

One People of God

Michael Martin

Introduction

Who will be the citizens of Christ's kingdom? Will it be Israel? If so, will it be all of Israel from all time? Will it be the Church? Will it be both? The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate that all of God's covenantal promises, to His elect people, regardless of biblical epoch, have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. This has resulted in people from the Old Testament epoch (believing Israelites/Gentiles), and people from the New Testament epoch (the Church), being saved by grace through faith, yet remaining distinct from one another, until Christ comes again; at which time both groups are united together in the Kingdom of God, as one eschatological people of God.

How Many Covenants?

"Covenants between God and human beings form a unifying thread in Scripture, from their conceptual introduction in Genesis to their eschatological fulfilment in Revelation. Although theologians differ over the precise number and nature of such divine covenants, few question their theological significance in relation to redemptive history."¹ Disagreement comes in regarding the identification of the first covenant that God made with man. There are those who believe that the first covenant established in the Bible is God's covenant with Noah, since Genesis 6:18 is the first place we find the word covenant

¹ Paul R. Williamson, "The Biblical Covenants," The Gospel Coalition, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-covenants/>.

utilized in Scripture. Some scholars recognize that God “established a relationship with Adam involving mutual obligations” however they “carefully distinguish such ideas from the concept of a covenant—one that involves additional elements such as a sworn and/or enacted oath.”² Other scholars argue however that even though the word “covenant” is not found in Genesis 1-5, “that cannot constitute an argument for the absence of a covenant prior to Genesis 6:18.”³ I am strongly inclined to understand that the first covenant made by God with man was the Creation/Adamic covenant (my reasoning to follow in the exposition of each covenant section). When you begin with the Adamic and end with the New – we find a total of six covenants (Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, New).

How Are They Interrelated?

Quite simply all the covenants are related in that they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that God the Father made all things through God the Son and “without him was not anything made” (John 1:3). This is an all-encompassing statement and must be applied to each and all the covenants. Additionally, we learn that Jesus Christ, “upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3), and I take this to mean that Jesus Christ, as God, faithfully upholds all that He has made, including each of the covenants. When we read Scripture as God’s progressive revelation to mankind, and we read it canonically, that is, seeking to understand it in its entirety, we come to see that, “Revelation, alongside redemption, unfolds in a progressive manner by unique twists and turns in separate but related epochs, largely demarcated by God’s acts and redemptive covenants, which reach their fulfillment , telos

² Williamson, “The Biblical Covenants.”

³ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 211.

(end/goal), and terminus in the person and work of Messiah Jesus.”⁴

For What Purpose/End?

Regardless of the biblical theology that one adheres to, each of the three (covenant, dispensational, progressive covenantalism) major systems agree that the understanding of the covenants is tied to one’s understanding of eschatology. The covenant theologian believes that all of redemptive history is framed by the covenant of works and covenant of grace, and they also tend to believe in an inaugurated eschatology – when Christ came the kingdom of God arrived, and yet the fullness of the kingdom is not yet consummated until Christ’s return.⁵ The result leads to affirming much unity and continuity between the testaments, which is crucial for theological conclusions. Israel and the church are one essentially and there is a continuity of covenant signs (circumcision in the OT, baptism in the NT). The dispensationalist bases his conclusion that Israel and the church are two separate entities with two distinct eternal realities (“For the dispensationalist, Israel is neither replaced by the church nor typical of the church, and neither is it a growing aggregate that expands to include the church. Israel and the church remain distinct forever.”⁶), on their understanding of the covenants – particularly the Abrahamic, the Davidic and the New. Finally, the progressive covenantalist believes that the people of Israel are saved by grace through faith (in God, and His promises of the coming Messiah). He also believes that church differs from Israel because the church is saved by grace through faith (in the person and atoning work of Christ), and thus have their hearts circumcised and indwelt by the Spirit (promises that were only made to Israel). Yet, both Israel and

⁴ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 116.

⁵ Parker, introduction to *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 11.

⁶ Mark A. Snoeberger, “Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 179.

the church find their respective covenants fulfilled in Christ and are united together in Him (Rom 11:11-27). Stephen Wellum argues the following:

This way of viewing Israel-Christ-Church differs from dispensational and covenant theology. First, in contrast to dispensationalism, Jesus is the antitypical fulfillment of Israel and Adam and in him, all of God's promises are fulfilled for the church, including the land promise realized in the new creation (Rom 4:13; Eph 6:3; Heb 11:10, 16; cf. Matt 5:5). Second, in contrast to covenant theology, Jesus's new covenant people are different from Israel. Under the old covenant, Israel, by its very nature was a mixed community of believers and unbelievers (Rom 9:6). The church, however, is constituted by people who are united to Christ by faith, which minimally includes heart circumcision, the forgiveness of sin, and the gift of the Spirit. In contrast to Israel, the church is constituted as a believing, regenerate people. This is why the sign of the new covenant (baptism) is only applied to those who profess faith, and why circumcision and baptism do not signify the same realities due to their respective covenantal differences.⁷

So, we see that all three systems are developed with a universal eschatological perspective in mind. However, I would also argue that the covenants are given to us by God so that every individual, who has ever lived or will live, would personally understand that physical death enters them into the eschaton. When a person dies that person's eternal destiny is sealed (Luke 16:19ff) and they will only await the eschaton in which they experience either the first resurrection (Rev 20:6) or second

⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, "A Primer on Progressive Covenantalism," Christ Over All, last modified September 5, 2023, <https://christoverall.com/article/longform/what-is-progressive-covenantalism-part-1/>

resurrection (Rev 20:12-15). And if 1 Timothy 2:3-6 is true, “This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time,” than it is true for all time and is applicable for all of mankind. Within the Adamic covenant there was enough information given by God for people to be held accountable to believe Him. First, the promise of Christ (Gen 3:15). Second, a blood sacrifice initiated by God (Gen 3:21). Third, a call to repent and believe from the heart (Gen 4:4-5). Fourth, the warning of a wrath to come for disobedience and rebellion (Gen 4:7). From here, with each successive covenant, the promise of forgiveness, and eternal security that would come through Christ alone is only made clearer. Therefore, I would argue that the covenants are given for both a universal eschatological understanding (the totality and magnitude of the end), as well as, and more importantly, for an understanding of personal eschatology (personal eternal destiny of one’s soul). John Frame sums it up well:

I confess my disappointment that so much teaching about the last days is focused on the order of events. I suppose I'm more of a post mill than anything else, but I honestly don't believe that the Bible is perfectly clear on the order of events in my view, when scripture tells us about the return of Christ, it doesn't give us this information so that we can put it on a chart and watch the events as they pass by. That would be catering to our intellectual pride, among other things why, then, does Scripture have so much to say about the last days? So that we can reorder our lives in the light of Jesus coming. So far as I can see, every Bible passage about the return of Christ is written for our practical purpose - not to

help us to develop a theory of history, but to motivate our obedience.⁸

Brief Exposition of Each Major Covenant

God's Covenant with Adam

God starts us in the beginning for a purpose. Unless we know and understand the beginning of why He created, we will never accurately comprehend who He re-creates, why, and how. A biblical-theological system that fails to start where God starts is built on sinking sand. There are significant debates about whether the first of God's covenants starts with Adam or with Noah. The thrust of the argument against identifying the first covenant occurring with Adam has to do with the fact that the word "covenant" is not actually used in Genesis 1-3. While this is true there are clear indications that God issues His first covenant with Adam in that 1) God identifies Himself by His covenant name, Yahweh, in Genesis 2:4-8, and 2) that God created Adam as both His image bearer (Gen 1:26) and as His son (Luke 3:38). Both of "which are covenantal terms and assume a covenant relationship."⁹ In the Edenic garden, God establishes a covenant of worship with Adam.

Created from the dust of the earth as a man, yet made in the image of God as his son, Adam was placed in the garden-temple of Eden as God's prophet-priest-king to work and keep it. As prophet, he was to speak God's Word to God's world; as priest, he was to guard God's divine sanctuary and mediate God's blessing to the world; as king, he was to rule God's world. As God's son—and in his specific roles

⁸ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 1096.

⁹ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 89.

of prophet, priest, and king—Adam was called to worship God through his word.¹⁰

This call to a covenant of worship was grounded in Adam's perfect obedience to God's instructions and "was expected to elicit in Adam a response of faith and obedience, love and devotion, with heart and mind and strength. Adam's reward for such a response was to be a fellowship meal with God at the tree of life."¹¹ Yet as we know Adam failed to heed the call, and instead of eating with God at the tree of life, chose instead to eat apart from God at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The one who had abandoned the worship of God in heaven—angelic Lucifer himself—had come to spoil the worship of God on earth. In careless and sinful rebellion, Adam followed the lead of his wife and obeyed the voice of the serpent, eating from the forbidden tree. He abandoned his probationary fast, disobeyed the voice of God, and bowed down to the serpent.¹²

Yet God would have none of it, as He alone is worthy of His creatures' worship. Knowing from eternity past what Satan would do, and how Adam would respond, God then instituted an eternal curse upon Satan and his seed, and a covenant of grace with His elect (Gen 3:15).

God's first act in this new gracious arrangement was to clothe Adam and Eve with garments of skin, which implied an animal had been slain. An innocent victim had to die in the place of the guilty pair, so that they could remain, even temporarily, in the presence of God. The idea of sacrifice as a

¹⁰ Gibson, "Liturgy in the Garden of Eden," Westminster Theological Seminary, last modified March 23, 2018, <https://faculty.wts.edu/posts/liturgy-in-the-garden-of-eden/>.

¹¹ Gibson, "Liturgy in the Garden of Eden."

¹² Gibson, "Liturgy in the Garden of Eden."

prerequisite for being in the presence of a holy God, whatever the duration, would become essential for all future worship of the chosen seed. Indeed, for there to be a permanent restoration of God's people living in God's presence, worshipping him and communing with him, a future son of the woman would have to undergo the flaming sword of God's judgment—in effect, experience death and resurrection—in order to lead the offspring of the woman back into the presence of God, so that they could eat from the tree of life.¹³

So, we clearly find within the first chapters of the Bible a covenant that is established by God with Adam. In addition, when we read and consider the entirety of the canon, we find the biblical storyline is divided between two types of men – those that are in Adam, and those that are Christ (Rom 5:12-21). In God's redemptive plan, Adam is significant because he points us to “the last Adam” and “the head of the new creation” who is Jesus Christ. “Yet the new covenant headship of Christ as the last Adam makes little sense without the covenant headship of the first Adam...[therefore] the creation covenant is foundational for all future covenants since all subsequent covenants unpack Adam's role in the world.”¹⁴

God's Covenant with Noah

In Genesis 6:18 God says to Noah, “But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons your wife, and your sons' wives with you.” This is the first occurrence that the word covenant is used in Scripture. The reason that God commands Noah to enter the ark is because God is going to destroy all of mankind, due to their unbridled evil and sinful nature. Within this covenant, and the scope of it being instituted, we find several connections to the Adamic

¹³ Gibson, “Liturgy in the Garden of Eden.”

