

GOD'S COVENANT PROMISES TO ISRAEL

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“But as regards election, [the Jewish people] are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”

- Romans 11:28-29²

“We believe that God will fulfil his promises to the ethnic nation of Israel as per the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic and New Covenants of the Old Testament.”

- Winter Bible School, “What We Believe”³

The Winter Bible School team has a theological agenda, an agenda that it wears proudly on its sleeve, without shame. Admittedly, some of its theological beliefs are minority views in the contemporary church. However, there is nothing wrong with being in the minority. Sometimes the minority is right. But when a group holds a minority opinion, it must be certain it is correct. It must analyse, reword, and be able to defend its view and explain why that view matters. This is certainly the case with the theological topic at issue in this paper: God's covenant promises to Israel.

Supersessionism, or replacement theology, has become the default position on the relation of Israel and the church⁴ in the majority of evangelical churches in the West, including New Zealand. Supersessionism asserts: (1) the Jewish people no longer have a role in God's plan, due to their disobedience and rejection of Jesus at his first coming; (2) Israel has completed or forfeited its status as the people of God and will never again possess a

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² All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) sometimes slightly modified based on the author's training in biblical Hebrew and Greek.

³ <https://www.winterbibleschool.co.nz/page/what-we-believe/>.

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, Israel means ethnic, national, territorial (ENT) Israel. The church, by contrast, is one body that consists of all believers, both Jew and Gentile, who live during the church age, the period of time between Acts 2 and the premillennial rapture of the church.

unique function or role apart from the church; (3) the church is now the true Israel that has permanently replaced or superseded ethnic/national Israel as the people of God; (4) Israel's covenants have been taken over or inherited by the church, the new, spiritual Israel; and (5) Israel and Israel's land are no longer significant in God's plan. Historically, proponents of supersessionism have been Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, among many others. Chief proponents today are Colin Chapman, Stephen Sizer, Gary Burge, and N. T. Wright. Supersessionists usually portray those with whom they disagree (restorationists and dispensationalists) as extreme or irrelevant. Often, supersessionists are highly critical of the State of Israel. Supersessionism seems to be on the rise in the evangelical church, especially among the next generation.

The questions here are: Why should we hold a different view? Why make this particular view one of our distinctives? Does it matter? If it does matter, how do we preach and teach believers in our local churches on this issue in a way that is persuasive and that impacts their Christian faith and practice?

The Importance of Hermeneutics

The disagreement between supersessionists and restorationists is at heart a hermeneutical one. This must always be kept in mind. As far as the Winter Bible School team is concerned, the starting point of theology is interpreting the biblical text using a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic applied consistently through all the Scriptures, including prophecy. Following the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the New Testament apostles, we choose to interpret the Bible literally, not allegorically. This does not mean we ignore figures of speech, nor does it mean we take things over-literally. But it does mean we follow the golden rule of interpretation:

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”⁵

The reason the Bible is to be understood literally is because God intends to communicate clearly to every human being in an everyday, normal, ordinary way. We are not at liberty to reinterpret the plain meaning of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament without clear warrant, which we do not have. Instead, we are to interpret both the Old and New Testaments in light of both the Old and New Testaments. Using a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic fosters trust in God’s ability to communicate and in the layperson’s ability to read and understand the Bible for him or herself.

With a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic as our starting place, the restorationist position held by the Winter Bible School team just about speaks for itself. The biblical support for it is incredibly strong. We note here the restorationist position is held most strongly by dispensationalists like ourselves, but we are not the only ones. The view is also held by charismatic Christian Zionists (see Gerald R. McDermott, *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land* (2016)), and some historic premillennialists (see Barry Horner, *Future Israel* (2007)). The restorationist position holds: (1) Israel remains theologically significant in God’s plan for history; (2) the land of Israel ultimately belongs to the Jewish people; and (3) in the future messianic kingdom, God will fulfil his promises to the the Jewish people under the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants. Let’s go over some of the biblical reasons why the restorationist position makes sense.

⁵ David L. Cooper.

Israel's Identity

As modern man has learned, identity is everything. This is no less true for the Jewish people. In God's plan for history, in his economy, he has clearly identified Israel as a nation having a special identity. God calls Israel his "firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22; cf. Jer. 31:9), "my people" (Ex. 6:7), the nation he has set apart from the peoples to be especially his (Lev. 20:26). Israel is a "great nation" to whom God is near (Deut. 4:7). God chose Israel to be a people "for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth" (Deut. 7:6; cf. 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4). He has promised to set Israel "in praise, in fame, and in honour high above all nations that he has made" (Deut. 26:19). Israel is God's "portion," "his allotted inheritance," "the apple of his eye" (Deut. 32:9-10; cf. 1 Ki. 8:53; Zec. 2:8). He established Israel for himself to be his people "forever" (2 Sam. 7:24; 1 Chr. 17:22). The Jewish people are his "treasured ones" (Ps. 83:3). They are "precious in his eyes," "honoured," and "loved" (Isa. 43:4). God has "engraved [Israel] on the palms of his hands" (Is. 49:16) and made "the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah" cling to him "[a]s the loincloth clings to the waist of a man" (Jer. 13:11). Israel's identity is an identity based on God's grace. No matter what the Jewish people do, they cannot ultimately change who they are. This is where our analysis must start: Israel is God's firstborn son.

