

Will God Eternally Bless Ethnic Israel? A Critique of “Replacement Theology” John Hepp Jr., www.kingdominbible.com

In this writing unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, and emphasis is added. Sometimes I change the royal title Christ to its equivalent Messiah. RT means Replacement Theology.¹ NT means New Testament. OT means Old Testament. Israel usually means ethnic Israel, the nation physically descended from Abraham-Isaac-Jacob.

By means of His majestic creation, we can see that God is powerful and wise. But how can we know that He is good? merciful? patient? Why did He make us? How did evil overpower us and the world? What will the future bring? We can know the answers to such questions only by God’s Word. Only it can make us sure what God is like, what important actions He has taken, how and why He made us, or what our future will be. In this writing we will consider how to understand many of God’s prophecies that, when given, predicted the future of the nation Israel.

Many biblical prophecies about Israel have not yet taken place in their obvious sense. Will they?

- Dispensationalism (in which I grew up) says yes. Premillennial, it teaches that when our Lord returns, He will first reign a thousand years as described by the prophets. He will literally fulfill prophecies about Israel in a program separate from the church’s program.
- Replacement Theology (RT) says no. Instead, the blessings of such prophecies are being fulfilled or will be fulfilled in a way that was not obvious. They were designed for a different “Israel,” the present church. RT is amillennial, teaching that (1) our Lord’s promised kingdom has already begun and (2) when He comes, He will install its perfected form.

RT teachings are mostly documented here from two books:

- Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003).
- Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

Each view has strengths and weaknesses. Dispensationalism usually interprets prophecies in a normal way. But it sometimes overlooks literary style and figurative language. Jealous to keep the church distinct from (and superior to) Israel, it tends to classify even some NT books as not containing pure “church truth.” (In contrast, on p. 24 see Appendix C: “The Church Was Not a Secret.”) RT emphasizes the continuity of God’s plans—and the church’s becoming a part of those plans. But RT makes many predictive Scriptures mean what they do not say. Relying on its questionable interpretations of a few NT Scriptures, it claims that “the primitive church...**mis-takenly** thought” wrong. I advocate a mediating position. Prophecies will be fulfilled normally unless Scriptures quite clearly require analogy. Ethnic Israel will finally be converted and become a distinctive part of the church. In that position it will inherit its own unique promises.

Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Isaiah 11, a Sample Prophecy | 3 |
| A. The Biblical Context of Replacement Theology | 5 |
| 1. Israel and Replacement Theology | |
| 2. God’s Kingdom Plan | |
| 3. Israel’s Murder of Messiah | |
| 4. No Longer Foreigners but Fellow Citizens | |
| 5. Spread of Replacement Theology | |
| B. Some Arguments Replacement Theology Uses | 7 |
| 1. Israel is under cursings by the law and by Jesus. | |
| 2. The true church inherits much that Israel was promised. | |
| 3. Descriptions of Israel are applied to the church. | |
| 4. Apostolic teachings contradict the obvious meanings of OT prophecies. | |
| 5. The new covenant replaces the old covenant seen in some OT prophecies. | |
| 6. The land promised to Abraham was reinterpreted in both Testaments. | |
| C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology | 10 |
| 1. RT considers many prophecies misleading. An OT prophecy: Ezekiel 37 NT prophecies from Luke 1 | |
| 2. RT considers the apostles misguided even after Jesus “opened their minds.” | |
| 3. RT has often misunderstood Romans 11 and the salvation of Israel. | |
| 4. RT contradicts the earthly aspect of Abraham’s hope. | |
| 5. RT invalidates the NT use of <i>Israel</i> and <i>Jew</i> . | |
| 6. RT logic would deny the eternal existence of nations. | |
| 7. RT misunderstands the promised kingdom. | |
| 8. RT misunderstands the NT use of the OT. | |
| Appendix A: Israel and the New Covenant | 20 |
| Appendix B: The Kingdom Described in Ezekiel 40–48 | 21 |
| Appendix C: The Church Was Not a Secret | 24 |
| Notes | 26 |

