation.

The restoration of Israel in the New Testament. The teaching of Christ and the expectation of the apostles anticipated the fulfillment of the prophecies relative to Israel's kingdom. The bulk and content of the coming kingdom is given so largely in the Old Testament that the New Testament confines itself for the most part to confirmation. As shown in previous discussion, Christ when questioned about the coming kingdom never denied and rather confirmed that it remained the sure expectation of the people of Israel. Mary the mother of our Lord was assured that her son would sit upon the throne of David and reign over the house of Jacob forever (Luke 1:32-33). The ambitious mother of James and John is denied her petition that her sons sit on either side of Christ in the kingdom, not on the ground that her hope of the earthly kingdom was an error, but on the ground that this honor was only for those whom the Father chose (Matt 20:19-23). The apostles had been previously assured that they would sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes in the day of restoration (Matt 19:28), and would eat at His table (Luke 22:30). When on the day of ascension they asked the Christ, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), they were not rebuked for doctrinal error but informed merely that the "times or the seasons" were in the hands of the Father. In other words, the teaching of Christ never refutes the common expectation of the Jews and the apostles for literal fulfillment of the promises of an earthly kingdom for Israel, but rather confirms it.

The classic passage in the New Testament on the issue of Israel's restoration is Romans 11, which has already been referred to repeatedly. The general teaching of Romans 11 is that Israel is to be restored. Paul asks the question, "Hath God cast away his people?" In answer to that question, Paul states categorically, "No"--"God forbid." The arguments are then piled up in confirmation of this answer. God has never cast away His people. In the time of apostasy prior to the captivities, Elijah is assured that there was a godly remnant of 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (Rom 11:2-4). During the lifetime of Paul himself there was "a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom 11:5), i.e., Jewish Christian

believers. The fact that the nation Israel as a whole is unconverted and blinded is plainly faced (Rom 11:6-10). The purpose of allowing Israel's failure is revealed as an act of mercy to the Gentiles: "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy" (Rom 11:11).

From the very fact of the fall of Israel resulting in great Gentile blessing, the argument continues that Israel is destined for a glorious future: "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" (Rom 11:12). Israel's time of fullness is still ahead. Using the figure of an olive tree as the fountain of blessing, Israel is pictured as being cut off the olive tree and the Gentiles are grafted in. But, Paul argues, if Gentiles who are like branches from a wild olive tree can be grafted into a good tree, how much more can Israel who is of the good tree naturally be grafted back in? Gentiles are warned that if they continue not in faith they too shall be cut off. It is clear that he is not talking about individual Gentiles or individual Israelites, but rather to each entity as a group. Today is the time of Gentile opportunity while the Israel promises are suspended. The day is coming when the present time of Gentile blessing or fullness will come in and then Israel's hour of blessing will follow.

The subject of Israel's blindness as now imposed and as scheduled for removal is to a large extent the key to the passage. It is not strange that a number of interpretations should be given to Romans 11:25, "For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." According to Origen, the father of allegorical interpretation, "all Israel" means simply "all believers." The Reformers like Origen attempted to eliminate Israel from the passage entirely. Calvin changed the "until" to "that"--a deliberate interpretation rather than a translation--so that the passage read, "Blindness in part is happened to Israel that the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." [1] John Calvin, Commentary on Romans, in loc. Luther labeled the Jews as the devil's children impossible to convert. [2] Cf. Charles Hodge, Epistle to the Romans, pp. 584-85. Origen, Calvin, and Luther unite in opposition to considering Israel as meaning Israel. On the other hand, Charles Hodge interpreted Romans 11:25 as predicting "a great and general conversion of the Jewish people, which should take place when the fulness of the Gentiles had been brought in, and that then, and not till then, those prophecies should be fully accomplished which speak of the salvation of Israel." [3] Ibid., p. 584. Charles Hodge goes on to prove by eight formal arguments that his position is that of the historic church and that the Reformers are the exception rather than the rule in their interpretation.

Premillennialism holds that Israel as used in this passage refers to the nation Israel and that what is predicted here is their release from the blindness or obtuseness of spiritual discernment which fell on them as a judgment of unbelief. Robertson cites Hippocrates as using the term in a medical sense and concludes that it means "obtuseness of intellectual discernment, mental dullness." [4] A. T. Robertson, Word Pictures in the New Testament, IV, 398. This judgment had fallen upon Israel. While Israel in the Old Testament had been guilty of unbelief in the prophetic Word, in the New Testament they had been guilty of unbelief in the fulfillment in Christ. For this reason it is designated a "mystery" doctrine not revealed prior to the New Testament but now revealed. Robertson defines mystery, "the revealed will of God now made known to all." [5] Ibid., IV, 397. The mystery consisted in the special judicial blindness which had befallen Israel over and above any natural blindness common to Israel or Gentiles in the past.

The blindness which befell Israel is scheduled for removal when "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." This expression has been variously defined by commentators. According to the context the fall of Israel is a parallel to the fullness of the Gentiles, and the end of the fullness of the Gentiles would parallel the

restoration of Israel. The "until" marks, then, the terminus of Gentile blessing, and the beginning of Israel's restoration. This in turn can be identified as the time of the Lord's coming for the church and the end of the age of grace.

Subsequent to the lifting of Israel's blindness, it is predicted, "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom 11:26). Here is a specific declaration that Israel will be restored. This interpretation hangs upon the interpretation of the term "all Israel," upon the character of the salvation or deliverance of Israel, and upon the question of the time of the deliverance.

