

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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A POSTMILLENNIAL JEW (THE COVENANT STRUCTURE OF ROMANS 11)

by Ray R. Sutton

Transcendence

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. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (Romans 11:1-2a).

Hierarchy

Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. . . (Romans 11:2b-10).

Ethics

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. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! . (Romans 11:11-14).

Oath/Sanctions

For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? . . . But if some of the branches were broken off, and you being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partakers with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches . (Romans 11:15-24).

Succession

For . . . a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" . . (Romans 11:24-36).

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They say if you live long enough you'll see everything! What I saw and heard the other day is definitely in the "if you live long enough category," what some might even call, "Ripley's believe or not."

I talked to a postmillennial Jew! I didn't go to him; he providentially came to me; he walked right into my office unannounced. I hadn't told him ahead of time about my belief in postmillennialism, and he certainly had not in-

dictated to me his postmillennial convictions. If he had, you can bet I would have been writing this newsletter a lot sooner! He was simply trying to tell me about a business matter and I began to discuss Christ with him.

During the course of the conversation, I learned of his Christian commitment, and he was the one who volunteered the information about postmillennialism. I was in virtual shock to find a postmillennial Jew in Tyler, Texas; mind you, there isn't a large Jewish community in Tyler; for that matter, there isn't large anything in Tyler, except empty bank buildings and Southern Baptist Churches. But here was a postmillennial Jew in my own office. I thought to myself, "Self, this is the providence of God; the Lord has led this faithful Christian right to me."

I tried to conceal my surprise; I wanted to think postmillennially because after all, if postmillennialism is right, we should expect to see a shift from premillennialism to postmillennialism as the world converts, especially in the Jewish Christian community.

Nevertheless, what I knew intellectually was struggling to catch up with what I had experienced among converted Jews, who are mostly premillennial. I was also so moved that I was having a hard time remembering what he was saying. I felt the same way when I once witnessed an automobile accident. I knew that I would be called on to retell what happened, but I was so excited and I was trying so hard to remember that I felt as though my eyes and ears were at war with my memory. Now I was part of and witness to an incredible conversation. I knew it had to be retold. I kept as many of my Jewish brother's comments in my mind as I could. The following account is as much of the conversation as I can remember.

I pick up our talk at the point where my friend, whom I'll call Benjamin, starts discussing eschatology. To protect him, I'm going to practice a bit of historical fiction. He doesn't want to get involved in any theological battles, so I'll recast the conversation according to true statements that were made.

Benjamin: "Have you studied much eschatology?"

Sutton: "Yes, a little. In fact, I went to a seminary that some would say specialized in it."

Benjamin: "Oh, really. Where was that?"

Sutton: "Dallas Theological Seminary. I graduated in 1976."

Benjamin: "Ah yes. I am a Messianic Jew, meaning I am a Jew who has come to believe in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. When I first became a believer, I had many teachers who went to Dallas Seminary. They taught me all about dispensationalism. Until recently, I was a premillennialist."

Sutton: "Uh, if you're not a premillennialist then what are you, an amillennialist?" [I know I should have suggested that he had become a postmillennialist, but I guess I wasn't thinking very postmillennially].

Benjamin: "I know you're going to think I'm crazy but I've become a postmillennialist; I just can't believe in premillennialism anymore."

Sutton: "Gulp, did you say 'postmillennialist?'"

Benjamin: "Yes!"

Sutton: "Well no, I'm not going to think you're crazy because I've become postmillennial in my viewpoint as well."

Benjamin: "Really? I can't believe it. I didn't know that you had made the same change."

Sutton: "Well look, let's not talk about me, tell me how you became postmillennial. I don't know of very many Jews who have become postmill." [In fact there are a good number who ranks grow day by day as they realize that postmillennialism creates a true love for the Jews, far better than premillennialism.]