¹⁴ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 90.

covenant. First, “Noah is presented as a new Adam. The blessing and commission given to Noah are the same as those given to Adam (Gen 9:1 = 1:28a). In this way, the narrator portrays Noah as a new Adam.”¹⁵ Second, Noah, like Adam, is told to “be fruitful and multiply” and to “subdue the earth” (Gen 9:1-4). Third, the covenant the God establishes with Noah, He also establishes with Noah’s offspring (Gen 9:9). Stephen Wellum notes, “this covenant re-enforces God’s intention that humans will fulfill their role as image-bearers in creation. The ‘seed of the woman’ will now come through Noah, the covenant mediator, and it is he who will reverse the effects of sin and usher in a ‘new creation.’”¹⁶ Hence we find that Noah is another Adam, in that he is to be a prophet-priest-king over the new creation which harkens back to the garden-temple of Eden. “The universal scope of the covenant reminds us that God’s purposes encompass not just one people but all nations and the entire creation.”¹⁷ Also, we find in Noah that he is a type of Christ. Noah, even though he was graciously chosen by God and delivered through the flood of death; even though he is described as “a righteous man” (Gen 6:9), proves to be a sinful one as well on the other side of judgement (Gen 9:21). This demonstrates that a heart problem still exists, because what is needed is a heart circumcision, or as Paul puts it, “a circumcision made without hands” (Col 2:11). Noah is not the One promised by God, and his sin nature disallows him to complete his role as an image-bearer, similarly to Adam. So, we find that the Noahic covenant points us back to Adam, while also simultaneously pointing us forward to the Promised Offspring of Genesis 3:15. In Noah, Messiah has not arrived, but the first Adam continues.

¹⁵ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 197.

¹⁶ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 91.

¹⁷ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 91.

God's Covenant with Abraham

After God saves Noah and his family and they begin to procreate, their offspring quickly develop into nations that spread abroad on the earth (Gen 10:32). These nations then seek to band together for the purpose of idolatrous worship, and God instead of judging them as would be just, upholds His covenant with Noah, and mercifully confuses their language and disperses them throughout the earth (Gen 11:1-9). From these sinful people, God calls one man (just as he created and called one man in Adam, and saved and called one man in Noah), Abram, whom He covenants with. And he calls this one man out of “a world political community, indeed a kingdom” to establish this one man as a covenant mediator who will usher in a new and greater kingdom – though not him, but his seed.¹⁸ And God does this by making Abram into a new creation.

According to the apostle Paul, God “calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom 4:17b).

When Paul speaks of Abraham believing in the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist, what does this language bring to our minds? Paul can be alluding directly to only one passage of Scripture: Genesis 1. Over and over again in the creation narrative we read the words, “And God said, ‘Let x be.’ And x was.” God simply speaks his word and calls into existence things that do not exist. Therefore, according to the New Testament, as we read Genesis 12-25, we are to view the call of Abram as a kind of “new creation.” Just as the divine word in Genesis 1:3 brings into being and existence things that are not, so in Genesis 12:3 it is the divine word that brings into existence a new order out of the chaos resulting from the confusion

¹⁸ Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism,” 92.

and curse of Babel - the condition of the world just prior to Genesis 12.¹⁹

Additionally, we see similar language being utilized when we compare the Adamic and Abrahamic covenants – particularly in the usage of the words “bless,” “fruitful,” and “multiply.” For example, in Genesis 1:28 we read regarding Adam and Eve, “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply...’” When we then compare this verse to Genesis 12:2-3, 17:2-6, and 22:17-18 we see identical language being used by God with Abraham. Not only that, but these key words are repeated as the covenant promise is passed from Abraham to Isaac to Israel (Gen 26:3-4, 28:3-4).

Thus Abraham and his family, later called Israel, is, as it were, a last Adam. When we see that Israel is, according to the Old Testament, the last Adam and, as later Jewish tradition understood it, the one undoing the sin of the first Adam, we see the background from Paul's understanding of Christ as the last Adam. As history unfolds, Jesus accomplishes in his person and work what God intended for Israel as a people.²⁰

God's Covenant with Israel

God's covenant with Israel is known by several different names: 1) Mosaic Covenant, 2) Old Covenant, 3) Sinai Covenant, 4) “the Book of the Covenant (see Ex 24:7) and/or, 4) God's Covenant with Israel. These are all different names for the same covenant. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to this covenant as God's Covenant with Israel.

It is important to note that this covenant is not disconnected from the previous three mentioned but that it is grounded in

¹⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 261.

²⁰ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 264.

these as its base. For instance, in the opening chapters of Exodus we find God remembering his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 2:24), and God telling Moses that He is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). We know that Adam was God’s son (Luke 3:38), and in Exodus we find God announcing, “Israel is my firstborn son” (Ex 4:22). Also, we know that Adam was placed in the garden which was to be a place of excellence and sustenance, and God promises to place Israel in “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 13:5). Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6), and J. V. Fesko writes, “ Israel was to take the redemptive knowledge of God to the ends of the earth in the same way that Adam was to spread the image and worship of God throughout the earth (Is 49:6).”²¹ Just as with God’s covenant with Adam in which there were blessings and curses identified, so it is with God’s covenant with Israel (Deut 7:12ff, 8:19).

