

Israel at War: Charting the Contours of a Developing Crisis

Week 2: The Future of the Jewish People

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The Bible begins with God. All of Scripture, and thus a text-driven theology, is God-centered. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, making man in his own image. At the fall of man into sin, God made a promise to intervene into the lineage of humanity with a special seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), embarking on a violent rescue mission to save a people for his own possession (Matt. 1:21; Rom. 5:12-14). The Bible, therefore, is not about man, but God. It is the story of God glorifying himself through his Son in showing himself to be a God of redemption who is on mission to save a people for himself. He will choose a people to first know his redemption and thus make his redemptive plan known throughout all the world.

Israel, a Chosen People

God is an electing God. He has chosen a people to be his own, through whom he will work his plan of redemption. The people he has chosen are known as *Israel*. (Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 32:28) However, we understand Jesus to be rejected by the Jews and Paul to be a missionary to the Gentiles. As the New Testament places a priority on a global, trans-national Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), and culminates with a vision of a heavenly multitude redeemed from every tribe and tongue (Rev. 7:9), many have asked a fair question: Is there a future for ethnic Israel? Such is not a discussion of the end times calendar of events, per se (cf. premillennialism, etc). Rather, the focus centers on the unfolding story of the Bible, and its relation to the nation state of Israel.¹ That is to say, is there any sense in which the formation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy? Some answer with a resounding “yes.” Others aren’t so sure.

We may rightly consider that within modern American evangelicalism there is a general assumption that Romans 11 is the Pauline prediction of the return of the Jews to the land. Yet, some may argue that such an interpretation is rooted more in 19th century Zionist ideology than a faithfully formed biblical theology. Located at near opposite ends of the spectrum of biblical interpretation are two systems of thought: covenantal theology and dispensationalism.² Both perspectives are populated with biblically conservative Christians, making the debate not one of first order theological triage but of healthy inter-fellowship (church) debate. In short, how one views the future of Israel is largely determined by how one reads the story of the Bible.³

¹ The phrase “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” in Romans 9:6 is hotly contested for example. In my view, the text seems to indicate that there has never been a necessary connection between being born Jewish and being a child of the promise. Paul is clearly distinguishing two uses of the word “Israel,” as to say, just because you were born a Jew ethnically (flesh), means that you are a Jew spiritually (promise). (Cf., Gen. 21:12) We are, therefore, not to boast in our mother, but our Messiah. God is using Israel to teach the world a lesson: Ethnicity saves nobody. It the gospel, not family (Phil. 3:4) that is the reason God’s promises have not failed (v. 6a).

² Dispensationalism largely gained traction in the academy at schools such as Moody Bible Institute (1886), Dallas Theological Seminary (1924) and Talbot School of Theology of Biola (1952). Dispensational thought was furthered popularized among Americans with the publication of study bibles by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1909) Charles Caldwell Ryrie (1978).

³ Dispensationalism sees more of a discontinuity between Israel and the Church, with Israel as the primary people of God and the church being a parenthesis in the plan of redemption. The mentioning of the ‘new covenant’ in Hebrews 8:13, for example, is *very new* for dispensationalists, but *not very new* for covenantalists. At risk of oversimplifying, some see “Israel” as the state of 1948 (dispensational), while others see the church (covenantal).

Covenant theology: God has one plan for the people of God.

It is a way of reading Scripture which sees the covenants (with Adam, Noah, Moses, David, and the New) as the backbone of the Bible. Though these seven covenants progressively build upon one another, covenant theology maintains that all God's relations to human beings are really understood in terms of just two covenants—the covenant of works made with Adam before the fall and the covenant of grace made through Christ with all who are to believe. Such a view sees much more *continuity* between Israel and the church, not only in promise-fulfillment but also in their experience of God. In short, the church begins in the OT, with Adam.

Dispensationalism: God has two plans for two people of God.

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), the originator of the Plymouth Brethren movement, is seen by most as the father of dispensationalism. Before his time there really was no such construct throughout historical theology.⁴

A dispensation is a way of ordering things, a divine administration over a certain period of time.⁵ Dispensationalism is a way of reading the Bible which emphasizes a literal interpretation of Scripture, specifically prophecy; recognizes God to have a distinct plan for Israel different from his plans for the church; and organizes the the storyline of Scripture into seven dispensations: Innocence (Eden); Conscience (fall to flood); Human Government (Noah to Babel); Promise (Abraham to Egypt); Law (Moses to John the Baptist); Grace (church age); Kingdom (millennium). Classic dispensationalism places a strong bifurcation between the Testaments, while placing an over emphasis on the epistles and an under emphasis on the OT and the Gospels. With the advent of dispensationalism came the rise of eschatological time frames schematics, graphs, calendars and bestselling books.⁶

Five views on the “all Israel” of Romans 11:26

1) All ethnic descendants of Abraham ever throughout all time; 2) All ethnic descendants of Abraham at the time when God initiates a special work of salvation among the Jews (confining “all Israel” to a specific point in time); 3) All means without distinction (not exception), the mass or at least the majority of Jews living at such a time; 4) All elect Israelites, that is, ethnic Jews; 5) All Jews and Gentiles, that constitute the elect Israel of God.

Discussion questions:

1. How does our understanding of the future of Israel impact how we understand the future of the world, and our posture in accomplishing the Great Commission? How does the nature and timing of the millennial reign of Christ impact our view of the future of Israel?
2. Why should Christians be concerned, or not, about the survival and welfare of the nation state of Israel, from a spiritual and theological perspective? (Not civil, and humanitarian)
3. Why are Americans so apt to support Israel? In your estimation, what influences have shaped the American mind towards a more *Zionist* reading of Scripture?

⁴ For a historical treatment of dispensationalism, see: Hummel, Daniel G. *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle for the End Times Shaped a Nation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023.

⁵ The word ‘dispensation’ is derived from the Greek word *oikonomia* (Gk: οἰκονομία) meaning ‘to manage, regulate, administer’ appearing in biblical texts such as Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25.

⁶ One of the more popular books in the twentieth century was Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970. Others have followed in its wake to include *Left Behind: A Novel on the Earth’s Last Days*, by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, the first of many in a series by Tyndale beginning in 1995.