

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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DOES ISRAEL HAVE A FUTURE?

Almost two years ago, some students from Dallas Theological Seminary (My old alma mater) conducted a videotaped interview of Gary North and me on the subject of postmillennialism. Why? They were taking a course on eschatology and for their semester project they wanted to present the postmillennial perspective. And rather than listen to what their professors say postmillennialists believe, they decided to do what any respectable scholar would do, "go to the original source."

You would think that someone at Dallas might have thought of this sooner, but it took these enterprising students to come up with the obvious. Actually, Dr. Robert Lightner did somewhat attempt such an interview for one of his books, but the problem was that he came through town unannounced. I was out on vacation and he didn't re-schedule. The interview never took place. Too bad, I would have enjoyed it. I think dispensationalism has mainly discussed a **modernistic**, as opposed to an evangelical and reformed, view of postmillennialism. Consequently, I don't believe that dispensationalism has been interacting with **real** postmillennialism. So did the students who interviewed us. They realized that they needed to talk to some contemporary, red-eyed **Bible-believing** "posties."

The time of the interview with the students was the late 1980s, nearly twenty years after Lindsey's turning-point-book, *Late Planet*. The eschatological climate had changed. The generation of the fig tree had failed to produce a rapture. Premil book sales had been going down. Postmil sales had been going up. The students who had come for the interview knew that "the times they were a chang'n." They understood that a resurgence of postmillennialism was occurring right in Dallas Seminary's back yard and that very little had been done or said about it.

Wonder of wonders, a revival of postmillennialism was even affecting Dallas Seminary; at least it was affecting it enough for these students to want to hear another point of view, the polar-opposite-point-of-view in eschatology. Since the interview, I have learned that the new interest in postmillennialism, together with a mini reformation of Calvinism and reformed theology that took place in the early 70s and a growing concern among some of dispensationalism's theologians to provide a **social ethic** for their theology, has indeed affected contemporary *pre-trib, pre-millennialism*. There is a new-improved-version of dispensationalism being taught at Dallas Theological Seminary, a version bearing all of the markings of playing catch-up to postmillennialism. And believe me, on the basis of what I've heard from one of its new, "cutting edge" theological professors, it is certainly a new and better version, and definitely not what I was taught in the early 70s. As a matter of fact, it's so improved, I think some Dallas Seminary professors have already moved into or at least come dan-

gerously close to, covenant theology!

Understand, I don't fault them for adjusting their theology. If I did, after better understanding Reformed and Covenantal theology, so can they. Besides, I think they're returning full circle to one of their founders whose theology is hardly ever mentioned, even though a lecture series is named after him, **W. H. Griffith Thomas**. He was not a postmillennialist, as far as I know, but he certainly was a strongly Calvinistic Anglican: all five points of the TULIP acrostic. So, to quote another book of Hal Lindsey's, at Dallas Seminary.

The Interview

I'll never forget the interview with the students from Dallas Seminary!

The students came to the church where I pastor and set up in the chancel area. After a brief discussion of the format, the interviewing student said the proverbial, "Roll'em." The first question out of his mouth was something to the effect, "Why don't postmillennialist see a future for **ethnic** Israel? Why don't you distinguish Israel from the church?" North and I responded, almost in unison as I recall, "But we do distinguish Israel from the Church." At that point, the young student interviewer lost his composure and could not figure out where to go from there. He literally raised his hands in a "time-out" fashion and told the other student running the camera, "cut, cut," meaning he wanted to stop.

The camera man dutifully stopped, while the interviewer sat there sort of stunned. We asked him what was wrong. He said, "You have to realize that you men have destroyed the entire interview with the first question. We are told at Dallas that covenant theologians do not see a distinction between Israel and the Church."

I knew he had been thrown off track, because in my student days I had been unprepared to handle the kind of covenant theology that makes an Israel/Church distinction. But I was surprised that the students still had not interacted with some very powerful exegetical works that present a postmillennial kind of covenant theology, not even counting some of the more recent works from the Christian Reconstructionist movement.