Benjamin: "I was reading the Early Church Fathers and the Puritans. I noticed especially in the Puritans that they for the most part had a postmillennial eschatology. I read their expositions of the prophetic passages of the Bible and I found their exegesis to be much better. I also discovered that the Puritans had a great love for the Jews and what I would call a superior motivation to help my brothers."

Sutton: "So it was mainly through reading the Puritans that you became postmillennial?"

Benjamin: "Not really."

Sutton: "What else could there be?"

Benjamin: "I got tired of being told Jesus was coming only to discover that the date-setters were wrong every time. I also became weary of all the other trappings of premillennial expectations: antichrist, tribulation, and too much wrong emphasis on Israel."

Sutton: "I'm surprised to hear you say, 'too much emphasis on Israel.' What do you mean?"

Benjamin: "I should say that the emphasis is misplaced! I hear premillennialists talk about the importance of Israel's becoming a nation, and there is a certain amount of importance to my people's being able to have a land of their own. But I'm afraid that many of my people, especially my Christian Jewish friends, are being misled into thinking that the nearness of Christ's return is automatically connected to Israel's becoming a nation."

Sutton: "But don't you think premillennialism's application of nationalistic emphases to Jewish evangelism has been effective?"

Benjamin: "What exactly do you mean?"

Sutton: "Simply this: Premillennial evangelical have been able to say to Jews, 'Christ said He would return in the same generation that Israel again became a nation, so you must prepare for His return by believing in Him.' Don't you think this has been a good method of evangelism?"

Benjamin: "Not really, because if Jesus doesn't return soon then the whole basis of their evangelism disappears."

Sutton: "I agree."

Benjamin: "Besides, it's not premillennialism that makes Jewish evangelism effective. Premillennialists have basically been the ones who have evangelized the Jews the most in the last few decades. And premillennialism has provided a motivation but not the best one. The best motivation for Jewish evangelism is found in

Remans 11, which teaches that the complete fullness of the Gentiles will not come until the Jews convert,"

Sutton: "I agree!"

The conversation continued for nearly half an hour. I was amazed at my Jewish brother's perception. He had discovered what evangelical postmillennialists have known for centuries: the real test of love for the Jews is in their being evangelized, not in their being nationalized.

Politicized Dispensationalism

Premillennialism has taught for years that the Jews will not be converted until the Church has been removed from the earth. At the same time, it has held that Israel needed to become a nation before being converted. Classic dispensationalists never believed Israel had to become a nation before the rapture. The newer brand of dispensationalism has opted for a before-the-rapture nationalization of Israel. Nevertheless, both have argued for the re-formation of a political state at some point in relation to the rapture.

Why? Classic and modern dispensationalism have a futuristic interpretation of Revelation, meaning they understand the books prophecies to be fulfilled in the future. Since these prophecies obviously speak of Israel in a political state – Temple, levitical priests, king and so on – it must become a nation for those prophecies to be fulfilled. Unless of course, Revelation's prophecies are viewed along the lines of covenantal postmillennialism, as already having been fulfilled in the first century, when Israel was still a political unit.

This emphasis on the nationalization of Israel, however, led the newer brand of dispensationalism to break with classic dispensationalism. Dwight Pentecost, head of the Bible department at Dallas Seminary for several years, started teaching, or at least heavily implying, that Israel was supposed to become a nation before the rapture.

Hal Lindsey went to Dallas Seminary in the early 1960s and understood the significance of what Pentecost was saying. *The Late Great Planet Earth*, had a suspiciously familiar ring to it: it sounded like Pentecost's lecture notes. What most don't know, even those within the dispensational camp, is that Hal Lindsey was not very welcome at Dallas Seminary after his book became so popular.

For one, he was not appreciated for ripping off his professor's insights.

For another, he was already having marital problems in the 1970s. Some were even starting to call him **Dispensationalism's Henry VIII**, because he was marrying and remarrying so often. Some would even say, "he was out there havin' fun, in the warm California sun," to use the refrain from an old rock'n roll song.

