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## Gospel Prosperity and the Future of Israel

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen in

*Calvinism Today*: 4, Vol. III, No. 2 (April 1993)

Talk of eschatology in evangelical circles today will inevitably come around to the issue of God's plans for ethnic Israel (the Jews). Special reference is often made to the nation of Israel in prophecy.

One of the most popular preachers in southern California proclaimed in 1980 that anybody who was not aware that Jesus must – given the recent history of the nation of Israel – be returning soon very likely did not truly know Him in a saving fashion. For this preacher, the Jews had such an obvious place in the Bible's end-time plans that only those with sin-blinded eyes could fail to see the signs of the times. He was a Christian Zionist who had made a sizable financial contribution to the nation of Israel and predicted that Jesus would return prior to the end of 1982. His millennial position was conspicuously dispensational premillennial.

People of Reformed convictions in theology have often reacted to such extreme displays and declarations about Israel's future by utterly repudiating any place in God's revealed plans for the Jews. One well known and prolific writer in the Reformed world has addressed the subject of Israel in prophecy, only to conclude that (in effect) Israel is no longer in prophecy at all. There is no distinctive future for ethnic Israel (the Jews) according to him. And he cannot resist reminding his readers that the Jews were the ones who killed Jesus. All prophecies, he contends, which once pertained to Israel now apply exclusively to the church. His millennial position is outspokenly amillennial.

Where would a postmillennialist stand on the question of Israel's future? Well, in a sense, there is no "official" (or standard) postmillennial answer to that question because one's response will be determined by his interpretation of various Biblical passages (notably, Romans 9-11) – and not all postmillennialists understand those particular passages in exactly the same way.

Nevertheless, a large number of people who believe that the Bible teaches the prosperity of the gospel and visible success of Christ's advancing kingdom on earth – that is, a large number of Biblical postmillennialists – have found Scriptural support for their eschatological hopes in what God has said about the future of Israel. They have not understood that

future, however, to be anything like the Zionist or nationalistic prospects favored by dispensationalism.

Attempting to adhere strictly to the full teaching of God's word, then, what precisely should we think about Israel's future? Do we owe loyalty and support to national Israel as a political force in the Middle East? Do we repudiate any special place in God's designs for those who are ethnic Jews? Are there alternatives to these polar antitheses?

God called the Jews through their father, Abraham. God promised Abraham to make him a great nation and through him to bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:2-3). Abraham's seed would become too great to number, and forever they would possess the land of promise (Gen. 13:15-16). Thus God established a covenant with Abraham and with his seed after him, a covenant which included these provisions and – above all – to be a God to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:1-8). Thus began the long history of God's covenantal dealings with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their people after them (called "Israel," following the new name given to converted Jacob).

This history leads to Egypt and the exodus under Moses, to the conquering of the promised land under Joshua, to the political ups and downs of the judges and kings (notably the division of the kingdom into north and south), to the exile out of the land and subsequent restoration. Throughout this time God spoke many promises to His chosen people, especially about the coming Messiah and the wondrous age of salvation He would inaugurate and the dreadful day of judgment He would impose. Israel enjoyed God's special attention during this time – so much so that He could declare to Israel, "You alone of all the families of the earth have I known [= loved]" (Amos 3:2). This special privilege brought greater, not lesser, responsibility and accountability to Israel – as the word of Amos continues: "*therefore* I will visit upon you all of your iniquities."

Of all the iniquities of Israel which could be mentioned, though, the most obvious of all was the rejection of the promised Messiah. As John puts it, "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not" (John 1:11). The Jews in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry were, like their fathers before them, unwilling to hear the prophets sent to them from God. Thus Jesus declared that the blood of all the righteous "shall be required of this generation" (Luke 11:51). The capital city and God's own house would be left desolated (Luke 13:35) as Jerusalem is trodden down by the Gentiles (Luke 21:24).

At the beginning of the week in which He would be crucified at the instigation of the Jewish Sanhedrin, Jesus taught a parable in Jerusalem about husbandmen, who had been left in charge of a master's vineyard. Whenever the master sent servants to collect his portion from the vineyard, the husbandmen beat them, and so he decided to send his son. Thinking to seize the inheritance, the husbandmen killed the master's son. At this point in the story Jesus stopped and asked the crowd what the lord of the vineyard would do to those who killed his

son. Without waiting for an answer Jesus declared: “He will come and destroy these husbandmen and will give the vineyard unto others” (Luke 20:9-16). Luke adds that the chief priests (the Jewish leaders) “perceived that He spoke this parable against them” (v. 19).