Isaiah 11, a Sample Prophecy

The following table shows that RT meanings are often not the obvious ones. Isaiah 11, quoted in the left column, describes the final world Ruler and His kingdom. Some obvious meanings of that chapter are summarized in the second column. These include material and political aspects for the kingdom, with great honor for ethnic Israel. RT proponents disagree in part. Some of their common (though not universal) interpretations of Isaiah 11 are summarized in the third column. Some I document, in notes, from Joseph Addison Alexander’s study of that chapter in his classic commentary on Isaiah.² They include the following: (a) Messiah established this promised kingdom in His first coming—with no material and political aspects for now. We are in it. (b) The promises ostensibly for ethnic Israel (such as, vv. 11-16, shaded in the chart) are really for the present church. In this writing I will explain why RT understands such prophecies, especially those about Israel, in such a non-obvious way.

| Isaiah 11, a Kingdom Prophecy Involving Israel | | |
|--|---|---|
| The NIV Text by Verses & Paragraphs | Obvious Meaning | RT Meaning |
| 1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. 2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD - 3a and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. | A descendant from David’s father is described as fully (a) anointed with the LORD’s Spirit and (b) dedicated to the LORD. | (the same) |
| 3b He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; 4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. 5 Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. | Thus enabled, He will rule the earth with divine justice and power. (not fulfilled, therefore, still future) | From heaven He will rule the earth spiritually. (now being fulfilled) |
| 6 The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. 7 The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. 8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper’s nest. 9 They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. | In His coming kingdom animals will live together in harmony and children will play in safety. The whole world will be perfectly related to the LORD. | (refers mainly to the church, maybe to the eternal state after this earth is destroyed) ³ |

Will God Eternally Bless Ethnic Israel?

| Isaiah 11, a Kingdom Prophecy Involving Israel | | |
|--|--|--|
| The NIV Text by Verses & Paragraphs | Obvious Meaning | RT Meaning |
| <p>10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.</p> | <p>All nations will respond to Messiah as He rules in peace. (still future)</p> | <p>(refers to Gentiles recognizing His present rule from heaven)⁴</p> |
| <p>11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea. 12 He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel; he will assemble the scattered people of Judah from the four quarters of the earth.</p> | <p>The LORD will then restore His chosen people, ethnic Israel, from their worldwide dispersion.</p> | <p>(Israel is restored in the sense that Jews become part of the church.)⁵</p> |
| <p>13 Ephraim's jealousy will vanish, and Judah's enemies will be cut off; Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah, nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim. 14 They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them.</p> | <p>The tribes of Israel will live together in peace and will rule over their former enemies—or enemies symbolized by them.</p> | <p>(refers to their being joined both now and in the future in the church, which conquers spiritually)⁶</p> |
| <p>15 The LORD will dry up the gulf of the Egyptian sea; with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand over the Euphrates River. He will break it up into seven streams so that men can cross over in sandals. 16 There will be a highway for the remnant of his people that is left from Assyria, as there was for Israel when they came up from Egypt.</p> | <p>The LORD will miraculously restore His people to their land, similarly to when He restored them from Egypt.</p> | <p>(probably “the general progress of the gospel”)⁷</p> |

This prophecy leads in Isaiah 12 to beautiful songs of praise for salvation, songs that will be sung “in that day.” We can sing them now in anticipation!

A. The Biblical Context of Replacement Theology

1. Israel and Replacement Theology. Ethnic Israel, descended physically from Abraham, is often referred to in the Bible as God’s chosen people (e.g., Deut. 4:32–38; Amos 3:2; Rom. 9:4; 11:2). Usually called *Israel* in the New Testament, that nation is a major theme in many parts of the Bible. The Old Testament tells its story and rarely diverges from it. On many occasions God obviously promised to bless (do good to) and/or punish Israel. For example, see promises of both blessings and cursings in Deuteronomy 27–30. Probably no one denies that for centuries prophets and godly Israelites thought that both such promises were for their nation.

RT, however, denies that long-standing conclusion. In many such cases of promised blessings, it (a) denies that they are for ethnic Israel and (b) changes their obvious meanings. God no longer plans to bless that nation as the prophets thought, says RT, or bless the world through it. Instead, it has forever been replaced by the true church, which is “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

Those who teach what I call RT object to the term and idea of *replacement*. They believe that God’s Israel was not replaced but defined differently by the apostles (as RT interprets Gal. 6:16).⁸ However, for those who take most OT prophecies at face value, a changed definition can have the same effect as a replacement. What seemed clearly intended for ethnic Israel is, according to RT, not for them after all.⁹ Let us now consider how RT began.