We said, "That's nonsense. Robert Haldane's commentary on Romans has been out for approximately one hundred and fifty years.² John Murray's commentary has been out since 1968, as part of the New

1. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Principles of Theology: An Introduction to Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Vine Books, [1930] 1978). Thomas' commitment to Calvinism and Reformed theology is obvious.

2. Robert Haldane, *An Epistle to the Romans* (Mac Dill AFB, Florida: Mac Donald Publishing Company, [1839] 1974). This is an excellent reprint. There are others available on the market.

tary Testament.³ Both are invaluable exegetical works. Both take the same view on Remans 11, since Murray largely depended on Haldane. Both carefully distinguish between **ethnic** Israel and the Church.”

Then North further explained how he had studied under Murray. In fact, he had become a postmillennialist after hearing the professor's exegesis of Remans 11 in his Romans class at Westminster Theological Seminary. North even described how he would attend Murray's lectures on Remans and receive large doses of postmillennialism. Then he would go to Murray's senior theology class and hear amillennialism. He explained the tension as the result of being caught between exegesis and the party line. Murray could teach the exegesis of Remans 11 without calling it postmillennialism. Whereas, he **had** to teach amillennialism and call it systematic theology. This allowed Murray to teach both systems in two different classes. Only those who closely followed Murray's exegesis of Remans understood what was happening. Obviously, a number of students didn't follow out the implications of Murray's exegesis of Remans 11. “But it's all there in black and white,” as North calmly explained. “Murray was clear in his distinction between Israel and the Church. Yet, he believed that the conversion of the Jews preceded the conversion of the Gentiles, before the end would come.”

The student said, “I **now** know this, but all of my questions for the rest of the interview are based on the presupposition that postmillennialists don't distinguish between Israel and Church. I really don't know where to go from here, because I wanted to concentrate on the millennium question. How can I when you guys have unraveled the dispensational argument in the first question.”

We responded by saying, “GO ahead and ask what you think are the important questions. We basically know the kinds of concerns that a dispensationalist would have. If we see that you're missing anything, we'll appraise you so that you can get a complete interview for your class.” The student agreed and finished the task, and gave us an excellent discussion of the postmillennial view of the millennium. The last I heard, the video tape was floating in the DTS underground. All indications are that the tape will be around for a while.

Confusion Over Israel

The interview illustrates a point that I should like to make: there is general misrepresentation about evangelical postmillennialism's view of Israel. Some would even pervert the truth so far as to suggest that postmillennialism is anti-semitic.⁴ But this confusion shouldn't be, if **honest** and **careful** scholarship is practiced. Iain H. Murray wrote an excellent book on postmillennialism's view of the Jews well over fifteen years ago, *Hope*.⁵ In this work, Murray proves an important thesis. He argues primarily that postmillennialism can be traced to the evangelical origins of the Puritans, not the unitarian Daniel Whitby,⁶ as dispensationalists sometimes carelessly argue in their more unscholarly pieces.⁷ Note that Professors' House and Ice commit this intellectual blunder,⁸ bringing into serious question the scholarship of their book. Research is more than

compiling footnotes; it is their correct use in the presentation of a coherent argument. This book is neither coherent nor correct. In contrast, however, as part of Murray's thesis on the evangelical roots of postmillennialism, he proves that a revival of this **eschatology** brought renewed interest in the **conversion of the Jews** (Israel). Murray says,

There are **several** reasons why the future of the Jews was a subject of importance in the minds of so many Christians in the seventeenth century. For one thing they considered that a concern for the welfare of that scattered nation is a necessary part of Christian piety. writes Edward Elton, “not to hate the Jews (as many do) only because they are Jews, which name is among many so odious that they think they cannot call a man worse than to call him a Jew; but, beloved, this ought not to be so, for we are bound to love and honour the Jews, as being the ancient people of God, to wish them well, and to be earnest in prayer to God for their conversion.”⁹

Why did this new emphasis of piety return to the Church in the seventeenth century? Murray explains that it was a **new (postmillennial) view of the kingdom**.