Israel was supposed to dwell in this garden-like land, worship and serve God, multiply the image of God and worship of him throughout the earth, and upon the completion of their work enter the eternal Sabbath rest of God. Of course, Israel did not do this and, like Adam, was ejected out of the garden-like land and the temple was destroyed. Because of the obvious parallels between Adam in the garden and Israel in the promised land, some scholars argue that the Mosaic covenant is a repetition of the covenant of works, though not in the sense that the Israelites could somehow merit their salvation. At the level of typology, the covenant of works is republished in the mosaic covenant, which showcases Israel’s inability to fulfill the broken

²¹ J. V. Fesko, *Last Things First: Unlocking Genesis 1-3 with the Christ of Eschatology* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007), 126.

covenant of works and points to the need of the true second Adam.²²

Finally, and most interestingly, we come to the Sabbath. In Genesis 2 we find that God took His Sabbath rest at the end of His creative works, a rest that Adam, if he had successfully fulfilled the covenant promise, would have entered himself. In Exodus 31 we find the Sabbath rest promise re-introduced to Israel. Fesko notes,

The Sabbath is not only a sign of God's redemptive activity at work in the midst of Israel, but it is also a sign of God's lordship over creation and of his eternal rest, which still remains as the eschatological goal for the creation. In this case, it also serves as an eschatological sign for Israel; each Sabbath they rest from their own labors of fulfilling the dominion mandate to look forward to the day when they will complete their labors and enter God's eternal Sabbath rest.²³

And so, we see that Israel cannot produce the Son of the promise of Genesis 3:15, and thus the OT prophets prophesy about a new covenant that will come about to solve this problem. "In numerous ways, the law-covenant was prophetic (Mt 11:13) since it pointed forward to God's provision of salvation, but in the end, God's righteousness comes apart from the law-covenant in Christ Jesus (Rom 3:21-31)."²⁴

God's Covenant with David

God's covenant with David embodies all the Old Testament covenants, and is the capstone of the Old Testament covenants, as it establishes that the promised man from Genesis 3:15 will

²² Fesko, *Last Things First*, 128.

²³ Fesko, *Last Things First*, 132.

²⁴ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 95.

be a king forever (2 Sam 7:12-13). As Wellum notes, there are two main parts to this covenant: 1) God's promise regarding the establishment of David's house forever, and 2) the promises concerning the Father-son relationship between God and this king (Psalm 2).²⁵ As it relates to the sonship, this covenant anticipates the greater Sonship of Christ, because it builds upon the failed sonship of Adam, corporate Israel, and as one moves through the book of 2 Samuel, the failed sonship of Solomon. This Davidic son, will be "the last Adam," and "the true Israel," who will "build a house for God's Name." Fesko writes, "Once again there are similar themes that echo the initial creation: a king will rule, who is called God's son, and will build God's dwelling place, a temple. Adam was God's son, ruled the creation, and was supposed to extend the garden-temple to the ends of the earth."²⁶ The connectedness of each of the Old Testament covenants cannot be denied, and is essential to fully comprehending the entire meaning of the New covenant, as well as holding to an eschatological theology that is biblically faithful.

It is not surprising that the Davidic king fulfills the role of Adam and thus rules over the world if we link the covenants together. Since at the center of God's redemptive plan is the restoration of humanity's vice-regent role in creation via the woman's seed, by the time we get to David, we now know it is through the king the creation will be restored. In the OT, the truth is born out in many places, especially the Psalter, which envisions the Davidic son as executing a universal rule (e.g., Ps 2; 8; 45; 72; cf. Is 9:6-7; 11; 53).²⁷

²⁵ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 95.

²⁶ Fesko, *Last Things First*, 134.

²⁷ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 96.

God's New Covenant

What is new about the New covenant? Quite simply the people's ability to obey what God has commanded. The Old Testament prophets (major/minor) proclaim judgement on a disobedient people after Solomon's failure as the Davidic king. However, they also make it known that God in His faithfulness will save His people and will do so through a faithful Davidic king (Is 7:4, Jer 33:14-15, Ez 34:23-24). The Old Testament prophets promise that a New covenant will come, and when it does there will be a pouring out of God's Spirit on the people (Joel 2:28-32); God's salvific reign over one united nation that consists of people from different ethnicities (Is 9:6-7, 11:11); the forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34); and a new creation (Is 66:22). The Old Testament prophets confidently expect the arrival of the New covenant. And what distinguishes this New covenant community from the community of old, is the Holy Spirit of God indwelling, and being poured out on, each individual believer. Wellum writes, "... all of God's people will know him, from the least to the greatest. By this change, the new covenant raises every member of the covenant to the same relationship with God through the universal distribution of the Spirit."²⁸ And who will be the one to distribute and baptize this covenant community with the Spirit? The Christ, the one who is first anointed with the Spirit Himself (Is 11:1-2, Ez 11:19-20, John 14:16-17).

What else is new regarding the New covenant? Two other truths should be noted: 1) all of the people in the New covenant community will be regenerate. "The old covenant community was a mixed people (Rom 9:6), but this is not true of the new. The entire community will know God and obey from the heart because of the Spirit's work."²⁹ 2) Each member of the new community will experience the complete forgiveness of sins, because under the New covenant a superior priest will offer a

²⁸ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 96.