2. God’s Kingdom Plan. When Christians pray, “Thy kingdom come,” we are asking God to finish the plan unveiled in the Bible. We are not asking Him to rule over the universe (Ps. 103:19) or even “in people’s hearts”; He has always done both. In fact, His universal kingdom does not change as time passes. But when God created the heavens and the earth, He began a new project with marked stages and changes. He clearly revealed on the sixth and last day of creation, what His new project would entail: Earth would be the center of a worldwide “material” kingdom with man ruling as God’s representative (Gen. 1:26–28; Ps. 8; Heb. 2:5–10).

Man’s sin quickly seemed to thwart God’s project by bringing a curse on himself and the earth (Gen. 3). However, man’s rebellion simply uncovered another aspect of God’s plan. In order to complete it and bring His blessings, God through man would undo the curse (Gen. 3:15). Centuries later He revealed what kind of man would accomplish this—an Anointed One (Messiah) from King David’s family. God Himself would anoint him to rule, as seen above in Isaiah 11. Such was the meaning of the Greek title represented by the English word *Christ* (Ps. 2:2; Matt. 1:1; Luke 9:20).¹⁰ Furthermore, God had decreed in Genesis 12 through what channel these promised blessings would come. They would all come through Abraham and the nation descended from Abraham—namely, Israel.¹¹

At the time of the Exodus God inaugurated a preliminary version of His kingdom on earth. That happened at Mount Sinai when He began ruling over Israel (Exod. 19:4–6; 25:22; Ps. 114:2). But Israel rarely cooperated with God. Just as He had warned, He eventually dissolved that kingdom and scattered Israel. But He promised that His kingdom would return in glory and be

ruled by the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 9:6–7; 11:1–10; Micah 4:1–8). To continue preparing for that glorious end, He brought a small remnant of the Jews back to the Holy Land (Haggai 2:6–9, 21–23).

3. Israel’s Murder of Messiah. When the time was ripe, the Messiah finally appeared, with all the power of the kingdom (Matt. 11:1–5; Heb. 6:5). But after seeing His credentials, Israel rejected Him and killed Him!¹² Though they did not realize it, they thus fulfilled Scripture (Acts 3:13–18). Only through death could He obtain eternal forgiveness for His people. Triumphant over death, Messiah ascended to heaven to stay there until time to come back and rule (Acts 3:19–21; Luke 19:11–12, 15; Heb. 10:12–13). From His Father’s throne He poured out the Spirit upon His disciples (Acts 2:32–33). He thereby constituted them the assembly (*ekklesia*, church) for His coming kingdom (1 Cor. 12:13).¹³

So what would God do to guilty Israel? Consider two of the sentences Messiah had already pronounced in anticipation. (a) In the first He spoke to Israel’s leaders: “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it” (Matt. 21:40–44). That prediction was fulfilled throughout the Acts period as the kingdom program passed to non-Jews.¹⁴ (b) Lamenting over Jerusalem, Messiah had also predicted, “Your house [either temple or royal house] is being left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:37–38). If that meant the temple, it happened right after the ending of Acts. In AD 70 ethnic Israel was severely punished and the temple destroyed by the Roman army. Near AD 130 the Jews under the false messiah Bar Kochba attempted to recover their loss but suffered another great defeat. During all this, Jews in general became ever-more bitter enemies of Christianity.

4. No Longer Foreigners but Fellow Citizens. While Jews were rejecting the gospel, Gentiles began flooding into the church. “Gentiles by birth,” who had been “separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise...now **in Messiah Jesus**...have been brought near...” (Eph. 2:11–13). They become members of the One Isaiah and Matthew portray as the true Israel (“my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor,” Isa. 49:3; Matt. 12:17–21; cf. 2:15). In Him they become Abraham’s heirs. The “promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed...meaning one person, who is Messiah....If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:16, 29). You can see why some (but not the NT) began calling believers the true Israel.

5. Spread of Replacement Theology. Within a century after Jesus’ ascension, many or most church leaders had concluded that the promises to Israel had now passed to the church. They decided that ethnic Israel has forfeited God’s blessings but that believers in Jesus (mostly Gentiles) are getting them instead. In effect they said that the church has replaced ethnic Israel in God’s plans and become “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).¹⁵ This RT has quite transformed the way many understand prophecies in general and especially those about the kingdom. It has continued strong in many or most forms of Christianity. I will list some of the arguments used for it, with refutations. Then I will give some other arguments against it.