Their [Christians in the seventeenth century] interest in Israel was always set in a wider context than the particular future of that nation; it was Israel's future within the kingdom of Christ and the relation between their incoming and the advancement of Christ's glory that was uppermost in their thinking. Puritan England and Covenanting Scotland knew much of spiritual blessing and it was the prayerful longing for wider blessing, not a mere interest in the unfulfilled prophecy, which led them to give such place to Israel.¹⁰

Thus, evangelical postmillennialism is not anti-semitic. But in order to clear away the confusion about Israel, it is important to see that there are essentially three views of Israel: Israel as a **sui generis**; Israel as a **secular** state; and, Israel as a **representative** of the Gentiles. All three have unfortunately appeared among the Church's views; only the third position is correct.

First, the **sui generis** view of Israel is that they are so totally **unique** that they are the **exclusive** people of God, completely unlike any other people for whatever reason. According to orthodox Jews, they are the only truly converted people in the world. They have always held the keys to the kingdom and they always will. They have been given the land of Israel as a token of God's love for them, whereas God has not given anyone else exclusive rights to any other part of the world. Technically, Israel can take anybody else's land, but no one can take theirs. They have exclusive rights because they are exclusively God's people.

As a variation, dispensationalism believes Israel is the **primary** people of God. They were originally intended to be God's people and the Church only occurred in history because of Israel's rejection of the Christ. The Church surprised God; it is His second love, appearing in the parenthesis of history when God's plan is circumvented by Israel's rebellion. Because Israel is His first love, the promises given to her are still kept. Strict dispensationalism will not say that Israel is the exclusive people of God; there are two peoples. But it argues that the **promises** are exclusively given to Israel, vis a vis the land and all that God gave in the Old Covenant. The promises are focused on Israel as an ethnic people and no one else. Some mild dispensationalists will add that the **benefits** of the promises sometimes flow to the Church, but never directly. All

3 John Murray, *International on the Testament: Epistle the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

4. Wayne House and T. Ice, *Theology: Blessing* (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah, 1988), pp. 397-406

5. Iain Murray, *Hope: Study in Revival the Interpretation* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, [1971] 1975).

6. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

7. *Dispensationalism in* “The House of Seven Garbles,” Gary North (Tyler, Texas: I. C. E., 12/88).

8. *Theology: Blessing* pp. 206, 209,

Ibid p.

10. *Ibid.*, pp.

in all, this is still an **exclusionist** view.

Second, the **secular** view holds that Israel has no unique place among the peoples of the world; no special promises are made to it; it has no special relevance to the program of God. It can be a nation, or it does not necessarily have to be a nation. It does not even have to exist as an ethnic group or people. It can become extinct without any loss to the world, nor does its presence necessarily add to the world. It is one among many nations.

Third, the **representative** view teaches that Israel as a covenanted people, and not necessarily a nation, represents the **Gentile nations**. Israel was the first of the nations to be called out by God after the tower of Babel. It was the **firstfruits** of the program of God to reclaim the nations of the world. As such, it was the priesthood of the world; through it and it alone the nations would find sacrifice and salvation. But as the covenantal representative of Gentiles, it called for the death penalty on Jesus Christ, the Savior who was supposed to be represented by Israel. Because Israel was the representative, it was held accountable by God. But because it was only a representative, it was not given **exclusive** responsibility for the death of Christ. After all, Rome became Israël's appointed henchman, meaning the Gentiles joined with the Jews in the Crucifixion of Christ. But Rome repented and Israel did not. For its persistent unrepentance and hostility to the Gospel, Jerusalem was destroyed. As a covenanted people, however, Israel was still allowed to exist even though it was no longer God's priesthood for the world. It had joined the ranks of the Gentile nations after A.D. 70.