²⁹ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 98.

superior sacrifice; the priestly-sacrificial system of the old, will be abolished forever.³⁰

So, this New covenant community is therefore different from believing Israel. The people of believing Israel were chosen by the Father and justified by faith in God's Word (inspired Scripture). The church is also chosen by the Father and justified by faith in God's Word (Incarnate Son, and inspired Scripture), while also being indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This New covenant community has been given progressively more revelation of who God is, how salvation comes to pass.

Israel and its Relation to the Covenants

First, Israel is from Adam, and Jesus is the last Adam, the first fruits of the new creation (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-23, 45). Adam became a living being, meaning that he was created; just as Israel became a nation, as they were created by God through Abraham. Adam sinned, was cursed, was exiled, and died. Israel in the same way sinned, cursed, was exiled, and as a nation lost their prominence in the world. But Jesus, who is God in the flesh, uncreated and without sin, "became a life-giving spirit" when He went to the Cross, bearing the sins of the redeemed, and imputing to them His righteousness.

Second, Israel traces its roots to Abraham, and Jesus is the son of Abraham (Luke 3:34). In the birth of Jesus, we come to learn that he is the fulfillment of all that was promised to Abraham (Luke 1:54-54, 72-73). The promises of offspring, land, and blessings to the nations come about through Israel, in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Gal 3:13-18).

Third, Jesus is the true Israel. He succeeds where national Israel fails because He is the faithful, beloved Son of God, who did not

³⁰ Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," 98.

come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (Matt 5:17).

Israel, as another Adam, is God's son (Exod. 4:22), and yet, Israel's sonship and future exodus from Egypt is typological as revealed in Hosea 11.^[19] Matthew 2:15 cites Hosea 11:1 showing that Jesus is the true son of Israel and that the return from exile is commencing with him. Moreover, Jesus identifies with and embodies Israel as the "beloved son" in his baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:15–17; Luke 3:21–22).³¹

Finally, Christ fulfills all of the biblical covenants, including Israel's restoration promises and prophecies in the New covenant. It is ratified through the shedding of His blood on the Cross for the sins of true Israel (Heb 9:15-18), and the pouring out of His Spirit (Ez 36:27, John 14:17).

Israel and its Relation to Christ

How are we to understand national Israel today in the light of Jesus Christ's first coming? Do the citizens of Israel hold a special place in God's redemptive kingdom? Do those who are religious Jews (as opposed to nominal Jews) either in the nation of Israel, or globally, hold a place of prominence in God's eyes? The Bible, particularly the New Testament, speaks plainly and clearly that the answers to the last two questions are no.

National Israel

Once Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we begin to understand how national Israel "dies" (just as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David all died). The nation dies, and completes its role in God's redemptive plan, because of its sin and inability to meet the demands of God's covenant with them

³¹ Parker, "A Biblical View of Israel."

– namely that it obey God’s voice, be a holy nation, and act as a kingdom of priests on God’s behalf (Ex 19:5-6, Deut 26:18-19). In Matthew 22:18-19 Jesus curses the fig tree which is representative of the nation of Israel (Jer 8:13) and it dies. Then in Matthew 22, Jesus shares what is known as “The Parable of the Wedding Feast” (Matt 22:1-14). A great wedding banquet is given which is compared to the Kingdom of Heaven (God). And the king (Father) “gave a wedding feast for his son,” (Jesus). But the people of the land (national Israel) would not come. And then we learn, “The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” This is to be understood as the death of national Israel. Finally, in Matthew 23:37-39, Jesus declares that the house of Israel is left deserted, and this desolation is reminiscent of what Solomon prophesies in Proverbs 1:24-28.

Religious Jews

Once again upon Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem we begin to understand that the religion of Judaism dies as well. At the end of Matthew 21 Jesus tells a parable known typically as “The Parable of the Tenants.” There is much that can be spoken about this parable, however the key verse is verse 43, where Jesus declares to the chief priests and Pharisees that, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and given to a people producing its fruits.” Why did Jesus declare this? Because they had rejected Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. And then later in those final days of Jesus’ ministry he declares what is known as the “Seven Woes to the Scribes and Pharisees” (Matt 23:13-26), declaring the religious Jews to be “sons of hell,” “blind fools,” and “hypocrites,” “whitewashed tombs” (which is representative of death), and “you serpents, you brood of vipers” (which is significant because it takes us back to the negative of the Genesis 3:15 promise).

So then are the Hebrew people forever rejected by God? No (Rom 11:1). There still remains a remnant of ethnic Jewish people who are chosen by grace (Rom 11:6).

While the story of national Israel reaches its climactic end in Christ, the story does not end for the people of God, not least of all for Jews. Jesus established his church, comprised of all those who are followers and disciples of Christ, a people who are united to him by faith.³²

The church is established and commissioned by Christ (Matt 28:18-20), and is made up of people from every tribe and nation (Rev 5:9-10), who have repented of their sins and believed the gospel (Mark 1:15). No longer will Jews be saved by faith according to the Old Covenant, but they will now be saved by faith according to the New Covenant – which is a superior covenant (Heb 8:6) and in which all of the promises of the Old find their yes and amen in Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

The church and national Israel remain distinct, just as true Israel (the redeemed of God through faith) was distinct from national Israel in the Old Testament. “This is an extremely important point to grasp because it explains why there is so much confusion regarding the relationship between the church and Israel.”³³ Today the people of the nation of Israel are not the people of God. Neither are the Israelites who practice Judaism. Both of these people groups, according to Scripture, stand dead in their trespasses and sins against God because they have not believed in the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. In this epoch of time, the one “holy nation” of God consists of people dispersed throughout the world, each of whom have confessed Christ as Lord, and have believed God raised Him from the dead.