And then the greatest irony of all, which perhaps put the biggest chill on the Lindsey-Dallas Seminary relationship, was that Lindsey had become the most popular mouth-piece for dispensationalism by breaking with system. He had become dispensationalism's representative by departing from the historic party-line. He preached a politicized interpretation of dispensationalism, meaning he argued that Israel's becoming a nation was fulfillment of pre-rapture prophecy, what classical dispensationalism had always rejected: remember, it taught that no prophecy is fulfilled during the "Church Age." Lindsey, however, shifted the center of gravity of dispensationalism from the Gospel to the nationalization of Israel. He had become evangelicalism's Jean Dixon, a sort of dispi-fortune-teller, using the events growing out of the formation of the nation of Israel as his crystal ball to look into the future.

But what was Dallas Seminary to do? They had to look over their shoulder and eventually not allow him to come

back to speak on campus, a kind of academic shunning. Dispensationalism peaked in the 70s. The popularity of Lindsey's book had probably been largely responsible for ushering dispensationalism into its "finest hour." The seminary had been accredited, become respectable, and was experiencing its greatest period of growth. It did not and probably shouldn't have said anything about Lindsey's personal problems; they were the local churches' responsibility, at least one of which I'm told gave Lindsey his walking papers.

The Lindsey situation, by the way, points out the problem of being an independent seminary that is not directly accountable to any church body, which means it cannot demand direct accountability from anyone else except from its employees. This situation also points out one of the chronic problems of the "Independent Bible Church Movement." They cannot maintain consistent accountability among their churches. Why? They have ignored the Jerusalem Council principle (Acts 15). They have refused to admit that there are problems that are bigger than a local congregation can handle. They have resisted the need to be officially and governmentally united together for the maintenance of order and the propagation of the Gospel. Consequently, they haven't been able to contain Lindsey's mouth or his apparent lack of marital rigor.

Hal Lindsey is a theological embarrassment to dispensationalism, especially to Dallas Theological Seminary. He hawked an overly political emphasis of the system. I and many others have seen this problem for years. My postmillennial Jewish friend had started to see it. And from what he tells me, many other Messianic Jews are beginning to break from dispensationalism. They realize that covenantal postmillennialism teaches and has always taught a true love for the Jews because covenantal postmillennialism advocates a true love for the Law of God, the Torah! Without the Law of God, the Jews will never be provoked to real jealousy; they'll never be converted. As the Apostle Paul argues, the conversion of the Jews signals a time of worldwide revival, a time that must occur before Christ returns.

My postmillennial Jewish friend had realized something important. He had recognized the fallacies of premillennialism. He understood the detrimental effects such a system would have on his people in the long-term. But more than the negative, he had discovered a new (old) view of his people, one that created a greater concern and love for them. He had found postmillennialism in Romans 11.

The Covenantal Structure of Romans 11

Postmillennialism is perhaps more clearly taught in Romans 11 than any other chapter. If the reader simply follows the text, he can easily trace the redemptive history disclosed. He will observe Paul's main concern: the place of his people in the future of the world. He will find Paul asking the question, "What is going to happen with my people now that they have rejected the Gospel?" He will note the Apostle further questioning, "Will the Jewish people ever return to the covenant?"

Yes, covenant is unquestionably a major theme in Romans 11. Paul alludes to it in the first verse of the chapter when he talks about being a descendant of Abraham. He recalls in his Jewish brothers' minds the covenant because it was to Abraham that it was first given. The Apostle then continues by using several images that were common symbols of the Biblical covenant. He refers to their "table" being a snare to them (11:9). He speaks of the "dough" from which bread is made and the "branches" that are "broken off" from the tree, perhaps the primary symbol of the covenant in Scripture. He describes Israel as being "cut off" (11:22), using language referring to the covenant symbol

of the Abrahamic covenant: **circumcision**. He even explicitly mentions the word covenant. Finally, the Apostle structures the chapter according to the Biblical covenant, as noted at the beginning of the newsletter.

