



RETHINKING BIBLE PROPHECY IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

'Eschatology' is the study of last things. Christians should never fear having their eschatological 'system' scrutinised by the plain teaching of the Bible. If you subscribe to the currently popular "Left Behind" system of eschatology, prepare to be challenged by Scripture and history. Moreover, prepare to gain a greater respect for the integrity of the Bible.

ISRAEL & THE CHURCH

BY JACK VAN DEVENTER

Modern premillennialism teaches that God has not one, but two separate peoples of God, Israel and the Church. This teaching, known as dispensationalism, was developed in the 1830's by J.N. Darby. Darby, seeking to legitimize his newly created rapture theory and its two "second comings," divided up the Bible into passages for Israel and the Church.¹ According to traditional dispensationalism, Jesus came to deliver the kingdom to the Jews, but the Jews rejected Him and caused Him to die on the cross. Thus, Christ's death on the cross was not part of God's plan.² As a result, the coming of the kingdom was postponed until the second coming of Christ and is not present today except in "mystery form."³ Christ's rejection caused a "parenthesis" in time in which the "prophetic clock" stopped ticking.⁴ Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, God created the Church as a Plan B that dispensationalists claim was wholly unanticipated, even by the Old Testament prophets.⁵

The implications of dispensationalism as historically put forth may surprise those who have been taught this form of premillennialism. According to dispensationalism, the millennium is fundamentally Jewish in nature such that the Jews will be "exalted above the Gentiles."⁶ The Gentiles will "be on the lowest level" in Christ's rule.⁷ In addition, despite Christ's ultimate sacrifice as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," dispensationalism teaches that the sacrificial system will be reinstituted!⁸

Regarding dispensationalism's distinctive doctrine that Israel and the Church are two separate peoples of God, it should first

be noted that such teaching is a radical departure from historic Christianity. According to Gerstner, "Historically speaking, this dispensational denial of the unity of Israel and the church represents a surprising novelty. From the earliest period of Christian theology onward, the essential continuity of Israel and the church has been maintained. This historic doctrine of the church is based on both the clear implication of Old Testament texts and the clear teaching of the New Testament."⁹ For example, early Church fathers such as Papias, Clement, Barnabas, Hermas, and Justin Martyr believed that the Church inherited God's promises to Israel.¹⁰

Christ's death was not an unfortunate accident brought on by the unanticipated rejection by the Jews. On the contrary, speaking of the cross, Jesus said "But for this purpose I came to this hour" (John 12:27). The Church is not a parenthesis lying between God's two dealings with national Israel, but rather the Church is the body of Christ and is therefore the "fullness of God" (Eph. 1:22,23).¹¹ Rather than being entirely future, the kingdom is a present and growing reality (Matt. 12:28; Col. 1:13). Contrary to dispensational claims, the Church was very much a part of God's plan from the beginning. Romans 9:22-26 (which cites Hosea 1:10) states that the children of Israel, both Jews and Gentiles, will be as the sand of the sea, too numerous to measure or number. That the Gentiles would be included among God's people was God's plan even before the cross (see Amos 9:11 and Acts 15:16-17).

As Provan points out, the Bible uses the same terms to describe both Israel and the Church, proving that those of the

Darby presented himself as a prophet who had been given "rediscovered truths" that had been "lost" to all who came before him. Neatby, *History of the Plymouth Brethren*, 1902

I came to see that I must either part company with John Darby, or my precious Bible, and I chose to cling to my Bible and part from Mr. Darby. George Müller of Bristol

household of faith are one and the same. Both are called the beloved of God, the children of God, the field of God, the flock of God, the house of God, the people of God, the vineyard of God, the wife of God, the children of Abraham, the chosen people, and the circumcised.¹² This presents a dilemma for the dispensationalists. Does God have two chosen peoples? two flocks? two wives? The Bible is clear on this point, "There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

The fact that Jewish names such as "children of Abraham" and "the circumcised" are used to describe the Church further accentuates the reality of the church as spiritual Israel. Indeed, Christians are called "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). Whereas Israel was to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," now to the church God says, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into