God appointed a new representative nation (Matthew 23), the Church. It assumed the role of Israel by becoming a New Israel. Yet, outside the Church the Old Israel still remains in the plan of God as a representative of the nations. What does it represent? It represents the **conversion** of the world to Christ. According to the Apostle Paul, its conversion to Christ and into the Church leads to the fullness of the Gentiles (Remans 11 :12). It is instrumental in the conversion of the Gentile, leading to the glory days of the kingdom.

I hold to the third view, neither anti-semitic nor Zionist. First, according to this position, Israel maintains a special place in the plan of God. It is greatly loved by God. Because of its unique role in the conversion of the Gentiles, it is to be evangelized, not exterminated. It is to be called back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, not excluded from a place in the world. It is to be cherished by the Church, the New Israel, not excoriated as a "Christ-killer"; remember, the **whole** world crucified Christ, for above His head were written in **all** the major languages of Jew and Gentile: "King of the Jews."¹¹

But second, the representative or covenantal view is not nationalistic. It does not believe there is magic in being a political unit, a nation. Just because Israel has become nationalized has little or nothing to do with its becoming "covenantalized"; in fact, being politicized has always stood in its way of accepting Christ as Savior and more importantly, **Lord**. The representative view can therefore advocate love for the Jew, while being able to reject his anti-Christian nation that persecutes Christians and butchers other people who need Christ just as much as they. It can work for the conversion of Israel without becoming the pawn of a maniacal nationalism, a racial supremacy as ugly and potentially oppressive as its twentieth century arch enemy, Aryanism.

The Covenantal Structure of Remans 3-11

The third view of Israel sounds good, but is it Biblical?

Can this position be found anywhere in Holy Scripture? Yes to both questions. The representative view of Israel surfaces in the Book of Remans, particularly Remans 11. In order to **exegete** the eleventh chapter, however, it is necessary to see that this **covenantal** view of Israel appears against the back drop of an overall covenantal structure of the book. Since I have already developed this in *You Prosper*,¹² will not discuss the book as a whole. Rather, I want to lay the contextual groundwork of the immediate context of Remans 11, the second section of the book (Remans 1:8-11 :31). This large section follows a pattern, setting the stage for our covenantal exegesis of Remans 11 in the next

Commentators have struggled with the outline of Remans. The most difficult connection to establish has been the relationship between the first eight chapters and chapters nine through eleven, directly concerned about **ethnic** Israel's fate. How could Paul apparently jump from the eighth chapter, which deals with "life in the Spirit," to Israel's future in the plan of God? The two sections don't apparently fit. Most commentators have therefore concluded that chapters nine through eleven are some sort of **excursus**, having no specific connection to the first eight chapters. The only tie would seem to be that Paul talks about the conversion of the Gentiles in the first eight chapters and the salvation of the Jews in the next three chapters, meaning the book is organized around the **doctrine of the salvation of the world**.

This will work, but this more doctrinal understanding of the structure of Remans has two main problems. First, the first eight chapters address questions raised by **Jewish** detractors. Paul speaks to **Jewish** concerns, not **Gentile** matters. Actually, he seems more interested in the problems of **Jews**. Second, chapters nine through eleven are not primarily devoted to Israel's salvation. They speak more of its rejection. Moreover, they give the most elaborate treatment in Scripture of the **Gentiles'** conversion, done, of course in relation to the Jews. So, the **excursus** theory around a general doctrinal theme of salvation is too broad.

One simple grammatical observation points us in the right direction. In the Remans 3-11 segment, Paul uses the strongest possible denial to a series of rhetorical questions, "may it never be" (**me genoito**), **ten** times. He follows the covenant pattern twice, as the outline below indicates.

It is not enough, however, simply to observe the ten uses of **me genoito**, even if they do follow the covenantal structure. What issue(s) do they address? To answer this question we should note an important statement made at the beginning of the book, one which most commentators recognize as part of a thesis statement: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek**" (Remans 1:16).