In the Matthew parallel to this parable Jesus leaves nothing to one’s imagination. He draws the dire conclusion out explicitly: “Therefore I say unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you (Israel) and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matthew 21:43). Ethnic Israel was rejected by God as a culpable covenant violator. “By their unbelief they were broken off,” says Paul in Romans 11:20. They may claim to be Jews (people of God), but they are not such at all, but rather a synagogue of Satan (Rev. 2:9).

Clearly then, national and ethnic Israel no longer stands in a special position of privilege. It is no longer the kingdom of God, and Jews are no longer God’s special people. He has visited their iniquities, desolated their nation, wrenched away from them the kingdom, and found them to be Satanic.

What, then, has become of God’s promises to the people of Abraham? Has the Abrahamic covenant been invalidated? Not by any means. God’s promise was to bless all families of the earth through Abraham, as we have seen. Thus the spreading of His kingdom and mercy over the Gentiles was intended all along from the very beginning of His relationship with the Jews. Now in Christ the uncircumcised, ethnic Gentiles have been “brought near,” into “the commonwealth of Israel,” by the blood of Christ, so that they are now “fellow citizens” of God’s kingdom (Eph. 2:11-19).

Abraham was promised a seed which would inherit the promises. All those who follow in the steps of Abraham’s faith – whether Jews or Gentiles – are reckoned as his seed: “They that are of faith, the same are the sons of Abraham... If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:7, 29).

But how can the promises be inherited now? The New Testament emphatically teaches that the Abrahamic promises are inherited *in Christ*. Jesus taught that “Abraham rejoiced to see my day” (John 8:56). The father of the faithful knew that the divine promises made to him anticipated the work and blessing of the Messiah. Paul tells us that “how many soever be the promises of God, they are in Him yes and amen” (2 Cor. 1:2). Christ is the object of all of God’s promises in the Old Testament; it is only through Him that their provisions are granted.

Accordingly, Paul explains that God’s promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed (Gal. 3:16a), but we must notice that they were intended not for many seeds but only for one seed (v. 16b) – the seed “which is Christ”! Those who have been made sons of God by adoption are the *joint-heirs* with Christ (Rom. 8:15-17).

This privilege extends even to the promise of the land which God spoke to Abraham. Abraham knew that the promised land was but a token, a type, a foreshadow and pledge of the far greater inheritance of the kingdom of God. “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance... (and) became a sojourner in the land of promise as in a land not his own... for he looked for the city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:8-10).

The Christian inheritance now is immeasurably greater than the land of Palestine, says Peter in his first epistle (1:4-5). This inheritance is the living hope of salvation and resurrection from the dead, an inheritance which has a down-payment given to us now in the gift of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14).

Therefore, we can see from the Bible that the nation of Israel was but a step in God’s overall plan to create an international body as His chosen people. The true seed of Abraham, which receives the ultimate inheritance of God’s kingdom of salvation, are those who are in Christ by faith. Indeed, then, all families of the earth are blessed in Abraham!

Ethnic Jews have no special distinction: “He is not a Jew who is one outwardly” (Rom. 2:28-29). “There can be neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Jews can be saved and enjoy the blessings of God’s kingdom, but only on the same basis and footing as with the Gentiles. “In every nation he that hears Him and works righteousness is acceptable to Him,” and “He made no distinction between them (the Gentiles) and us (the Jews)” we learn from Peter in Acts (10:35, 15:9).

The church of Christ now stands in the position of gracious privilege which once belonged to ethnic, national Israel. The church is now “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16) – whether conceived as in the commonwealth of Israel (Eph. 2:12, 19) or as the twelve tribes in dispersion (James 1:1, I Peter 1:1). Even as God described Israel in Exodus 19 and Hosea 1-2, the church is described by Peter as “an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (I Peter 2:9). In God’s sight and dealings, the church is now Israel, His chosen people.