His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God" (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

The Jews rejected Christ, shouting, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" and "We have no king but Caesar!" (John 19:15). Anticipating this rejection, Jesus warned them in parable that "the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it" (Matt. 21:43). In condemnation He warned that upon them would "come all the righteous blood shed on the earth" (Matt. 23:35) and that this judgment would happen "upon this generation" (Matt. 23:36). This prophecy was fulfilled in A.D. 70 when Jerusalem was laid waste by armies under Roman command and the temple was destroyed such that not one stone was left upon another (Matt. 24:2).

The rejection of the Jews will not be permanent, however. As the gospel spreads and the nations are discipled, the Jews will respond in faith when the "fullness of the Gentiles" takes place (Romans

11:25). Genetic Israel will be converted to Christ and this conversion will be a great blessing to the world (Romans 11:11-12, 15, 23-27).

Endnotes

- 1 Ernest R. Sandeen, *British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chic. Press, 1970), p. 63, 66.
- 2 Clarence Larkin, *Rightly Dividing the Word* (Philadelphia, PA: C. Larkin, 1921).
- 3 John F. Walvoord, in Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (General Editors), *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1994), p. 80.
- 4 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Bros, 1953) p. 136.
- 5 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) Vol. 4, pp. 40-41.
- 6 John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), p. 136.
- 7 Herman Hoyt, "Dispensational Premillennialism," in Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1977), p. 81.
- 8 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), p. 525.
- 9 John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wagemuth & Hyatt, 1991) p. 186. Dispensationalist Alan Patrick Boyd agreed, stating "The majority of the writers/writings in this period completely identify Israel with the Church" (in "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers [Until the Death of Justin Martyr]," unpublished master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977, p. 47).
- 10 Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided, The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), p. 173, 174.
- 11 William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presb. and Ref. Publ. Co.) p. 44.
- 12 Charles D. Provan, *The Church is Israel Now* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1987).

The Kingdom and the Church

ADAPTED FROM "PROPHECY AND THE CHURCH" BY OSWALD T. ALLIS

Does the Christian Church **fulfil**, or does it **interrupt** the fulfilment of the Old Testament predictions concerning Israel? Is the Church age a mystery period unknown to the prophets, or did they foresee and predict it? This is the vital issue which confronts every student of Dispensationalism. It is presented to us in very definite form when we turn to such a passage as Titus 2. 14 where Paul, in a context which deals with the second coming, briefly states the purpose of the first coming as follows:

"who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people [ARV, 'a people for his own possession'], zealous of good works." The expression, "a people for his own possession," which Paul uses here is taken from the Old Testament (Ex. 19:5, Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 26:18); and Paul uses a similar expression in Eph. 1:14, as does Peter in 1 Pet. 2:9. That this use of, or reference to, the language of the Pentateuch is intentional can hardly be questioned. Consequently, the question is this, **Do Paul**

and Peter use this expression for the purpose of calling attention to the close and vital connection which exists between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church? Or, do they expect us to understand that there are two "peculiar peoples," which are to be carefully distinguished? Does the God of Israel have one peculiar people? and does the Lord Jesus Christ have another peculiar people? Or, has Jehovah-Jesus, who is the "only redeemer of God's elect," one and only one peculiar people, which is made up of Old Testament saints and of New Testament saints without distinction?