Prior to this statement, Paul had said that he was praying for and eager to come to **Rome** (verse 15). To him, he saw something special about the city. As the "for" at the beginning of verse seventeen indicates, he provides an explanation. He summarizes the city's importance in one clause, "to the Jew first and also to the Gentile." So what? By this comment, Paul revealed that a major shift had taken place in redemptive history. He saw a transfer of **priesthoods**. In the Old Covenant, Israel had been a nation of priests (Exodus 19:6). After the Resurrection, the Church became the new priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). For Paul, Rome symbolized the shift in priesthoods, or hierarchies, the move from Jew to Gentile.

11. Klaas Schilder, *Schilder Trilogy: Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, [1940], 1979), p. 194.

12. Ray R. Sutton, *That* pp. 246-252.

(Tyler, Texas: I. C. E., 1987),

But such a change created many problems and raised many questions for the Jews and Christians in Rome. These questions are grouped by Paul's use of "may it never be." They concern two areas.

First, they answer basic **redemptive history** concerns. The Jew would begin to ask such questions as: "Where does ethnic Israel now fit into the plan of God in the history of redemption? Before, they had been priests to the nations, but now what happens to them? What will be their relationship to the Church? Do they still maintain a position of superiority in the covenant? if not, do they have a place at all?"

Thus, the "may it never be" questions develop an explanation of the shift from Jew to Gentile. Consider the beginning and the end of these ten questions. The first questions cover matters that a Jew would ask: "What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? . . . What then, if some [Jews] did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be!" (Romans 3:1-4a). This question has to do with God's character, who He is, in other words a transcendence issue of the covenant. **The last questions, however, focus** more directly on the future status of Israel and its relationship to the Church. Paul says, "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? **May it never be!** For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Romans 11:1). Then the Apostle concludes with the final "may it never be" question, "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? **May it never be!** But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous" (Romans 11:11).

Second, for the believer in the Church at ancient Rome, he was faced also with some difficult questions leading to serious moral issues. What does this shift in priesthoods say about God's character? Is God fair in such a change? What effect does this have on the Law of God? Is the believer still obligated to keep the commandments of the Old Testament? And so forth and so on the questions went, judging by the ones listed in the Book of Romans.

More than questions, however, the interrogatives of Paul indicate that certain sinful deductions had been made. Some of the believers were using grace as a justification for licentious living (Romans 6:1ff.). Others were still claiming the primacy of the Old Covenant by keeping the dietary laws and sabbath days. As a consequence, the Church at Rome was faced with serious problems, even sins.

Paul responded by structuring his letter in the form of a covenant lawsuit. As was pointed out in earlier issues of the second section of a covenant lawsuit is characterized by questions. The messenger interrogates on behalf of the suzerain, raising questions to convict the offending member of the covenant. This is precisely what we find in the ten "may it never be" questions.

The following outline, therefore, gives a brief overview

13. Ray R. Sutton, Texas: I. C. E., June, 1988).

Renewal, "Covenantal Evil (III)" (Tyler,

to provide the covenantal background for Romans 11.

Transcendence (Romans 3:1-4)

If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar (Romans 3:3-4).

Hierarchy (Romans 3:5-30)

But if unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms,) May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? (Romans 3:5-6)

Ethics (Romans 3:31-5:21)

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law (Romans 3:31).

Oath (Romans 6:1-14)

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? (Romans 6:1-3)

Succession (Romans 6:15-7:6)

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (Romans 6:15-1,6)

Succession (Romans 7:7-12)

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet" (Romans 7:12).

Oath/Sanctions (Romans 7:13-9:13)

Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful (Romans 7:13).

Ethics (Romans 9:14-10:21)

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! (Romans 9:14)

Hierarchy (Romans 11:1 -10)

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1).

Succession/Transcendence (Romans 11:1 1-36)

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous (Romans 11:11).