

A New Covenant Theology of Israel

by Geoff Volker

How one views the nation of Israel is absolutely crucial in understanding New Covenant Theology. One's understanding of Israel can impact hermeneutics. Do we interpret the old through the lens of the new or the new through the lens of the old? One's understanding of Israel can also effect how he views the Christian life. Was the nation of Israel a nation of unbelievers? Were they simply "carnal" Christians? If Israel was a nation of believers, should one expect the same rebelliousness from believers today? One's understand of Israel can also influence how the church functions. Is Israel the church in the Old Testament? Should we imitate their gatherings or should there be a contrast in the way Israel gathered and were spoken to, and the way the people of God in the New Covenant era gather? In this article I want to give you the big picture of how New Covenant Theology views Israel in the plan of God.

We who hold to New Covenant Theology understand the Bible to teach that Israel should be viewed as the picture¹ of the promises to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant. The picture, or physical fulfillment, of the Abrahamic Covenant is the nation of Israel and the Old Covenant that God established with Israel on Mount Sinai. The spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is found in the church and the New Covenant. Yet, in the New Covenant era Israel still has a role to play. Though it clearly looks like God is done with physical Israel, he states in the book of Romans that he is going to save a remnant of natural Israel during the New Covenant era.

When one reads Genesis 15, it does seem that the promise of a seed for Abraham finds its fulfillment in the nation of Israel: "Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.' He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them.' then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be'" (Genesis 15:4-5). If one comes to this text without the New Testament fulfillment, one would clearly find this promise from God referring to many, many blood-related descendants of Abraham.

There is further evidence of this in both the Book of Psalms where Israel is called on to trust in the God of Israel. They are called to trust in God because He is the same God who fulfilled the covenant to Abraham which resulted in the establishment of the nation of Israel, the children of Abraham:

Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced, O descendants of Abraham his servant, O sons of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth. He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: To you I give the land of Canaan as a portion you will inherit (Psalm 105:4-11).

Clearly, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is seen here as possession of the physical land of Canaan by the blood relatives of Abraham. This is the physical or picture fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

True or spiritual fulfillment of the promises to Abraham can be seen in the New Testament. The book of Galatians describes how the seed of Abraham is not really the physical descendants of Abraham. They functioned only as a temporary picture of the seed of Abraham. The fulfillment of the seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to your seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Galatians 3:16). And not only is Jesus Christ the true seed of Abraham but those for whom he died on the cross are also the true children of Abraham and the recipients of the promises made to Abraham: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29). The physical children of Abraham, the nation of Israel, received a physical land, the land of Canaan. This land is only a temporary picture of an eternal land.² Therefore it can be seen that the promises made to Abraham were first to be fulfilled in a temporary picture fulfillment in the Old Covenant and then given an everlasting fulfillment in the New Covenant. The mistake that the Israelites at the time of Jesus and his Apostles made was that they thought that the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham were found in the nation of Israel.³

Whenever the nation of Israel is evaluated in Scripture it is always viewed as an unbelieving people of God.⁴ This is seen most clearly in the book of Hebrews where it is stated that the Old Covenant, the covenant that established Israel as a nation and as the people of God, could not produce a real people of God.⁵ It could only produce an unbelieving picture of the people of God:

But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and is it founded on better promises. For is there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: “The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord (Hebrews 8:6-8).

God finds fault with Israel because they were unbelieving. Yet it should be understood that there has always been a remnant of true believers within Israel.⁶ But whenever there is an evaluation of Israel as a whole they are always viewed as unbelieving. Israel then functions as a temporary picture of what is to come, a people of God who will have their sins forgiven and will be God-lovers.

The New Covenant is a term used to describe what was accomplished by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross:⁷

because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Then he adds, “Their

sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 10:14-18).

In the context of Hebrews 10, the death of Christ is said to be the fulfillment of the prophecy made to Jeremiah regarding the New Covenant.⁸ It is the death of Jesus Christ that purchased a true people of God.⁹ This people of God is called the Church and is made up of both Jews and Gentiles and is no longer an ethnic nation of Israelites:

For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those of you who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Ephesians 2:14-18).

Those for whom Jesus died are the real children of God and unlike Israel,¹⁰ they have eternal life.¹¹ For the Old Covenant provided no forgiveness of sins for those under it.¹²

In the New Covenant era, which is from Pentecost until the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ,¹³ the Israelites have not been completely rejected. With the coming of the New Covenant era, Israel can no longer view herself as being the people of God. But, during this period of time, God has chosen some Israelites to be saved:

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah – how he appealed to God against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? And what was God's answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if it is by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace (Romans 11:1-6).

The Israelites in the New Covenant era have been removed as the people of God since the covenant that established them,¹⁴ the Old Covenant, has come to an end.¹⁵ The people of God who ultimately fulfill the promise made to Abraham are those who were saved by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross which is the New Covenant.

I have given you a brief overview of how Scripture and New Covenant Theology understands Israel in the plan of God. As I wrote earlier, one's understanding of hermeneutics, the Christian life, and the way in which the church gathers depends on how one views Israel in God's plan. If I am correct, and Israel is the unbelieving picture of the people of God and they were never believers as a whole, what do you need to change in your theological system to adopt this truth? How must your understanding of the

Christian life and the church change? These are questions that I have had to answer in my own life. The answers have been difficult and sometimes even painful, but walking out my theology is just a matter of being faithful, and I am willing to go wherever His Word takes me.

Author

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Endnotes:

¹ In the Old Covenant we see in picture or physical form what is fulfilled in the New Covenant. Israel is the picture of the people of God (unbelievers and related by blood to Abraham), but not the real people of God (believers and related by the work of the Spirit to Abraham). The church in the New Covenant era is the real fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Galatians 3:29

² Hebrews 4:1-11

³ In Romans 9:6-8 Paul clears up this misunderstanding.

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:24-29, 2 Kings 21:14-15, Malachi 3:7, Matthew 8:10-12, Matthew 21:33-44

⁵ The nation of Israel under the Old Covenant was unbelieving- a picture of the people of God, but not the real people of God. Those who are in the New Covenant, that is those for whom Jesus died, are the real people of God. They receive both forgiveness of sins and a changed life. *Hebrews 8:7-8, 10:14-18*

⁶ Romans 11:1-6

⁷ Luke 22:19-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

⁸ Jeremiah 31:31-33

⁹ Acts 20:28, Revelation 5:6-10

¹⁰ Those Israelites who were real believers and yet who lived in the Old Covenant era experienced the benefits of the New Covenant in the Old Covenant era. They experienced the full forgiveness of sins and a new heart.

Romans 4:1-8, Acts 13:22

¹¹ John 3:16, Romans 6:23

¹² Hebrews 10:1-4, Hebrews 8:7-8, Hebrews 7:18-25

¹³ The Old Covenant era is from the giving of the law on Mount Sinai until the cross of Jesus Christ. The New Covenant era is from Pentecost until the 2nd Coming of Jesus Christ. *Matthew 27:51, Acts 2*

¹⁴ The Old Covenant came to an end at the cross and is therefore not in effect. Therefore, the Israelites are no longer fulfilling that function as temporary picture of the people of God. *Romans 9:6-8, Ephesians 2:14-16, Galatians 4:21-31, Hebrews 8:13*

¹⁵ Hebrews 8:13