³² Parker, “A Biblical View of Israel.”

³³ Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament.”

The Church and Its Beginnings

The church did not come about *ex nihilo*. It began with 120 people in all. These people were ethnic and believing Jews (true Israel) who were worshipping together as the day of Pentecost arrived (Acts. 1:15). The word “church” is synonymous with the “body of Christ” (Col 1:18) and Jesus Christ is the head of the church. The word church first appears in Matt 16:18, when Jesus affirms Peter’s pronouncement of Him, and proclaims, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Jesus’ words, “I will build my church,” were a foretelling of what was about to happen when He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell believers on the day of Pentecost which followed His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. The start of the church involved Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2), but the church soon spread to other people groups, including the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-6), and then gentiles from throughout the world (Acts 8:26ff). Gregg Allison rightly notes that,

Jesus inaugurated the new covenant through his death and resurrection. Moreover, because certain constitutive elements of the church – baptism with the Holy Spirit for incorporation into the body of Christ, and the distribution of spiritual gifts – awaited the ascension of Jesus Christ and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit in his powerful new ministry on the day of Pentecost, the church did not exist until that day.³⁴

Because of this the Church is defined as the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit.³⁵ This means that there is a new people group that Jesus has come to redeem for Himself in the Kingdom of

³⁴ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 82.

³⁵ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 29.

God. “A people, whose locus ‘is no longer national and tribal’ but ‘international, transracial, and transcultural’.”³⁶ The church is covenantally new and distinct from Israel because the people of the church are not just baptized with the Holy Spirit but indwelt with the Holy Spirit as well (John 14:17), and therefore not a mixed group of unbelieving and believing people who are all marked with the same sign (circumcision of the flesh), as the people of Israel were.

The Church and its Relation to the Covenants

The church is God’s New covenant people because, as has been noted, the church is a new entity of Spirit indwelt people established on the day of Pentecost, thanks be to the salvific work of Jesus Christ. For this reason, “the Jewish people of the old covenant and Christians of the new covenant are very distinct groups of the ‘people of God,’ and the church has not replaced Israel.”³⁷ Although the church was not a recognized or realized entity during any of the covenants of old (Adam-David), it has come to inherit all of those covenant promises through Jesus Christ who established, fulfilled, and will consummate all of the promises of all of the biblical covenants (see 1 Peter 1, and Hebrews 3-4).

The person and ministry of the Holy Spirit is the differentiating factor that makes distinct the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. James Hamilton notes, “The Old Testament teaches that God was with His people by dwelling among them in the temple rather than in them as under the new covenant...The concern in the Old Testament is with God’s presence with the nation, not with individual covenant members possessing the Spirit.”³⁸ In the Old Testament those who were empowered by the Holy Spirit

³⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 713.

³⁷ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 42.

³⁸ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 25.

tended to be prophets, priests, or kings – not every individual believer. The latter prophets, “proclaimed that Yahweh would raise up for them a Messiah whose anointing from the Spirit would be similar to, but also greater than, their leaders of old (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 48:16; 61:1).”³⁹ In fact, the Messiah’s anointing is so much greater that He is given authority to pour out the Spirit on those whom the Father has given Him (Is 44:3, John 16:7, Joel 2:28-29, Acts 2:17-18; 33). This is indeed the structural change of the covenant people of God that Jeremiah and Ezekiel signaled would occur.

All God's people in the covenant will know him, from the least to the greatest, and in relation to the new covenant mediator (who we now know is Christ), all God's people will become prophets, priest, and servant-kings, which in turn will result in God's new covenant people keeping the covenant... In light of the Old Testament context, this prophetic teaching anticipates a universal distribution of the spirit on Messiah’s people in this empowering/gifting sense so that all those in the new covenant will have this spirit and every member will be gifted for service.⁴⁰

So, we see that church, because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, becomes the beneficiary of each and all the covenant blessings. Those in Christ Jesus receive grace (Adamic covenant), peace (Noahic covenant), blessing as the seed of the promise (Abrahamic covenant), rest (Mosaic covenant), and citizenship in heaven, under the rule of an eternally righteous King (Davidic covenant), because they have been forgiven their sins, and born again (New covenant).

The New Testament identifies the church with the dawning of the Kingdom and the ushering in of the “age to come,” which is now arrived in Christ in

³⁹ Hamilton, *God's Indwelling Presence*, 28.

⁴⁰ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 750.

which he will consummate his return. As such, the church is part of the already-not yet tension in the New Testament. Her identity is not with “this present age” (identified with Adam) but with the “age to come” (identified with Christ). As a result of Christ's work, those in faith union with Christ are now citizens of the new, heavenly Jerusalem (our final destination tied to the new creation).⁴¹

The Church and Israel in the New Testament

Contra dispensationalism the New Testament makes clear that there is continuity between “true Israel” and the church as both are the people of God because they are saved by grace through faith. Contra covenant theology, the New Testament also makes clear that the church has not replaced Israel, nor that the church existed in any sense before the first coming of Jesus Christ.⁴² “The relationship between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament is better described in terms of an organic development rather than either separation or replacement.”⁴³ I would argue that this organic development is similar to that of a preborn human being verses a birthed human being. The preborn human being is a human being in every sense of the word, yet he is not fully developed as a preborn, and because of that, is not capable of existing outside the womb until the prescribed time. The saints of old like preborn humans, were saints in every way, having been anointed by the Holy Spirit; but because Jesus Christ had not come and fulfilled all the promises of God from old, these saints were not indwelt with the Holy Spirit being fully born again; that is they were not able to receive the Spirit in His full, complete,

⁴¹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 753.