Israel's Origin

Why has God made Israel his firstborn son and given it this amazing identity? One big reason has to do with Israel's origin. God created Israel from scratch after humanity's three great failures in Genesis 1-11: the fall (Gen. 3), the flood (Gen. 7), and the tower of Babel (Gen. 10). Genesis 10 lists about seventy nations, but Israel is not among them. In fact, Genesis 12-50, which covers the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, is

God's answer to Genesis 1-11. Genesis 1-11 presents the problem; Genesis 12-50 provides the solution: one nation that God creates from scratch (Isa. 43:1, 6-7; 44:1-2, 21) will be the instrument through which God will re-bless the nations and restore garden-of-Eden-like conditions on earth. The solution to humanity's sin problem, the Seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15-16), will come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God chose Abram because he was from the line of Shem (Gen. 9:26-27; 11:10-26), in the eleventh generation from Noah (Lk. 3:34-36),⁶ just as Noah was in the tenth generation from Adam (Lk. 3:36-38). Abram and his wife Sarai were childless, giving God the grace opportunity he wanted to miraculously create the seventy-first nation that would save the other seventy. The story of Genesis 12-50 is the story of why God chose Abram and not Terah or Lot, Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob, not Esau, and Judah, not Reuben, Simeon, or Levi. God's choice of Israel to be the nation through whom he would bless the world is certainly not arbitrary (see Deut. 7:6-8; 10:14-15).

Israel's Purpose

To what has God called Israel? What is the nation's special calling, purpose, or raison d'être? In essence, God formed Israel to be his servant (Isa. 44:21). As God's servant, Israel's job is threefold: to *birth* the Messiah, to *teach* the nations, and to *reach* the nations.

First and foremost, it is through a specific Jewish family line that the Seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15-16), the Messiah, the hero of the biblical story, is to be born (Matt. 1:1-17; Lk. 3:23-28). Genealogies are important in the Old Testament because the family line of Messiah is important. Every generation from Abraham to Jesus is represented by at least one Jew and usually two. Jesus is not just God and a generic man; he is God and a Jewish man. In

⁶ It is possible Abram completed the task his own father, Terah, the tenth from Noah, did not (Gen. 11:31-32; Lk. 3:34).

fact, he will never lose his Jewishness. In God's economy, the Messiah had to be, and is, Jewish (Rom. 9:4-5; cf. 1:1-4)

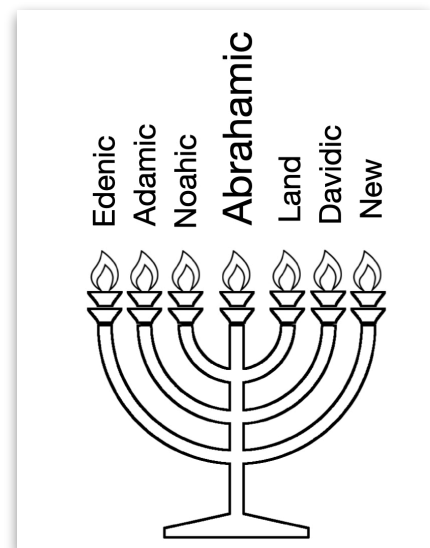
Second, Israel is to *teach* the nations about God and his plan. God teaches Israel (Deut. 4:33-39) so that they may teach the nations (Exod. 19:5-6; 33:16; Acts 15:21). God has displayed his attributes and communicated his plan for humanity through the various genres of the Old Testament, of which the Jewish people have been authors and custodians (Rom. 3:1-2). God has also taught the nations through his historical dealings with Israel as a nation, in events such as the exodus, the establishment of the Davidic monarchy, the exile, and the return from exile. The story of reality communicated in Scripture, what is often called the biblical worldview, is thoroughly Jewish. The grand story that lies at the core of the biblical worldview cannot be presented apart from its Jewish context.

Third, Israel's responsibility is to *reach* the nations by blessing them with the gospel. Reaching the nations is usually associated with the church, and rightly so, for the great commission currently in force applies to the church. However, in the Old Testament it was, and in the future messianic kingdom it will be, Israel's job to draw the nations to God. Israel's drawing people to God is primarily centripetal, whereas the church's drawing people is primarily centrifugal. It should not be forgotten that the land of Israel lies at the crossroads of three great continents (Africa, Asia, and Europe), and that the New Testament apostles were all Jewish. In the messianic kingdom, the nations will flow like a river to Jerusalem to be instructed by Israel's King, Jesus himself (Isa. 2:1-4). In this way the nations will be blessed through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their seed (Ge 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Isa. 49:6; Jn. 4:22; Acts 3:25; 15:16-18). In sum, God chose Israel because she is particularly suited to do the job God needed done: to bring forth the Messiah and to teach and reach the nations. No other nation would do.

Israel's Covenant Promises

Theologians dispute exactly how many covenants are in the Bible. But what is clear is that the Noahic covenant applies to all flesh, including people and animals. Arguably, what are known as the Edenic and Adamic covenants do as well. By contrast, the five other covenants—the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants—apply by their very terms particularly to Israel. All but one of these covenants, the Mosaic covenant, are unconditional covenants in the sense that their promises ultimately will be fulfilled by God no matter how badly Israel fails.