The Nature of the Kingdom

Since it is clear that the thought of the coming kingdom was prominent at the time when the gospel story opens, and since John the Baptist and Jesus both refer to it, the most important question before us is this. What was the nature of the kingdom which they announced? When we turn back to the infancy narratives in Luke, the answer may seem to be given very simply in the words of the

angel Gabriel to Mary (Lk. 1:31f.). Mary's Child is David's Son; He is to sit on David's throne; He is to reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there is to be no end. It is with reference to this passage that Scofield declares that "The promise of the kingdom to David and his seed . . . enters the New Testament absolutely unchanged." And it is the claim of all Dispensationalists that the kingdom offered the Jews by John and by Jesus was an earthly kingdom similar to that of David the son of Jesse; and since such a kingdom was not set up at the time of the earthly ministry of Jesus, they insist that it was rejected by the Jews and has been postponed to a time still future. As to this teaching there are several comments to be made.

a. The Kingdom was to be Spiritual

The kingdom announced by John and by Jesus was primarily and essentially a moral and spiritual kingdom. It was to be prepared for by repentance. "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Childlikeness, humility, forgiveness, poverty, meekness, unselfishness were characteristic of it, as described in

the Sermon on the Mount. It was to be entered by a new birth (Jn. 3:3, 5). The scribe who understood the real meaning of the law was not far from it (Mk. 12:34). To prove his Messiahship Jesus did not appeal to the kingdom prophecies, but rather to His works of mercy and healing. He allowed Himself to be called Jesus of Nazareth, despite the fact that the Messiah was according to prophecy to be born at Bethlehem; and He made no effort to correct the mistaken inference drawn by the Jews from this title (Jn. 7:42). He accepted the title "Son of David," but never, as far as we know, used it Himself. He refused the efforts of the Jews to make Him a king or to involve Him in conflict with the Roman rulers. He declared to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36). Had Jesus come to set up such a kingdom as Dispensationalists describe, He could not have made this reply to Pilate. Or, at least, His words would have to be taken as meaning, "My kingdom is *not now* of this world." For according to the Dispensational view it was a worldly kingdom, a kingdom which would involve the forcible overthrow of Rome that Jesus had offered the Jews, and would have given them (even as recently as the triumphal entry?) had they been willing to receive it.

b. The Kingdom was to be Universal

While in a sense Jewish and Davidic, the kingdom which Jesus announced was also to be world-wide. The clearest proof of this is to be found in the account of the early Judean ministry of Jesus as given us by John (1:19-4:45). In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus uttered those most familiar and most precious words: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And He made the scope of these words perfectly plain by conversing with the Samaritan woman at Sychar, and declaring to her that the time was already come when men might worship the Father anywhere, if only they did it in spirit and in truth (4:23). In His first sermon at Nazareth (Lk. 4:16f.) He applied the words of Isa. 61:1f. so pointedly to the Gentiles as to give grievous offense to the nationalistic expectations of His hearers, who sought to kill Him, just as years later the Jews at Jerusalem tried to kill Paul for the same reason (Acts 22:2 it.). Such passages as the above indicate with unmistakable plainness that from the very outset Jesus not merely gave no

encouragement to, but quite definitely opposed, the expectation of the Jews that an earthly, Jewish kingdom of glory, such as David had established centuries before, was about to be set up.

c. The Cross Prominent from the Beginning

It is also to be noted that just as Jesus at the very outset opposed the idea that He was come to set up a national and earthly kingdom, so John the Baptist emphasized that truth, which Jesus Himself after His resurrection declared to be taught by Moses and all the prophets, that the Christ must suffer (Lk. xxiv. 26f.; cf. xviii. 31f.). John did this by twice pointing out Jesus to his own disciples as "the Lamb of God" (Jn. 1:29, 35), a title which he explained by the words, "that taketh away the sin of the world." John, the herald of the coming kingdom, hailed its king as "the Lamb of God," pointing back, not to Nathan's words regarding David's royal Son, but to Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant (chap. 53), to the passover, and to the altar of sacrifice. Jesus Himself declared to Nicodemus that He the Son of man must suffer, when He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness even so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." The necessity of the Cross was present in the mind of Jesus from the very beginning of His ministry. Both John and Jesus declared this definitely and emphatically. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the best way to gain a correct understanding of those words which appear so abruptly, as it seems, in Matt. 3:2 and Mk. 1:15, "the kingdom of heaven (or *of God*) is at hand" (cf. Lk. iv. 43) is a careful reading of the first four chapters of John's Gospel. Those who so confidently assert that the Baptist and Jesus were announcing an earthly kingdom which was to be definitely Jewish can hardly have given them careful consideration.