The term Israel as it is used here is defined by the context as a genuine reference to the Jewish people. It is used in contrast to Gentiles throughout the preceding context. Except for Origen, and Calvin and those who completely spiritualize the term, this is generally accepted. Previous discussion has shown that the word Israel is never used in reference to Gentiles in the Bible. Not only premillenarians but many postmillenarians and amillenarians also accept Israel as meaning the Jewish people, not the church as such.[6] Cf. A. T. Robertson, *op. cit.*, IV, 398; Charles Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 589; William Hendriksen, *And So All Israel Shall Be Saved*, p. 33. Charles Hodge states plainly, "Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and all Israel, the whole nation. The Jews, as a people, are now rejected; as a people, they are to be restored. As their rejection, although national, did not include the rejection of every individual; so their restoration, although in like manner national, need not be assumed to include the salvation of every individual Jew. $\pi\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma\ \ \text{I}\sigma\text{ρα}\eta\lambda$ is not therefore to be here understood to mean, all the true people of God, as Augustine, Calvin, and many others explain it; nor all the elect Jews, i.e., all that part of the nation which constitute 'the remnant according to the election of grace'; but the whole nation, as a nation." [7] Charles Hodge, *op. cit.*, p. 589. The term "all Israel" may be taken, then, as a reference to the people as a whole.

The nature of the salvation of Israel indicated here is described by a citation of Old Testament prophecy, "There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins" (Rom 11:26-27). The quotation is from Isaiah 59:20-21 and a comparison will show at once the identity of the two passages and at the same time show the quotation is only in part and with variations. Three things are singled out in the Romans quotation: (1) the Redeemer or Deliverer shall come out of Zion. (2) He shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob. (3) The deliverance shall be a fulfillment of the covenant with Israel including taking away their sins.

The phrase "out of Zion" in Romans 11:26 has been seized upon because the Isaiah passage reads, "to Zion." The LXX has it "for Zion." Paul uses neither the Hebrew nor the LXX. Where did Paul get this phrase? The answer is that Paul is not attempting direct quotation. The reference to turning away ungodliness is not in the Isaiah passage either. Paul is appealing rather to the general doctrine. The Scriptures speak of Christ as both coming to Zion and coming from Zion (cf. Ps 14:7; 20:2; 53:6; 110:2; 128:5; 134:3; 135:21; Isa 2:3; Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2). Certainly Paul is justified in his declaration that what he quoted "was written." Further, the change in wording gives no comfort to the amillenarian though Allis tries to make it imply that only a heavenly Zion is in view.[8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 305. Even if Allis were right, the action is subsequent to the second advent and deals with Israel on earth, not in heaven. It should be obvious, however, that Christ in His second advent comes both to Zion and from Zion. He comes to Zion in His second advent, and goes forth from Zion to bring deliverance to Israel.

Zion, as it is used in the Scripture, has reference to Jerusalem and is often used in this sense as synonymous. Its use in the Old Testament as in the New is literal in every instance. Amillenarians find it necessary to spiritualize the term in Hebrews 12:22 and Revelation 14:1 in order to avoid premillennial ideas, but if the doctrine of premillennialism be established on other grounds, these passages like all others yield to an ordinary literal usage.

The Deliverer "shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob" and "take away their sins." Here again is an event not a process, specified as subsequent to the second advent. According to the Scripture, Israel will also be delivered in that day from her persecutors, regathered from all over the earth and brought back to her ancient land, and there blessed spiritually and materially. All these events are not mentioned here. To conclude as Allis does that items not mentioned are therefore not included is a precarious argument from silence.[9] Loc. cit. The purpose of Romans 11 is not to summarize all the future of Israel but to speak to the point of whether Israel is "cast away." The evidence is complete and decisive: Israel has a future, a glorious one, which will be fulfilled subsequent to the return of her Deliverer.

The restoration of Israel is the capstone of the grand structure of doctrine relating to the Abrahamic Covenant. In bringing to a close consideration of this covenant as it pertains to premillennialism, attention should be directed again to the strategic importance of this revelation to Scriptural truth. It has been seen that the covenant included provisions not only to Abraham but to Abraham's physical seed, Israel, and to Abraham's spiritual seed, i.e., all who follow the faith of Abraham whether Jew or Gentile in this age. It has been shown that Abraham interpreted the covenant literally as pertaining primarily to his physical seed. The unconditional character of the covenant has been demonstrated--a covenant resting upon God's promise and faithfulness alone. The partial fulfillment recorded to the present has confirmed the intent of God to give literal fulfillment to the promises. It has been shown that Israel's promise of perpetual possession of the land is an inevitable part and conclusion of the general promises given Abraham and confirmed to his seed. Israel's continuance as a nation, implied in these promises, has been sustained by the continued confirmation of both Testaments. It was shown that the New Testament church in no wise fulfills these promises given to Israel. Finally, Israel's restoration as the natural outcome of these promises has been presented as the express teaching of the entire Bible. If these conclusions reached after careful examination of the Scriptural revelation are sound and reasonable, it follows that premillennialism is the only satisfactory system of doctrine that harmonizes with the Abrahamic Covenant.

These conclusions are further strengthened and supported by the other Biblical covenants given to David and the New Covenant given to Israel. Next in order of consideration will be the promises given to David concerning his seed, throne, and kingdom.

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