The **Abrahamic covenant** (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21) enjoys a position of prominence among the other covenants. In a chiastic structure, it is the fourth, central covenant that joins the other covenants together, like the middle candle in a traditional seven-candled Jewish menorah. The Edenic, Adamic, and Noahic covenants set up the Abrahamic covenant, and the Land, Davidic, and New covenants elaborate on the three central promises of the Abrahamic



covenant: land (Gen. 12:1), seed (Gen. 12:2), and blessing (Gen. 12:3). Important to note is that the blessing promise involves not only the blessing of Abraham and his seed, but also of “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Jer. 4:2; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8, 16). The nations are not directly party to the Abrahamic covenant, but they are promised blessing under the covenant nonetheless as third party beneficiaries. The three core promises of the Abrahamic covenant—land, seed, and blessing—are confirmed twenty times in Genesis to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Deut. 4:31; 23:5). The promises are literal, that

is, God promises a literal land to a literal people for a literal time period... forever (Gen. 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:18-19). The repetition of the promises strongly suggests God means what he says. The promises are unconditional, eternal, and reinforced throughout the entire Bible.

God's **Land covenant**⁷ with Israel amplifies the land promise he made to Israel under the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1, 7; 13:7; 15:7-21; 17:8; 26:3; 35:12). The Land covenant is the focus of Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 29-30; Ezekiel 16; and Ezekiel 36-37. Under the Land covenant, after a period of disobedience (Deut. 29:2-30:1), Israel will repent (Deut. 30:2), be regathered (Deut. 30:3-4), reoccupy the land of Israel (Deut. 30:5), be renewed spiritually (Deut. 30:6, 8), experience rest from her enemies (Deut. 30:7), and enjoy abundant prosperity (Deut. 30:5, 9). The Land covenant reasserts Israel's unconditional, eternal (Gen. 17:8; Isa. 60:21) ownership/title of a specific geographical area: from the Euphrates river to the Wadi El-Arish (Gen. 13:14-15; 15:18-21; Num. 34:4). However, while Israel's ownership/title of the land is permanent and unconditional, its occupation and enjoyment of the land is conditioned upon its faith and obedience (Lev. 26:27-35, 43; Deut. 4:40). The first and second exodus generations illustrate this principle. The first exodus generation failed to enter and enjoy the land of Israel because of its unbelief and disobedience. The second exodus generation, by contrast, entered and enjoyed the land because of its faith acted out in obedience.

Supersessionists teach that the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant has already been fulfilled, either literally in the days of Joshua (Jos. 21:43-45), David (2 Sam. 8:3), or Solomon (1 Kgs. 4:21-24; 8:65); or allegorically through the church. However, Israel has never in history occupied and enjoyed the entire land. At the end of Joshua's life, much of the

⁷ In the past, this covenant has been called the "Palestinian covenant." However, this is a very poor name for the covenant, as the label Palestine is at heart antisemitic, given to the land by the Roman emperor Hadrian in his attempt to "de-judaize" the land after the Bar Kokhba revolt (ad 132-36).

land had not been conquered (Jos. 13:2-7; Judg. 1:1-36). Jerusalem and many other areas were not conquered until David's reign (2 Sam. 5:6-10, 17-25; 8:1-14; 10:1-19). Even then, however, the land was not fully occupied. When the Jewish remnant returned from Babylonian exile, the nation never enjoyed independent control of the land, living under Persian, Greek, and Roman domination until Jerusalem was destroyed in ad 70 and renamed Aelia Capitolina in ad 130. Today, the State of Israel, founded in 1948, does not possess the entire land. The Euphrates river has never been Israel's eastern border (Gen. 15:18-21). Further, even if Israel had at some point occupied and enjoyed the entire land, the Land covenant would still not be fulfilled because there is more than just a geographical aspect to it. The Land covenant also demands Israel's national repentance and spiritual renewal, which has not yet happened. In short, the Land covenant has not yet been fulfilled.

Just as the Land covenant amplifies the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant, the **Davidic covenant** (2 Sam. 7:11-17; 1 Chr. 17:10-15) amplifies the seed promise of the Abrahamic covenant. Under the Davidic covenant, God promises David four eternal things: (1) an eternal dynasty/house (2 Sam. 7:11, 16; 1 Chr. 17:10); (2) an eternal throne (2 Sam. 7:13, 16); (3) an eternal kingdom (1 Chr. 17:11, 14); and (4) an eternal descendant (1 Chr. 17:11-14). The Davidic covenant is confirmed in many passages, including 2 Sam. 23:1-5; Ps. 89; Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6; 30:8-9; 33:14-26; Ezek. 37:24-25; Hos. 3:4-5; Am. 9:11; Lk. 1:30-35, 68-70; and Acts 15:14-18. Applying a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic to these passages, the eternal house, throne, kingdom, and descendant promised to David are literal, earthly, and physical, not allegorical, heavenly, or spiritual. Like the Land covenant, the Davidic covenant is unconditional and unfulfilled, which means it must be fulfilled in the future.

Last of all, there is the **New covenant**, an amplification of the blessing promise of the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant is, to the author, the most exciting of the covenants.