This fact has tremendous theological implications. In the first place, the dispensational hopes for the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine are all quite mistaken in their reading of the full scope of God’s inspired revelation.

In the second place, the promise to Abraham of a seed which cannot be numbered, a seed which inherit a land of promise and provide blessing to all families of the earth, is now to be fulfilled in the church. A solid confidence in the prosperity of the gospel is thus afforded us. Christ’s dominion “from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8) will not be the extension of Israel’s boundaries by military might, but the success of the Great Commission to make all nations His disciples (Matt. 28:18-20).

It should be noted, in this regard, that although the Old Testament promises to Abraham speak of the promised land as Palestine, in the New Testament Paul sees the full scope of those promises (where the land of Palestine is merely a token of the final reward) as applying to all of creation. He says in Romans 4:13 that the promise was to Abraham and his seed “that we would be heir of the world”!

When we follow through the teaching of Scripture about Israel, then, we see that God has promised His people – the church – that “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15). The true seed of Abraham, believers in Jesus Christ, will be more numerous than the sands of the sea or the stars of the sky.

Will this great prosperity for the gospel exclude those who are ethnic Jews? Will the world dominion of Jesus Christ and the international spread of His saving message ignore those who have been rejected as the national people of God? Paul wondered about these very matters in Romans 9-11, and we need to hear his answer.

Paul was greatly disturbed over the rejection of Christ by Paul’s brothers according to the flesh, the Israelites (9:1-5). Had God’s word come to nothing? (v. 6). Paul answers this question through the words of Romans 9. Not everyone in the nation of Israel was truly God’s people. This differentiation was according to God’s sovereign purpose in election. God’s covenant promise never guaranteed salvation for all of ethnic Israel, says Paul, but it did provide for the inclusion of the Gentiles in salvation.

In Romans 10 Paul explains the grave theological error of the Jews, being ignorant of God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own (v. 3). While a gracious gospel was published to the Jews throughout the Old Testament, and while Israel was stubborn against it, the good news was found out by the Gentiles instead (vv. 16-21). Paul saw that the nation of Israel had rejected Christ, and that the church was now growing through the conversion of Gentiles.

Thus in Romans 11:1 Paul asks the pained question whether God has cast off His people. Have the ethnic Jews been utterly rejected from God’s kingdom? Do they have any future whatsoever? Paul insists that God has not totally rejected the Jews (vv. 2-4). His love and election necessitates a remnant among Israel (vv. 5-6), even though many were hardened by their self-righteousness (vv. 7-10). We could say, then that Israel has stumbled.

Was it God’s purpose to have Israel stumble so that she might utterly fall? Paul denies it (v. 11). Rather, Israel has rejected the Messiah as her savior, with the result that salvation would come to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:46, 18:6, 28:28). The saving of the Gentiles, moreover, is intended by God “to provoke them (Israel) to jealousy. Paradoxically, the present unbelief of Israel (which sends the gospel to the Gentiles) will serve the purpose of restoring Israel to

belief! Thus the more that Paul's ministry to the Gentiles meets success, the more the cause of Israel's salvation is furthered (vv. 13-14) by this provoking to jealousy.

In Romans 11:16-24 Paul appeals to the Old Testament imagery of Israel as an olive tree (cf. Jer. 11, Hos. 14) in an attempt to warn the new Gentile possessors of God's kingdom not to become arrogant and not to expect that God would spare apostasy on their parts. If even the natural branches (Israel) are broken off, the ingrafted branches (Gentiles) will not be spared if they refuse to continue in the goodness of God. Remember! "God is able to graft them in again (v. 23). That very ability will eventually be displayed to all the world. In explanation of this confidence, Paul serves an important notice to the Gentiles in Romans 11:25, warning them against conceit.

Something has been hidden in the mind and counsel of God, but no longer is it a "mystery" (Rom. 11:25). The *partial* hardening of Israel has taken place *until* "the fullness of the Gentiles comes in." Here Paul is not referring to a remnant of believers among the Gentiles, for the word "fullness" stands over against the concept of a remnant (cf. v. 12). Besides, a remnant elect among the Gentiles was at that very time (in Paul's day) coming into the kingdom, and thus Paul's statement that Israel is partially hardened "until" such a remnant (= "fullness") comes would be senseless. He must mean by "fullness" the mass of the Gentiles.