The Kingdom "at hand"

The last words of this great announcement are of particular interest because of the construction placed on them by Dispensationalists. All Bible students will agree that they clearly imply the nearness of the kingdom. But Dispensationalists give them a special meaning. According to Scofield, "'At hand' is never a positive affirmation that the person or thing said to be 'at hand' will immediately appear, but only that no known or

predicted event must intervene." Since it is claimed that the kingdom referred to was one of earthly glory, the kingdom promised to David "absolutely unchanged," this must be understood to mean that divine revelation as it then stood knew of nothing which must intervene before the "setting up of the Davidic kingdom."

But the expression "at hand" need not and does not have the meaning assigned to it by Scofield. The word in the Greek means to be "near." The correct understanding of the expression "near" or "at hand" is important because of the nature of the kingdom which is said to be "at hand." Jesus said to the woman at the well, "the hour cometh and now is." By this He meant that the spiritual kingdom which He declared to be "at hand" was already present, already "come" for all who were prepared to receive it. But if this kingdom is regarded as an earthly and Israelitish kingdom, then the claim that "at hand" means that no known or predicted event must precede acquires the utmost importance. For it raises at once this important question. Where does the Cross come in? We have seen that John the Baptist pointed Jesus out to his own disciples as the Lamb of God. If, when he said, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," John meant to imply that "the next thing, in the order of revelation as it then stood, should have been the setting up of the Davidic kingship," why did he hail Jesus as "the Lamb of God" instead of as "the Messiah, the Son of David"? Was he adding something to these prophecies? Or, did he find in them something which Dispensationalist interpreters show a tendency to ignore? We believe the latter alternative to be the correct one. There are Old Testament prophecies which refer plainly to the priestly office of the Messiah, to the Suffering Servant. Can it then be affirmed that the establishment of the kingdom was quite independent of the sacrifice of the Cross? Can it be asserted that the order might have been, first the kingdom, then the Cross, when the risen Christ so clearly declares that the burden of prophecy gives the opposite order: "Behooved it not the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?" (Lk. 24:26; Acts 26:23; 1 Pet. 1:11). Finally, if the sequence could have been, first the kingdom, then the Cross, and if the kingdom is to be "without end," where can the Cross come in? In other words, if the Jews had accepted the kingdom would there have been any

place, any necessity for the Cross? To the Christian who realizes the meaning of the Cross, who knows that he has been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ, the question raised by the Dispensational interpretation of the words "at hand" is of the greatest moment. It amounts to this, Could men have been saved without the Cross?

d. Dispensational Teaching regarding the Kingdom and the Cross

The answers which Dispensationalists give to this question illustrate the difficult situation in which their understanding of the nature of the promised "kingdom" and the meaning of the words "at hand" necessarily lands them.

(1) This is illustrated by two brief quotations from Darby. On the one hand Darby tells us: "From Adam to the end of time no one was or will be saved but by the redemption and the work of the Spirit." No evangelical Christian denies this. Elsewhere Darby says: "Supposing for a moment that Christ had not been rejected, the kingdom would have been set up on earth. It could not be so, no doubt, but it shows the difference between the kingdom and the Church." What is the inference to be drawn from this statement if not this, that the difference between the kingdom and the Church is that the latter required the Cross, while the former did not?

(2) Scofield tells us: "The kingdom was promised to the Jews. Gentiles could be blessed only through Christ crucified and risen. Cf. John 12:20-24." The position to which the advocates of this teaching are practically driven is this, that if the Jews had not rejected Christ and caused Him to be put to death, His death would not have been necessary for their salvation. Or, to put it differently, it was the crucifixion which made the Cross necessary. If man had stopped short of the enormity of shedding the blood of the Son of God, the blood of beasts would have sufficed for the Jew of the promised kingdom age as for the Jew of Old Testament times. Why not then also for the Gentile (Gen. 20:18)?