Under the New covenant, God promises unconditionally to Israel and Judah (Jer. 31:31, 36) that he will: (1) forgive their sin (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:25, 29); (2) renew them spiritually (Jer. 31:33; 32:39-40; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26); (3) enable them through the indwelling Holy Spirit to live holy, righteous lives (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:27; Joel 2:28-29); (4) dwell among them (Jer. 31:34; 32:38; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:28; 37:26-27); and (5) bless them extraordinarily (Isa. 61:8; Jer 32:41; Ezek. 34:26). Given Israel's national repentance and renewal has not yet occurred, the New covenant has not yet been fulfilled.⁸

In sum, God has made four unconditional covenants specifically with the people of Israel (Rom. 9:4-5). The Abrahamic covenant is the primary covenant, and it is amplified by the Land, Davidic, and New covenants. God's covenantal promises to Israel are mentioned at least 350 times in the Old Testament. If words mean anything, these promises are to be taken literally, not allegorically. They are this-worldly promises, not other-worldly ones, and they have not yet been fulfilled. The promises under these covenants are "irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29). God has promised not abandon the Jewish people, destroy them, or forget the covenant he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut. 4:30-31; cf. Lev. 26:44-45; 1 Sam. 12:22; Isa. 41:8-14; 49:14-16), even if a majority of Jews are unbelieving (Rom. 3:3-4). God has spoken, and he will fulfil his promise to bless Israel (Num. 23:19-21). His loyal, faithful, covenant love (אָהַבָה, *chesed*) will not depart from Israel (Isa. 54:10; Jer. 31:2-3).

⁸ Church age believers have been grafted into and share in some of the New covenant blessings (Acts 2:16-18; Rom. 11:24-27; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; 2 Cor. 3:5-6, 18; Gal. 3:13-14; Heb. 8:6-13), such as the forgiveness of sins and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but this is nowhere close to being a fulfilment of all the New covenant promises to Israel that we find in the Old Testament. Gentile believers in the church age are third-party beneficiaries of New covenant blessings never addressed or promised to them, which Paul calls an astounding mystery (Eph 3:1-12).

Because of these unfulfilled covenants, Israel has and will continue to exist, no matter what (Isa. 45:17; Jer 30:11; 31:35-37; 46:28; Mal. 3:6). In fact, God has placed his own character and reputation for faithfulness and trustworthiness on the line in his relationship to Israel. He has chosen to bless Israel not because Israel is great but because he is great (Ezek. 36:22-32). He is jealous for his holy name (Ezek. 39:25-29). Through their disobedience, rebellion, and sin, the Jewish people have presented God numerous opportunities for him to revoke his promises to them, yet God has never done that. When the Jewish people fail, God disciplines them, but always with that discipline always comes the promise of a future, eternal, permanent forgiveness and restoration (Exod. 34:9; 2 Kgs. 13:22-23; Isa. 40:1-2; 31:37; 33:23-25; Jer 29:10-4; Lam. 4:22; Mic. 7:18-20).

If God ever were to decide to revoke his promises to Israel, he would need to do so clearly and unambiguously in the interest of fairness. But he hasn't done that at all. In fact, the most important book of the New Testament in terms of theological doctrine, *Romans*, is largely a defense of the proposition that God has not turned his back on the Jewish people, despite their habitual stubbornness and rejection of Jesus at his first coming (Rom. 9-11). Jesus himself indicated as such when he foretold a time when Israel would say together, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matt. 23:39). Israel, as its name suggests, is a nation that strives with God and with men, and yet prevails (Gen. 32:27-28). Because of God's unconditional covenant faithfulness to the Jewish people, their end will be glorious (Num. 23:8-10).

Israel's Advantages

Israel is a nation with specific privileges and responsibilities in God's plan. In God's economy, it is first in importance, order, preeminence, and rank. This theological fact may

grate on the sensibilities of most Westerners who have come to view absolute equality as essential to fairness, but this Western view has not been common in history. There is nothing intrinsically unfair or wrong with God selecting one nation as his “firstborn son,” with enhanced rights and privileges. In fact, with those rights and privileges comes enormous and humanly impossible responsibilities. There are advantages to being God’s firstborn son, but there are disadvantages as well.

As to the advantages, Israel is a people set apart to God, his treasured possession (Deut. 7:6), a nation that dwells alone (Num. 23:9). She is beloved for the sake of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Rom. 11:28). To Israel belongs “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” as well as “the patriarchs” and “the Messiah” (Rom. 9:4-5). “[S]alvation is from the Jews” (Jn. 4:22). It is because of Israel’s importance that, in God’s economy, history is Israel-centric (cf. Dan. 9:24-25). For Jesus and the apostles, the gospel message was always for the Jewish people first, and then for the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5-6; Mk. 7:24-30; Acts 3:26; 13:46; Rom. 1:16). Further, Israel’s special status didn’t just exist in the past. It exists in the present and will exist in the future as well. The eldest brother is always the eldest brother, even when he is estranged from the Father, as he is now. When the eldest brother is reconciled to the Father, all the children will be blessed (cf. Rom. 11:12).

Israel’s preeminence does not mean God holds individual Jews to a different standard than he does individual Gentiles. In Romans, Paul is very clear that Jews and Gentiles, as individuals, are all sinners, and all are justified in the same way—by grace alone through faith alone in Messiah Jesus alone (Rom. 1:16-17; 2:9-11; 3:9, 21-31; 4:9-12; 10:12; 11:30-32). A Jew isn’t saved by virtue of being Jewish or being circumcised, a view common among first-century Jews that was vigorously opposed by Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 3:9;

Rom. 3:28-29; Gal. 9:6-8). Nor should Israel's preeminence be viewed as threatening to other nations. Israel's destiny is not to conquer lands beyond its designated borders but to live happily within its own, in harmony and peace with neighbouring nations. Israel's special status is a blessing to the nations, not a threat (Isa. 2:3-4; 51:4; 60:3). The preeminence of Israel takes nothing away from Gentile nations, nor from the church, with its unique blessings. There is plenty of God's infinite blessing and grace to go around. Indeed, God cares about every nation, not just Israel (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 49:6; Rom. 3:29-30). That God has a special love for Israel does not mean he has no love for Gentile nations, each of which will be represented in the messianic kingdom and beyond (Rev. 5:9-10).