Until this large portion of the Gentiles comes into the kingdom of God, a part of Israel will remain hardened against the gospel. With the mass conversion of the Gentile populace, Israel's hardening will cease then. Provoked to jealousy (cf. vv. 11, 14). Israel will turn to the Messiah for salvation. And "thus" – in this manner – "all Israel shall be saved" (v. 26). By this declaration Paul must have meant by "Israel" what he has meant by the term throughout the chapter: namely, ethnic Jews (his brothers "according to the flesh").

To maintain, as some do, that Paul was simply stating that "all the elect among the Jews and Gentiles" (that is, "all true Israel") will be saved is to overlook how irrelevant, obvious, un-mysterious and anti-climatic Paul's declaration would be made. Paul is showing the mysterious wisdom of God, how He marvelously uses the hardening of the Jews to save the mass of the Gentiles, which in turn provokes the Jews to save the mass of the Gentiles, which in turn provokes the Jews to seek in mass the salvation enjoyed by the Gentiles. This mutual interaction cannot be suppressed in interpreting Paul here. John Murray wrote about this passage:

...the salvation of Israel must be conceived of on a scale that is commensurate with their trespass, their loss, their casting away, their breaking off, and their hardening,

commensurate, of course, in the opposite direction... In a word, it is the salvation of the mass of Israel that the apostle affirms.<sup>1</sup>

Paul has taught, therefore, that at some time in the future the large portion of ethnic Jews will be saved in response to the mass of Gentiles who have already enjoyed that benefit. In Romans 11:12, 15 he indicates that the mass conversion of the Jews will signal even further blessings on the Gentile world: “for if the casting away of them be the reconciliation of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?”

The rejection of the Jews has brought a wonderful blessing to the Gentiles! Iain Murray summarizes the sense of these verses as pointing “to a vast addition to the Church by Israel’s conversion with resulting wider blessing for the world. There is a great revival predicted here!”<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

As we survey the Biblical material which we have covered in this discussion, what summary concerning the place of Israel in Biblical prophecy would be appropriate? The following truths stand out:

1. The promises to Abraham and to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament were all pledged in and through Christ for God’s true people.
2. The greater attention and care which God gave to the nation of Israel throughout the Old Testament increased Israel’s culpability for breaking the covenant and rejecting the Messiah.
3. Israel as a nation and the ethnic Jews as a race have been rejected by God, so that they no longer constitute His kingdom or chosen people.
4. The church of Jesus Christ (Gentile and Jew) is now the kingdom of God, the people of God’s own possession, and as such inherits the promised blessings to Abraham and to Israel.
5. This fact indicates glorious days for the gospel throughout future history, for the seed of Abraham (true believers) must grow to an overwhelming numerical size and bless all nations.
6. The mass conversion of Gentiles in the world will provoke the Jews to jealousy and bring them to a mass conversion of their own to Jesus Christ. This has

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), vol. II, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (London: Banner of Truth, 1971), pp. 66.

nothing *per se* to do with Palestine or a national body, and it does not indicate that the Jews will have any blessing from God apart from the church of Jesus Christ and submission to the gospel (in the same way as the Gentiles).

7. When the world sees “all Israel” become saved in this way, there will be further and greater blessings from God upon the whole Gentile population since Christ will be internationally exalted among men.

What response should we give these truths? Not only should we correct our thinking theologically, avoiding the excesses of dispensationalism and amillennialism, but we should be moved to at least three practical reactions.

First, we should be greatly encouraged and motivated to pursue Christian missions. This was the effect of these truths upon the Puritans (cf. Iain Murray’s *The Puritan Hope*).

Second, we should be confident of the cultural benefits which the kingdom of God will bring to the world through the work of Christ’s people. This will call for the consecration of all our efforts in the world as work for the Lord’s kingdom (cf. Gary North’s *Unconditional Surrender*).<sup>3</sup>

Third and above all, we should be moved, as was Paul when he looked at the glorious plan of God for the prosperity of the gracious gospel of Jesus Christ, to exclaim: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past tracing out! . . . For of Him, and through Him, and unto Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:11, 36).

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<sup>3</sup> Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983).