⁴² In Matt 16:18 Jesus says, “I will build my church.” This indicates future tense. The beginning of the building has not yet begun and will not begin until the pouring out of His Spirit through baptism (Matt 28:18-20). Additionally, the Spirit was not given to indwell the elect of God – completely and fully – until Jesus had been glorified (John 7:39).

⁴³ Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament.”

and permanent measure, because Jesus Christ had not been glorified yet. So, in that way we might view them as preborn Christians; or the other side of that coin is we might view the church as the fully matured and developed “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), having been born again.

In Romans 8 Paul indicates that the church, as beneficiaries of the full and complete ministry of the Spirit in their lives, must live as new creations according to the Spirit. Paul as a former Israelite testifies to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his life (Rom 9:1), and then goes on to explain what must occur for the people of Israel to be saved and remain God’s chosen people. In short, they must receive Jesus as the Messiah, so that they can become part of the church, the body of Christ, the new temple of God, and God’s new covenant people. As Israelites, “to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all,” (Rom 9:4-5). As unbelieving Israelites, they have not been cut-off from the opportunity to experience the blessings of these promises, but unless and until they repent and believe on Christ therefore becoming converted to the church, they will forever forfeit the opportunity to experience these blessings. Paul then goes on to detail what it means to be the offspring of Abraham in a spiritual sense. There is a remnant of Israel who will be saved, and they will be saved as the gentiles are saved, by grace through faith (Rom 9:27, 30). So the Israelites in the New Testament context are still able to be saved, but as firstborn sons (Ex 4:22) who have despised their birthright as Esau did (Gen 25:34), they must turn to God’s beloved Son with whom God is well pleased (Matt 3:17) to inherit all of their covenant promises. In Christ, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Greek, the distinction now lies between those are in Christ and those outside of Christ (Rom 10:12-13). Jesus Christ is the true vine, and the Father is the vinedresser (John 15:1), and in this way those who refuse to abide in Christ will “broken off” (Rom 11:17) and thrown away (John 15:6). And those who do abide by grace through faith,

even if they are “wild olive shoots” (Rom 11:17), they will be grafted in and will produce the fruit of the Spirit to the glory of the Father (John 17:8).

What is the Kingdom of God?

Carl Henry is correct when he states that, “The Old Testament depicts God as Israel's superlative king and as sole sovereign of the universe and of history. Although it does not use the expression ‘kingdom of God,’ the whole of reality distinct from God gains its meaning and worth in relation to God's royal power and rule.”⁴⁴ We see this demonstrated in such verses as Psalm 103:19, “The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all,” and in the testimony of King Nebuchadnezzar, “His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation” (Dan 4:3b). The New Testament reveals to us that this eternal and supreme kingdom is inaugurated by the Messiah of the house of David, the Son of Man (Mark 1:15, Acts 2:29-39), and consummated by the Savior-King who is to come in the eschatological future.⁴⁵ And the kingdom over which He shall rule shall be inhabited by a singular people (John 17:6, 20-24). And this people shall be a singular people united together from two camps. Those under the old covenant – true Israel – a people who are of their father Abraham, justified by faith (Rom 9:6-8). And then those who were promised to be birthed out of the old covenant into the new – a people born again according to the promises of God (Ez 36:22-28). “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Therefore, we cannot consider what the New Testament teaches concerning the Kingdom of God apart from its Old Testament roots.⁴⁶ The Kingdom of God refers to its old covenant promises, its

⁴⁴ Carl F. H. Henry, “Reflections on the Kingdom of God,” *JETS* 35/1 (March 1992): 39.

⁴⁵ Henry, “Reflections on the Kingdom of God,” 40.

⁴⁶ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 718.

inauguration in Christ's first coming, and its consummation in his second coming.

Scripture stresses that Christ is both currently and eschatologically reigning over his creation-kingdom. The realities of life in the 'age to come' have already come from the future into 'this present age,' but not in full. Because it is in the 'the present evil age' (Gal 1:4) that Christ sits on the throne of heaven, 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion ... not only in this age but also in the one to come' (Eph 1:21), there is both continuity and discontinuity between his present and future kingdoms. The future kingdom of Christ is here in kind (continuity), and the present kingdom of Christ will increase unto completion (discontinuity) at his return.⁴⁷

Jesus Christ Fulfills All of the Biblical Covenants

The apostle Paul makes clear in the opening words of Ephesians that all the biblical covenants are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul makes clear that the people of God are blessed in Christ, "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph 1:3). It is in and through the spiritual blessings that we come to understand how the physical promises and inheritance will rightly come to the people of God. We are elect and justified in Christ (v.4), and then set apart for sanctification (v.5), in order to praise the Father and rejoice in His grace toward us (v.6). Then in verses 7-10 we see that, "the new covenant is the fulfillment, telos, and terminus of the biblical covenants."⁴⁸ It is in and through the blood of Christ that we are redeemed and forgiven. It is in and through Jesus Christ's atoning work on the cross that we come to understand the amazing grace of God.

⁴⁷ Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 127.

⁴⁸ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 660.