Israel's Disadvantages

Privilege has its downsides, and this has certainly been the case with Israel. One disadvantage Israel has experienced is the extreme pressure of the high expectations that come with being singled out as God's firstborn son (Jer. 13:11). The Mosaic covenant, under which Israel lived from the time of the exodus to the death of Jesus, was a high stakes covenant. To whom much is given, much is expected. Under the Mosaic covenant, if the Jewish people kept their end of the bargain, they would be extraordinarily blessed (Deut. 28:1-14), but if they failed, they would be extraordinarily, but not unredeemably, cursed (Deut. 28:15-68). The latter is what has tended to happen throughout Israel's long history. Israel has received sevenfold discipline in five cycles, as she was warned about in Leviticus 26:14-39 (cf. Deut 4:25-28; Isa. 1:9). The Jewish people have suffered severe divine discipline throughout their history, including the destruction of their capital city on numerous occasions and forced exile from their homeland for centuries at a time.

The Jewish people have also faced the intense hatred of Satan. Because of Israel's identity and unique purpose in God's plan, Satan has attempted to destroy, at various times and in various ways, the Jewish people. This was true in the past (1 Chr. 21:1; Rev. 12:4-5), and it will be true again in the future (Rev. 12:6, 15-17). Satan has been especially active in attempting to destroy the messianic seed line (Exod. 1:15-16, 22; 2 Ki. 11:1-3; Matt. 2:16-18). The relentless and highly irrational antisemitism the Jewish people have experienced throughout their history (Ps. 83:1-5; 124:1-5; 129:1-2), likely inspired by Satan, is a result of God's election of them as his chosen people. Given all that has taken place in Israel's history, it is highly questionable whether any nation would willingly choose to take Israel's place as God's firstborn son. In sum, Gentile nations are to give Israel its due. While Israel enjoys distinct advantages as God's chosen people, it has experienced distinct disadvantages as well.

Israel's Present

While some Jews of course believed in Jesus at his first coming (Rom. 11:1-5), the nation of Israel as a whole did not. What does this mean for Israel today, and what is the relationship today between Israel and the church? These questions have been hotly debated for centuries. Key texts for answering these questions are Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 21:20-24; Acts 1:6-8; Acts 3:17-26; and Romans 11:25-29.⁹ These passages, read in context using a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic, demonstrate that what we call the church, the *ecclesia*, is not equivalent to Israel, nor has it replaced Israel under the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants. There is an "untilness" involved in each of these passages (Matt. 23:38; Lk. 21:24; Acts 3:21). Until Israel as a nation believes in Jesus, Jesus will build

⁹ Other relevant texts are Matt. 24:14; and 2 Cor. 3:12-16.

his church, a distinct new entity (Matt. 16:18). This in-between time, the period between Jesus' first and second comings, is the church age. During this previously unforeseen, unprophesied "mystery" age (Jn. 10:16; Rom. 11:25; Eph. 3:1-13), the fulfilment of God's covenant promises to Israel is postponed, but the promises themselves are not revoked (Rom. 11:29).

Are individual Jewish believers part of Israel or part of the church? The answer is both! Just as a believing Gentile does not surrender his Gentileness as he is baptised by the Holy Spirit into Messiah, so a believing Jew does not surrender her Jewishness as he is baptised by the Spirit into Messiah (1 Cor. 12:13). In other words, our spiritual communion in Messiah transcends *but does not replace* ethnic and national differences. Jews are still Jews, and Gentiles are still Gentiles, with both Jewishness and Gentileness transformed in Messiah. There is a "Christian Jewishness" and a "Christian Gentileness." Jesus and Paul rejected the particular way Jewish identity was being promoted by the Jewish leaders of their day, but they did not reject Jewish ethnicity per se. Galatians 3:28, for example, does not teach the erasure of Jewish-Gentile distinctions just as it does not teach the erasure of male-female distinctions (androgyny). Today's remnant of Israel, whether called Jewish believers or Messianic Jews, are today's spiritual Israel (Rom. 3:28-29; 11:1-7), "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). For Jewish believers in the church age, to be included in the church does not mean exclusion from the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants to Israel.

Israel's Future

How will the transition occur from the current church age to the age in which God's promises to Israel under the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants will be literally

fulfilled? We don't have to guess, for the Bible provides a huge amount of information about this transition, which may be summed up in **“the twelve R's.”**

#1: Return in unbelief. The Jewish people's return to the land of Israel in unbelief is hinted at in Isaiah 66:7-9; Zechariah 13:8-9; Matthew 24:15-20; and Revelation 12:6, 14.

This return very much appears to be happening our our lifetime, and is a necessary prerequisite for the eleven “R's” that follow. At some point in the future, the Jewish majority living in the land of Israel will enter into a “strong covenant” with the antichrist for a period of seven years (Dan. 9:27), which is often called the tribulation.