B. Some Arguments Replacement Theology Uses

1. Israel is under cursings by the law and by Jesus. In the Pentateuch the main statements of the old covenant cursings against Israel are Leviticus 26:14–39 and Deuteronomy 28:15–68. For Jesus’ sentence against Israel, see above under “Israel’s Murder of Messiah.” RT concludes that Israel will never regain its former position.

REFUTATION: Such cursings were not final but followed by promises of subsequent blessings. For example, each Pentateuchal cursing passage cited above is followed by one for subsequent blessings: Leviticus 26:40–45 and Deuteronomy 30:1–10. In the first example God assured Israel that “if they confess their sins and the sins of their fathers...I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land...I will not reject them or abhor them” (Lev. 26:40, 42, 44). In other words, He promised to finally bless Israel (a) when they would repent, (b) not because of the temporary covenant He made at Sinai but the one with Abraham. Similarly, even when sentencing Israel, Jesus also assured that nation of future blessing: “You will not see me again **until you say**, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’” (Matt. 23:39).

The OT itself has a dramatic depiction of that still-future converted Israel: the “Servant Song” in Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12. It quotes repentant Israel *after* it realizes its sin in having sacrificed its Ruler. It will be Israel that says, “He was despised, and *we* did not esteem Him....But He was pierced through for *our* transgressions, He was crushed for *our* iniquities....the LORD has caused the iniquity of *us all* to fall on Him” (53:3-6). What divine grace for the worst of sinners!

2. The true church inherits much that Israel was promised. Below I reference—with overlapping—several of the New Testament passages that so teach. The RT conclusion is that the church (as a “new Israel”) inherits **in place of** Israel.

- Those who “belong to Messiah...are Abraham’s offspring, **heirs** according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). As seen above, being in Messiah, the true Israel, makes us heirs with Him.
- Gentiles who were “strangers to the **covenants of promise**” (Eph. 2:11–12) and “who formerly were far off have been **brought near** by the blood of Messiah” (2:13). “So then [we] are no longer strangers and aliens, but...fellow-citizens with the saints” (2:19).
- Gentiles were “grafted in among them [the Jews] and became **partaker[s]** with them of the rich root of the olive tree” (Rom. 11:17). The tree we are now in is “their [the Jews’] own olive tree” (11:24).
- When God swore to Abraham to bless and multiply him (Heb. 6:13–16), He did it not just for Abraham’s sake. It was also “to show to the **heirs** of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose...in order that...**we** may have strong encouragement” (6:17–19).
- Abraham and his descendants with faith “were **looking for the city** which has foundations” and for “a better country, that is a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:10, 16). That is the same city we look for: “here **we** do not have a lasting city, but **we are seeking the city** which is to come” (13:14).

REFUTATION: All parts of this argument are correct except the conclusion. Sharing the eternal inheritance with Israel does not displace Israel. By no means will all heirs get the same parts of the inheritance. In Jesus' coming kingdom different servants will achieve different rewards, as He often indicated (e.g., Luke 19:15–19).

3. Descriptions of Israel are applied to the church. See some valid and some invalid examples below. The RT conclusion is that God no longer intends to make Israel fit these descriptions.

- The words that describe us in 1 Peter 2:9 come from God's preface to making Israel His OT kingdom (Exod. 19:4–6). The church is "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God."
- James 1:1 calls that book's addressees "the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad."
- Many believe that we are "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. Some apply to Gentiles Romans 2:29: "He is a Jew who is one inwardly."

REFUTATION: It is true that language about Israel is sometimes used about the church. But applying it in a new setting does not cancel its original meaning. Take the example, given above, of 1 Peter 2:9, which does quote Exodus 19:6 to describe the church. Does Peter thereby imply that Israel will never attain that purpose? By no means. Many prophecies, such as Zechariah 2:10–12 and 8:20–23, picture a restored Israel that will fulfill the same description. In fact, Peter quotes such an example in his next verse (1 Peter 2:10). In it he applies to the mostly Gentile church the promise of Hosea 2:23 about Israel: Those who were "not a people" have become "the people of God." It is obvious that Hosea used both expressions for what in his day was Israel of the future. Why should we think that applying them to us cancels that promise for Israel?¹⁶

Each passage describing the church in terms derived from the OT should be considered in context. For example, why was the Book of James addressed to "the twelve tribes"? Because in that early stage of the church nearly all believers were Jews. Who are "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 and the "Jew who is one inwardly" in Romans 2:29? Believing Jews, as you will see later.