(3) This conclusion, which we find more or less obscurely stated by Brethren and Dispensational writers, has been clearly drawn by S. D. Gordon, the author of the "Quiet Talks" books. Gordon took the position that the sacrifices required by the Mosaic law were redemptive in themselves. He tells us: "It can be said at once that His dying was not God's own plan. It was a plan conceived somewhere

else and yielded to by God. God had a plan of atonement by which men who were willing could be saved from sin and its effects." This plan was the Jewish system of sacrifice. The death of Christ was Roman. God did not intend it. But when the hate of men brought about the death of His Son, God by a "master-stroke" made His death the atonement for the sin of man. Gordon cannot of course deny that God foresaw the death of Christ. He admits that it runs "like a lower minor strain" through the Old Testament. But he insists that it was not God's plan. He turned Christ's death into an "enrichment" of His plan. For the death of Christ prepared the way for the mystery of the Church which is founded on the Cross. But this enrichment, he tells us, is only temporary. For, "The Church goes up and out. The kingdom comes in and down." All this serves to show the terrible difficulty in which Dispensationalists become involved when, in the face of plain statements to the contrary, they insist that Christ came to set up a visible earthly kingdom and reign over Israel. Such statements as the following cannot be reconciled with the Dispensational scheme. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45); "him being delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye by the hands of lawless men did crucify and slay" (Acts 2:23); "For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Heb. 10:4).

The Postponement Theory

If it be admitted that a visible earthly kingdom was promised to the Jews and announced as "at hand" by John and by Jesus, some explanation must be found of the fact that such a kingdom was not set up, especially since it is asserted that "at hand" means that no predicted events need occur before its establishment. The explanation which is given by Dispensationalists is covered by the two words "rejection" and "postponement." The kingdom was rejected by the Jews and postponed by God; and in its place the Church was introduced. That the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah and finally crucified Him is clearly stated in the New Testament. But when did this rejection take place, and when was the kingdom offer withdrawn or postponed?

a. Was the Kingdom Postponed?

The New Testament speaks in quite different terms. Jesus declared to the Jews

that the kingdom should "be taken from" them (Matt. 21:41f.). The children of the kingdom (the natural and lawful heirs) are to be "cast out" (8:11f.). None of those "bidden" are to taste of the marriage supper (Lk. 14:24). The vineyard is to be given to "other husbandmen"; to "a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof"; men are to come from the "highways," from "the east and west and north and south," to partake with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of the marriage supper. The language of these passages is parabolic and should not be taken too literally. But it is entirely in accord with the words of John 3:16 which were uttered near the beginning of the Lord's earthly ministry and of Matt. 28:18f. and Acts 1:8 which belong to its close. They imply clearly that the period of Jewish particularism was ended; and they do not lend any support to the view that it was ended only for a time and is to be restored after the proclamation by the Church, during the present age, of the "every creature," "whosoever believeth" evangel has been concluded.

b. When did this Postponement Take Place?

Or, when was the offer of the kingdom withdrawn? A good way to answer this question is by turning to Matt. 21. Scofield gives this chapter the heading, "The King's public offer of himself as King." These words would seem to imply that despite the fact that the Jews had morally rejected the kingdom much earlier, Jesus offered Himself to them again on the occasion of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But Jesus had repeatedly declared to His disciples that He was going up to Jerusalem to suffer and to die (Matt. 16:21, 20:18). He entered His royal city as its King definitely fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy. But He entered it thus, not to set up an earthly kingdom, but that as Israel's King He might be rejected and die. He said definitely to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight." He did not come to reign but to die. And His rejection by Jerusalem, when He entered it as her King, meant the rejection of Jerusalem, "Behold your house is left unto you desolate" (Mt. 23:37f.). It was not as King but as Priest-King that Jesus entered Jerusalem. He came to die that He might reign; not over Israel only, but that He "might gather together into one the children of God that were scattered abroad" (Jn. xi. 52).