#2: Refuge. At the midpoint of the seven-year tribulation (Matt. 24:21), Jews living in the land of Israel will be faced with a choice whether to remain in their homes or to flee quickly to the wilderness (Zech. 14:1-2; Matt 24:15-22; Lk. 21:34-36) to be protected by God for three and a half years (Rev. 11:1-2; 12:6, 13-17). Jews who hang back will not survive the reign of the antichrist (2 Thes. 2:1-5). Zech. 13:8-9 predicts that two-thirds of the Jews in the land of Israel will die and that only one-third will survive. The wilderness place of refuge will likely be Bozrah in what was formerly known as Edom (Isa. 34:6; 63:1).

#3: Repentance. Towards the end of the tribulation, the remnant of Israel who have been protected and nourished by God both at Bozrah and among the nations will experience deep regret over their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (Deut. 4:29-30; 30:1-2, 10; Hos. 3:4-5; Acts 3:19). They will weep and plead with God for mercy (Jer 31:9; 50:4-5; Eze. 20:43). When they see Jesus coming to rescue them, they will be overwhelmed with emotion (Zec. 12:10-14; Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7). They will finally call on Jesus' name saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matt. 23:39; Lk. 13:35).

#4: Rescue. In response to the Jewish people's repentance, Jesus will suddenly appear to save them (Jer 31:1-3; Heb. 9:28), dealing out justice and wrath upon the antichrist and

Israel's enemies. This event receives extensive attention in Scripture (Isa. 26:20-27:1; 29:5-8; 41:11-14; 63:1-6; Dan. 7:21-22; Joel 3:1-2; Obad. 15-17; Zec. 12:2-9; 14:3-4, 12-15; Matt. 24:27-28; 2 Thes. 2:8; Rev. 19:11-21).

#5: Redemption. Not only will Jesus rescue the Jewish people from physical danger and death, he will also ransom and redeem them from sin and spiritual death (Ps. 130:7-8; Isa. 43:1-4; 44:21-23; 62:12; Jer. 31:11; 50:20; Lk. 21:27-28). Jesus' substitutionary death and resurrection will be applied to all Jewish people then living on the earth, those who have survived the great tribulation (Isa. 45:25; Rom. 11:26-27). At that time there will no longer be two Israels—one saved and another unsaved. Every living Jew will become an inwardly circumcised Jew (Rom. 2:28-29). The Jewish people will be cleansed totally from their sin (Zec. 13:1; cf. Jer. 31:34).

#6: Resurrection. In conjunction with this rescue and redemption, Jewish believers from all generations in history who have previously died will be bodily resurrected. This event is famously predicted by Ezekiel in his vision of the dry bones coming to life (Ezek. 37:9-14). The graves will be opened, and individual Jewish believers will be raised (Ezek. 37:12-13). This “first resurrection” (Rev. 20:4-6) will precede the regathering of Israel (Ezek. 37:12, 14). In faith Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph all insisted on being buried in the land of Israel (Gen. 25:8-10; 49:29-33; 50:12-13, 25; Exod. 13:19; Jos. 24:32; Heb. 11:22; cf. Matt. 22:31-32) in anticipation of this great event.

#7: Regathering. Then a great regathering to the land of Israel will begin. This regathering will include all Jewish believers from every generation of history, including Jews rescued through the tribulation and Jews who have just been bodily resurrected. The fact of this future regathering has extensive support in Scripture, beginning with Deuteronomy 30:1-5 (cf. Ps. 50:4-5; 107:1-3; Isa. 11:11-12; 14:1-3; 27:12-13; 43:5-6; 51:11; Jer. 16:14-15;

31:8, 17; Ezek. 34:13; 36:24; 37:21; Mic. 4:6-7; Zec. 8:7-8; 10:6-10). Israel will finally and permanently occupy and enjoy the land of Israel as promised under the Land covenant (Ezek. 20:40-42). Isaiah 49:18-22 is a beautiful prophecy that God directs to the land of Israel itself, as if the land was a bereaved mother welcoming her estranged children from afar. It is Jesus himself who will organise this great regathering (Isa. 49:5-6). The nations will escort the Jewish people to their own land (Isa. 49:22) along with riches of all kinds (Isa. 60:4-9). Not a single Jew will be left dispersed among the nations (Ezek. 39:25-29).

#8: Reunification. With all Jewish believers from all time now regathered to the land of Israel, the next great event will be the official and permanent reunification of the twelve tribes of Israel (Jer. 3:18). The animosity between the tribes, especially between Judah and Joseph, will depart (Isa. 11:13). Ezekiel's two sticks shall become one stick (Ezek. 37:16-22). Israel shall be one nation of twelve tribes in the land of Israel, ruled by one king (Ezek. 37:22).

#9: Renewal. With Israel's regathering and reunification accomplished, the nation will then experience a complete spiritual renewal. God will circumcise the heart of all Jewish people so that they will love God and obey his voice (Deut. 30:6-8). God will pour out his Spirit on the Jewish people (Isa. 44:3-5), providing the enablement necessary for them to live holy, righteous lives (Isa. 60:21). In fulfillment of the New covenant, God will put his law within them and write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:17-20; 36:25-29). The Jewish people will then fear God forever (Jer. 32:38-39). No longer will they defile themselves or backslide (Ezek. 37:23-24; cf. Zeph. 3:11-13). Jewish society will be thoroughly holy (Zec. 14:20-21).