4. Apostolic teachings contradict the obvious meanings of OT prophecies. This RT conclusion has two different levels. On a "lower" level we nearly all agree that some elements have definitely changed (see argument 5 and the caution there). But on a "higher" level RT assumes that Jesus inaugurated His kingdom. If He did, then many OT prophecies cannot mean what they say. You saw an example of this at the beginning. For RT the predictions in Isaiah 11 (and elsewhere) of political and material features for the kingdom must be spiritualized. Another example is Isaiah 2:1–4, which pictures the coming kingdom with the Lord ruling the world from Jerusalem. It promises that all nations, obedient to Him, "will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." No doubt the armaments and implements will be more modern.

Yet, the point is obvious: all nations will live together in peace. RT cannot accept that meaning, because it thinks Messiah is already reigning without that kind of peace.¹⁷

REFUTATION: The “lower” argument will be extended in the next one. If the “higher” argument could be sustained in every aspect, it would be strong for RT. But it cannot; the apostles did not teach a purely spiritual kingdom. I will deal with this subject especially in Appendix B.¹⁸

5. The new covenant replaces the old covenant seen in some OT prophecies. The “old covenant” was the law inaugurated at Sinai. Bible students agree that in some sense it was replaced by the new covenant, inaugurated at Calvary. This did not mean that “the righteous requirements of the law” (Rom. 8:4) are useless. Instead, “what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, **God did...**” (Rom. 8:3–4). This is what God predicted for that time when Israel finally returns to the Lord and He has compassion on them. “You will...follow all his commands I am giving you today,” promised Moses, “commands that are written in this Book of the Law” (Deut. 30:1-10). In other words, these “righteous requirements of the law” have been transferred to the new covenant now in operation. But some elements of the law, such as, its sacrifices, temple, and priesthood, have not been transferred but transformed. Their goal was reached in Messiah (Rom. 10:4). To literally fulfill prophecies reinstating those elements would violate the new covenant. The best source for this RT argument is the Book of Hebrews. Notice two examples.

- Priesthood. “[W]hen *there is a change of the priesthood*, there must also be a change of the law” (Heb. 7:12). Though descended from Judah rather than Levi (7:13–14), Jesus is now the “great priest over the house of God” (Heb. 10:21). This contradicts OT prophecies that promise a return to the Levitical priesthood (e.g., Jer. 33:17–22; Zech. 14:16–19).
- Sacrifices for sin. After the forgiveness accomplished by Messiah, “there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (Heb. 10:18). Yet, Ezekiel 43:19–25 repeatedly foresees such sacrifices in a restored temple.

CAUTION: Apparently Scriptures do require some updating in prophetic details. (In Appendix B, p. 21, we will consider whether this is the right approach for Ezekiel 40-48.) In such cases, fulfillments will be similar to what was predicted but on a higher level. Here are a couple of safeguards when we consider non-literal interpretation.

- Not everything can change in meaning. There must be clear evidence for changes.
- A temporary covenant cannot alter an eternal covenant. The ultimate reference for prophecies about Israel is not the law. Rather, it is God’s eternal covenant with Abraham, which included His choice of that nation (Gen. 12:1-3). Even the new covenant does not abrogate nor transform that basic covenant but fulfills it.¹⁹

6. The land promised to Abraham was reinterpreted in both Testaments. Amillennialists often allege this. For example, Riddlebarger on pages 71-73 says that the promise “was reinterpreted by Isaiah to refer to a new heavens and a new earth, not just the land of Canaan.” He cites Romans 4:13, Hebrews 11:10, and 2 Peter 3:13 as giving the same new meaning. Waltke, con-

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

sidering this of great importance, dedicates three chapters to “The Gift of the Land.” He then draws conclusions including those that follow. Notice that twice he refers to “the primitive church” as mistaken. This refers to NT Scriptures that RT disagrees with, such as the prophecies in Luke 1-2 and the question in Acts 1:6. Here in his own words are five of Waltke’s conclusions:

- Second, the primitive church, lacking the teachings of Jesus and the illumination of the Spirit, mistakenly thought along with all of Jewry that the glories of Messiah Jesus would also be fulfilled literally in the land of Canaan.
- Third, the Synoptic Gospels’ predictions...make a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies regarding Messiah’s glory impossible.
- Fourth, Christ inaugurated his everlasting reign at his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven.
- Fifth, apart from the primitive church, the rest of the New Testament represents the glorified Christ as ruling the nations....
- Seventh, upon reflection the church realizes that the Old Testament promises regarding the Land typify Jesus Christ and the life of saints in Christ.²⁰

REFUTATION: All these conclusions are incorrect and/or misleading, as we will see. Perhaps the most significant is the claim, common nowadays, that Jesus is already reigning from heaven. Instead, Hebrews 10:13 says that there “he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8). But even if He were already reigning, we would not be justified in transferring Israel’s promises to another group.