As we read the storyline of Scripture and come to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we comprehend in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will – which He set forth, according to His own purposes in Christ. And what God wills is to redeem a people for Himself. This was His plan from the beginning of time, for the fullness of time. It is in and through Jesus Christ that all things good, righteous, and holy are united forever – including the uniting of all those who have been saved by grace, through faith, into one people of God for eternity. And this one people of God will inherit a perfect physical home with God, thanks be to Jesus Christ, where God will rule, and be worshipped, and be exalted, and He will supply every need of His people, and sin will be no more (Rev 21-22). As Wellum writes,

For this reason, the new covenant is the fulfillment of the previous covenants; it has brought the other covenants to their God intended end. Fulfillment in the New Testament primarily means that the previous covenants revealed, anticipated, and predicted through instruction in various patterns is now here, albeit in inaugurated form. That is why our Lord is presented as the new covenant head, who in his person and work is greater than Adam by undoing what Adam did and thus winning for us the new creation; as the true seed and offspring of Abraham, who brings blessings to the nations by his cross work; as the true Israel, fulfilling all that she failed to be; and as David's greater Son, who rules the nations in the entire creation as King of kings and Lord of lords.⁴⁹

The Israel – Christ – Church Relationship

What is the relationship between Israel and the church? This can be challenging to understand unless we see Jesus Christ

⁴⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 660-61.

as the one whom Scripture portrays him to be. The one Lord & Savior of one people of God. In the Old Testament, that one people of God, seems to be the people of Israel, as most of the Old Testament focuses on them and their relationship to God. Even though their relationship (obedience and love) is lacking, the authors of the Old Testament Scriptures - even the prophets who proclaim judgement upon Israel - look with hope toward a day of restoration and reconciliation with God. And when Jesus the Messiah does arrive, the first people to believe in Him are Israelites. Yet, Jesus instructs these believing Israelites to carry the gospel to the nations throughout the globe, and soon many who come to faith in Christ are not Israelites, but gentiles; and thus, the church is established and is proclaimed to be God's people.

The problem arises then – how can you have one people of God who consist of two different groups of people – Israel and the church? The answer is found in the clear teaching of Scripture. In the Old Testament there were essentially three groups of people. First there were gentiles, those who did not worship Yahweh, and did not identify as Israelites. Second, there were Israelites who were circumcised in the flesh, but not in the heart. They were outwardly religious, but inwardly they were as dead to the truth of Yahweh as the gentiles. Third, there were Israelites who were circumcised in the flesh, and circumcised in heart as well. These were the remnant that God kept for Himself; those within the greater nation of Israel who were the promised offspring spoken of in Genesis 3:15. Mathison writes, “God always kept for Himself a faithful remnant—those who trusted in Him and who would not bow the knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:18). This remnant, this true Israel, included men such as David, Joash, Isaiah, and Daniel, as well as women such as Sarah, Deborah, and Hannah.”⁵⁰ This remnant was sustained all the way to the time of Jesus, and it was from this remnant that Jesus began to build His church; for it was the true Israel

⁵⁰ Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament.”

who proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ the Son of the living God (Matt 16:16-18). Many of the religious leaders denied that Jesus was the Christ, and in this way “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham” (Rom 9:6-7). Mathison then goes on to rightly state, “On the day of Pentecost, the true Israel, Jewish believers in Jesus, was taken by the Holy Spirit and formed into the nucleus of the New Testament church (Acts 2). The Holy Spirit was poured out on the true Israel, and the same men and women who were part of this true Israel were now the true new covenant church.”⁵¹

In this way we see how God is able to harmonize, what appears to be in conflict. The remnant of old, “true Israel,” were a people elected of God, and saved by God by grace through faith in God, and His promises to them. Those old covenant promises were not fully understood by true Israel, but they were fully understood by the new remnant – the church. And those promises of old were understood to have their fulfillment in Jesus the Christ. So then, even today, the one people of God are all those who have repented of their sin against God and believed on Christ as their Lord & Savior. This one people of God consist of people who are earthly citizens of Israel, but also earthly citizens of other nations – Mexico, Cambodia, Zimbabwe, and Norway for example. On the other hand, those who live in the nation of Israel, who identify as Jews, or children of Abraham, are not part of God’s chosen people. They are outside of the new covenant and are children of Adam, just like the rest of mankind who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

God created human beings for relationship. In the beginning He created Adam, not because He needed Adam, but because He desired to relate with Adam and share His glory with Adam. God gave Adam all that he needed, and then gave him instructions on how he was to relate to both the Creator and the creation.

⁵¹ Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament.”

And God warned Adam what would occur to him if he disregarded Him, and disregarded his privilege, and disobeyed. Sin would bring forth death. And it did. Fast forward to the final chapters of Scripture and we find God joyfully dwelling with His people and caring for them. Death has been defeated, and the people of God have been restored to fellowship with Him for eternity. How did this happen? Through Jesus Christ, who is “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:13), and is “the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). As we read the Bible, we see God progressively revealing Himself and His plan to defeat death and restore humanity to our privileged position in the creation and in relationship with God, through the biblical covenants. Those in the Old Testament epoch (believing Israelites/Gentiles) who looked forward in faith, were counted by God as righteous. Even though the atoning work of Christ had not yet been fulfilled, they understood their names to be written in the Lamb’s book of life. Likewise, those in the New Testament epoch (the Church) who were saved by grace, through faith, and were given the spiritual insight to see Christ for who He was, understood their names to be written in the same book of life. Two distinct people, in two distinct time periods, soon to be united together by one Spirit, into one body, under one Head, thanks be to one Father who is over all, and through all, and in all (Eph 4:1-6).

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