#10: Restoration. With the Jewish people spiritually renewed, the promised restoration of Israel as a nation will occur. This is the time the Jewish people have been

eagerly waiting for (Acts 1:6-7; 3:21)! Israel's fortunes will finally be restored (Deut. 30:3; Ps. 126:1-4; Jer. 30:3, 18; 33:26; Ezek. 39:25; Am. 9:14; Zeph. 2:7; 3:20). The city of Jerusalem, and other cities in the land of Israel, will be rebuilt (Jer. 31:38-40; Ezek. 36:33-36; Am. 9:14; Zec. 14:10), including Jerusalem's temple and palace (Jer. 30:18; Acts 15:16-18). The farmland of Israel will be like the garden of Eden (Ezek. 36:29-30, 34-35; cf. Am. 9:14).

#11: Rule. With Israel regathered, reunified, renewed, and restored, Jesus will begin his thousand-year rule (Rev. 19:15; 20:4-6) from Jerusalem (Mic. 4:7-8; Zec. 2:10-12; 8:3) in fulfilment of the Davidic covenant (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-5; Jer. 23:5). Jesus will finally sit on David's throne (Matt. 19:28; Lk. 1:32-33). The nations will flow to Jerusalem for teaching and instruction (Isa. 2:1-3; cf. Zec. 2:11) and to have their disputes settled (Isa. 2:4). They will be required to visit Jerusalem every year to worship King Jesus and to observe the Feast of Booths (Zec. 14:16-19). Peace will prevail on the earth (Isa. 2:4) under Jesus' faithful, righteous leadership (Isa. 11:5; Jer. 23:5-6). Jewish believers from all generations will assist him in his rule (Dan. 7:27; Rev. 20:4, 6). The twelve apostles, for example, will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:27-28). Jesus' Israel-centred kingdom will never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44; Lk. 1:33).

#12: Rest. The thousand-year rule of Messiah Jesus will result in an unprecedented time of rest for Israel and the nations. The Jewish people will be abundantly prosperous (Deut. 30:5-9), experiencing the full blessing God promised long ago under the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3). Israel will live in complete safety, without fear of its neighbours (Deut. 33:28-29; Jer. 23:6; 32:37; 46:27; Ezek. 28:26; 39:26; Joel 3:17; Am. 9:15; Zeph. 3:13-15; Zec. 14:11). There will be no hurt or destruction in Jerusalem or Israel, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God (Isa. 11:9). This is the period when the "wolf will dwell with the lamb" (Isa. 11:6-8). God will give the Jewish people rest from all the pain, turmoil,

and hard service they were made to experience through the centuries (Isa. 14:3). Israel's population will explode (Ezek. 36:37-38), and songs of thanksgiving and the laughter of children will fill the streets (Jer. 30:19-20; 31:12-14). The life of the Jewish people will be "like a watered garden" (Jer. 31:12). God will quiet Israel by his love (Zeph. 3:17).

Here we must again stress the importance of understanding the Bible in a literal way. When we respect God by reading his word with a literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic, we are left with no choice but to accept and agree that the Jewish people are hugely important to God and his plan. There is no way God's literal promises to Israel under the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants have yet been fulfilled. This means they must be fulfilled in the future. The twelve R's above, derived from Scripture, provide a roadmap of how God will transition from the church age, the one in which we live, to the Israel-centred messianic age.

Here's a homework assignment. Work your way through Jeremiah 30 and 31 and identify how many of the 12 R's you find. You will see that these 12 R's are biblical and very much part of God's plan for the future.

Reasons This Doctrine Is Important

Let's remind ourselves of the Winter Bible School statement of belief: "We believe that God will fulfil his promises to the ethnic nation of Israel as per the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic and New Covenants of the Old Testament." Does believing this really matter? Is this a hill worth dying on? Why do we insist on this? Three main reasons present themselves.

First, this belief fosters confidence in God's faithfulness and trustworthiness. God has made many unconditional promises to Israel that have not yet been fulfilled. If they won't be fulfilled, can't be fulfilled, or are fulfilled in some roundabout allegorical way, we simply

cannot come to the conclusion that God is faithful and trustworthy. If God doesn't keep his promises to Israel, on what basis do we believe he will keep his promises to us? Significantly, Romans 9-11 answers an obvious question raised by Romans 8. How can we trust God to be faithful to us (Rom. 8:31-39) if he wasn't faithful to Israel? The answer is: God was, is, and always will be faithful to Israel, despite its stubbornness (Rom. 9:6; 11:1-2, 25-32; cf. 2 Tim. 2:13).

The God of the Bible is unique in that he is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. He makes promises and then asks us to believe he will fulfil those promises (Gen. 15:6). If God cannot or will not keep his promises, it changes the whole nature of the God in whom we say we believe. God's character and reputation are on the line (Num. 23:23). By his own choice, God has staked his reputation on whether he fulfils his promises to Israel (Deut. 4:37-39).

Second, this belief honours the whole counsel of God and fosters trust in the entire Bible. Replacement theologians tend to ignore parts of the Bible that discuss God's promises to Israel, like *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Ezekiel*, and *Zechariah*. Even when these books are addressed, the plain meaning of the text is allegorised or personalised in a way that removes all reference to Israel. We cannot and must not do this. God's faithfulness to Israel is not our idea—it's God's! In fact most of the Bible is about God's faithfulness to Israel under the Abrahamic covenant despite Israel's failure under the Mosaic covenant. Interpreting the Bible consistently in a literal, grammatical, historical way, we are left with no option but to conclude that Israel was and is still very important to God's plan. When we allegorise away God's promises to Israel, we train ourselves (and the next generation) to question the natural, plain meaning of Scripture. In other words, we foster confusion about and even distrust of God's word. This we must not do, for the health of the church in the next generation.