So, Paul's concerns are **covenantal**, namely: how and why Israel was removed from the covenant; how the Gentiles too could be cut out of the covenant if they became arrogant and apostatized; how and when the Jewish people would one day be included back into the covenant; and, what the covenantal ramifications would be for the Gentiles when the Jews finally do come back to the covenant.

In general, his point to the Church at Rome is simple: the moment the Jews come back to the covenant, the Gentiles will have their greatest day in history; they will see worldwide conversion; the prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel will be fulfilled. So to put Paul's exhortation in common vernacular, "Get out there and preach the covenant to the Jews and lovingly lead them back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Joseph."

In particular, the following explanation provides a more detailed treatment of Paul's covenantal emphases in Romans 11.

Transcendence (11:1-2a)

Romans 11 begins on the identification theme. Covenants always start here (Deuteronomy 1:1-4), describing the head (suzerain) of the covenant. In this case, Paul's goal is to encourage Israel that God has not totally abandoned them. To do so, he follows the covenantal pattern, using the covenant itself to minister to them. He identifies God as the God of Abraham, a common Old Covenant designation of the Lord, when he points out that he is a "descendant [seed] of Abraham." For, often God would simply say, "I am the God of Abraham" to refer to His covenantal relationship with Israel.

Beyond this, Paul wants his people to see his membership in the New Covenant as evidence that God has not abandoned them. He reminds them that since God is Lord of the covenant, and since he is a Jew who has been preserved as a son of Abraham, God will also keep His promises to them. We learn from Paul's approach that the best way to reassure people that God has not forsaken them is by identifying who is Head of the covenant, meaning who is really in control.

Important for the correct interpretation of the chapter, however, is the proper understanding of Israel. The discussion is aimed at Israel, but which one: ethnic or covenantal? In the Old Covenant, they were one and the same. But which one is Paul discussing in this chapter? He is talking about the state and future of ethnic Israel because he says, "I too am an Israelite." Some, such as Calvin have tried to argue that the focus is on covenantal Israel, but Paul is talking about the relationship of ethnic, apostate Israel to the covenant. The distinction is critical as we shall see in the unfolding of the chapter.

Hierarchy (11:2b-10)

The second part of a Biblical covenant normally discusses the representatives of the covenant. This theme is brought out as Paul turns to a discussion of the remnant principle. He looks back to the days of Elijah, implying that they are analogous to the first century. He describes how the prophet, together with the "seven thousand who had not bowed their knee" (11:4), represented Israel. His point: A remnant represents the larger body, holding back the judgment of God on the people as a whole.

At the time of Paul's letter to the Romans, the remnant principle was still in effect. Paul makes an implicit connection and an explicit application of the remnant principle. Implicitly, the Apostle parallels himself with Elijah, and he

connects the church, of which some converted Jews were part, with the remnant in Elijah's day. A remnant is a "called out" group of people. Significantly, the Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*, a combination of two words, *ek* (out of) and *kaleo* (call), meaning "called out." The very word for church contains the remnant principle. The Church is the new remnant and as such it represents the rest of world!

Explicitly, Paul applies the remnant principle to teach the Jews about salvation by grace, which they had forgotten. If a whole nation is corrupt, a few faithful could only surface by the grace of God. How else could a minority prevail or even learn about the faith? The Gentiles and the converted Jews could not have learned about the faith from the nation of Israel. They could have only been saved by grace.

Ethics (11:11-14)

The third part of a Biblical covenant normally lays down the stipulations or terms of the covenant. In Remans 11, Paul continues to follow the covenant pattern. He moves from the concept of representation to address the matter of Israel's fall. What does Israel's fall have to do with the third part of the covenant? Instead of discussing the stipulations of the covenant, Paul refers to Israel's "transgressions" of the Law of God. So, he is obviously referring to violation of specific stipulations, a clear reference to the subject of the third part of the covenant.