Third, this belief was vitally important to Jesus and the apostles, so it must be to us.

Our thinking is to match the thinking of Jesus and the apostles. Their worldview is to be our worldview. Their worldview was Israel-centric, and so ours must be. For a period of forty days after his resurrection, Jesus taught the apostles about his coming messianic kingdom (Acts 1:3). That the coming kingdom is to be Israel-centric is clearly indicated by the apostles' question in v. 6: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" If Jesus' kingdom is merely allegorical or spiritual, one would expect Jesus at this point to correct the apostles' erroneous idea that the kingdom was to be Israel-centred. But Jesus doesn't do this at all. Instead, he tells them it is not for them to know when the Israel-centric kingdom will begin (Acts 1:7). The apostles' mission is to wait in Jerusalem, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and then to be Jesus' church age witnesses to the end of earth (Acts 1:8). Very much implied is that a time will come when the kingdom *will be* restored to Israel. This is exactly what Peter argues two chapters later in Acts 3:19-26. The church age is an in-between time, a period between the first and second comings of Jesus in which the gospel is to be proclaimed to all the nations. The Israel-centric messianic kingdom predicted by the Old Testament will happen. It's just been put on hold.

Other reasons this belief is important are: (1) it clarifies who we are as the church and what we are supposed to be doing; (2) it encourages evangelism to Jewish people and counters antisemitism; (3) it gives us an exciting, emotionally compelling, true picture of the future that offers this-worldly hope; and (4) it brings blessing on us (Gen. 12:3; Num. 24:9).

Practical Tips for Persuading the Next Generation

How do we communicate about this particular statement of belief in a way that the next generation finds compelling and convincing? Here's some tips:

1. Speak regularly about the importance of using a consistent *literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutic* when reading the Bible. This is where it all begins. Clarify what is meant by *literal*. A literal hermeneutic is very different from a literalistic hermeneutic.

Explain the dangers and fallacies connected with allegorical interpretation of the Bible.

2. Be balanced, professional, and measured in the way you discuss biblical eschatology. Don't be overly "end-timesy." Affirm what the Bible says about the future, but don't set dates or play the "this is that" game. Don't fixate on eschatology to the detriment of other areas of theology.

3. Teach about the biblical covenants and dispensations. Explain how they work together and the church's relationship to them. Emphasise that most of the Bible isn't about the church. Explain that as the church, we are *a* New covenant people but not *the* New covenant people. Call our dispensation, the church age, the "sixth" one, and emphasise that we are waiting in hope for the "seventh," the messianic age. Emphasise the unique opportunities we have as believers in the church age.

4. Teach from the major and minor prophets of the Old Testament, such as *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah*. Show how frequently the prophets predict an earthly, Israel-centric kingdom with Messiah at its head. Then teach from Romans 9-11. Let the evidence speak for itself.

5. Be precise in how you use the term *kingdom*. The word kingdom is used in many ways in the Bible, but primarily it is used to denote the future kingdom of Messiah on earth. While God's eternal, universal kingdom always stands, the messianic kingdom is not present yet. We live in the church age, not the kingdom age. Make this distinction clear.

6. Train your congregation how to spot and counter Platonism in theology. The habit of allegorising God's promises to Israel is one ultimately learned from the Greek philosopher

Plato and his followers. Plato emphasised ideas over matter and the things of the spirit over the things of the body. This emphasis crept into the early church through influential teachers such as Origen and Augustine and led to heresies like Gnosticism. True biblical theology, however, holds the things of the spirit and the things of the body together in unified harmony. Bodily, earthly, physical things are not evil by nature. Jesus, for example, is fully God *and* fully man. By rejecting the Platonic tendency to allegorise the earthly, literal, physical promises to Israel, we will better interpret Scripture because we will be viewing it through a Hebrew lens rather than a Greek lens. By showing that the first-century church, as yet uninfluenced by Platonism, held to an earthly, Israel-based, messianic kingdom, our churches will be connected theologically with the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

7. Observe the Feast of Booths (*Sukkot*). This annual festival, usually held in September or October, foreshadows the future, earthly, Israel-centric, messianic kingdom and is a great way to reinforce in a concrete, practical way that God is going to fulfil his covenant promises to Israel. Our family celebrated the Feast of the Booths for the first time last year, and it was an experience we will not soon forget. Each of the eight days of the festival, as we ate outside under our *sukkah*, was a time to reflect upon and hope for Jesus' coming earthly kingdom (Lev. 23:34-43; Zec. 14:16-19; Jn 7:37-39).

Summary

I often ask myself, "If I were God, would I arrange history in this way?" The answer is most probably no, I would not. But thankfully I am not God. The Bible reveals what God says about his own plan for history. In broad contours, his plan is very clear, and it centres on the nation of Israel. His covenants with Israel, beginning with the Abrahamic covenant, are the driving force of history. We are to be thankful God will keep his covenant promises to

Israel, for as he does so, we Gentiles will be blessed in a way we can scarcely now imagine.

We are to eagerly hope for Israel's "full inclusion" (Rom. 11:12) and "acceptance" (Rom. 11:15), for then the long-awaited messianic kingdom will arrive. The Lord's prayer is actually a prayer for all Israel to be saved (Rom. 11:26), for only then will the this-worldly messianic kingdom come (Matt. 6:10). As believers, we can only step back and admire God's plan, centred on his faithfulness to Israel. As Paul says in this very context:

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." - Romans 11:33-36