There is another parallel in Paul's verses to the third segment of the covenant, especially the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 5-26). The whole point of the ethics section of the covenant was to show the people of God that they were not only supposed to live by the commandments, but they were to have dominion through this obedience. Israel was specifically taught that faithfulness to the Law of God meant the Gentile world around them would be blessed. But violation of the law would bring down the Gentiles on them; they would be conquered, in other words, by the Gentiles. The Gentiles would spoil the righteous, in this case the Jews of the Old Covenant. Specifically, a transfer of blessing occurred positively or negatively according to obedience. Obedience led to more for the Gentiles and disobedience resulted in the Gentiles getting what the Jews had. Indeed, this is pictured time and again in the Old Testament.

Given this fact, consider Paul's statement: "By their[Israel's] transgressions, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Remans 11 :11). Paul tells them what Moses had promised. He explains a transfer from Jew to Gentile at the disobedience of the Jew: "their transgression be riches for the world" (Remans 11 :12). Do you see the principle of transfer? The Jews did not believe Moses and consequently they did not trust in Christ (John 5:46-47). So the Jews lost what they had to the Gentiles, the Church.

On the other hand, the Apostle says another important transfer was to occur at the obedience of the Jew, their conversion to the Gospel. He says, "If their transgression

be riches for the world and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be" (Remans 11 :12). The implication is that if the Gospel and the covenant go to the Gentiles as a result of Jewish apostasy, so much more happens when the Jewish people convert: namely, the salvation of the whole world. Paul later says it this way, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Remans 11:25).

Oath/Sanctions

The fourth section of the covenant normally has a variety of themes: oath, symbol, sanctions of blessing and cursing. The fourth part of Remans 11 concentrates on the theme of Israel's being rejected, clearly a curse/sanction (Remans 11 :15). This idea is referred to primarily through the symbol of "branches being broken off" (11 :17, 19, 20). It is also described as an actual "cutting off" (11 :22), unquestionably a reference to the curse/sanction for breaking the circumcision/oath (Genesis 17:14). Thus, Israel is portrayed as having been sanctioned for violating their oath to God, and the Church at Rome is warned by this sanction: the sanctioning of Israel becomes a sanction to the Church, the New Israel (Galatians 6:16)!

Succession

The final segment of the covenant often presents a transfer of power, authority, and inheritance that leads to the conquest of the unbeliever's realm. In Remans 11, Paul speaks of the final cleansing or conquest of the land, "the removal of ungodliness from Jacob (Remans 11 :26). But since he is discussing Israel's re-inheritance, he speaks in terms of its future relationship to the covenant. He points to a time when Israel's hardness is softened, "the fulness of the Gentiles" (11 :25). Putting this verse together with 11:12, the Apostle teaches the following redemptive progression: the fulness of the Gentiles comes in; Israel's fullness occurs; then the Gentiles experience even greater fullness.¹ Considering these steps together, it means there is no such thing as a rapture, no removal of the Church from the earth, and it also implies that the world will see unprecedented conversion of Jew and Gentile together in the Church, not separate from one another.

This results in Paul's wonderful doxology at the end of the chapter because he realizes the implications for his people. In the same way, my postmillennial Jewish friend was moved to praise God with me. This is the joy of the future, the time when Jew and Gentile will praise God together at the Lord's Table in local churches all over the world in every place. Truly it will be the fulfillment of the great Feast of Tabernacles!

1. This progression was pre-figured during the exilic period, when Israel was hardened. But as the Gentiles responded to the Word of God, the hardening of Israel was lifted. Israel returned to faithfulness. Then the Gentiles financed the return of Israel to its homeland and greater benefits accrued to the Gentiles. In a sense, all Israel together with the Gentile world are viewed as working as a converted unit.