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

1. RT considers many prophecies misleading. At this point I will give examples from one OT chapter (Ezekiel 37) and one NT chapter (Luke 1). If RT is true, then God’s Word in some such cases is misleading or even deceitful. It often promises ethnic Israel eternal blessings that it will not get. Yet, God gave such promises not only when Israel was being faithful to Him but in spite of their chronic unfaithfulness. In fact, He often emphasized the fact that rebellion would continue until the promise was fulfilled. Furthermore, no prophet predicted that Israel would be rejected forever. RT, in contrast, teaches that God did so reject them.

An OT prophecy: Ezekiel 37. This is one of many emphasizing that God would eternally bless ethnic Israel in spite of rebellion. If RT were correct, God would have known that the obvious meaning of this prophecy was mistaken. In that case, He deceived the hearers. (A similar example, Jeremiah 31, is considered in Appendix A.)

Ezekiel 37 narrates the prophet’s vision of dry bones brought back to life by God’s breath. The bones “are the whole house of Israel,” God’s people (37:11). God had identified them in His first words of Ezekiel’s first vision. He had called them “the sons of Israel...a rebellious people who have...transgressed against Me to this very day” (2:3). He had proceeded to have Ezekiel

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

preach against this rebellious “house of Israel” (3:1, 4, 5, 7). During Ezekiel’s ministry most of the survivors in Israel had been killed or had followed him into the Babylonian Captivity.

But now in chapter 37 God pictured a huge change for His people, this “whole house of Israel.” He brings these rebels out of their graves and back “into the land of Israel” (37:12-14), “their own land” (v. 22).²¹ That, He continues, is “the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where [their] fathers lived....They will live there forever” (v. 25). “They will never again be two nations” but one (vv. 15-22).

And they will be godly. “They will no longer defile themselves with their idols and vile images or with any of their offenses, for I will save them from all their sinful backsliding, and I will cleanse them. They will be my people, and I will be their God” (v. 23). They will enjoy the LORD’s “covenant of peace...an everlasting covenant” (v. 25a) and His “sanctuary among them forever” (vv. 26b-28). They “will follow my laws,” He promised, “and be careful to keep my decrees” (v. 24b). The LORD’s “servant David will be king over them...their prince forever” (vv. 22-25b). “Then the nations will know,” He concluded, “that I the LORD make Israel holy” (v. 28).

Years later some of them felt that such promises were about to be fulfilled. Under Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, God brought a small remnant back to the Holy Land. But they were disappointed; important features of the Ezekiel 37 prophecy were missing. For example:

- Zerubbabel did not truly become their Davidic king.
- They did not walk in God’s laws and decrees.
- God did not put His dwelling place “among them forever.” (In fact, His glory never returned.)
- The nations were not convinced that divine grace made Israel holy.

Since God means what He says, He will still fulfill *all* these promises to *the same nation that has been rebellious*.

RT on Ezekiel 37. Bruce Waltke agrees in part. He admits that the first part of the chapter applies to ethnic Israel but considers that part already fulfilled when God enabled a remnant to return. “Ezekiel’s vision pictures the spiritual state of the Babylonian exiles, who are dead in cynicism and despair...but are revived to hope through God’s word and God’s spirit, a hope that lifts them from their graveyard in Babylon and lands them in the Sworn Land (see Ezek. 37:1-14).” Waltke also notes their disappointment. “The prophetic hope for both the political renewal of the Davidic dynasty and a spiritual renewal of a new covenant does not come to fruition upon their return from Babylon.” Instead, he sees a “present fulfillment” in “Christ and his church.” He assumes that Christ has begun to rule from heaven—a rule to be perfected at His Second Coming. “Moreover, Jesus Christ and his church fulfill the prophetic hope of a glorious messianic age.... The present fulfillment is but a foretaste of the consummated political and spiritual deliverance that will take place at Christ’s parousia.... One day the people of God will sit down at the messianic banquet, which inaugurates the new age, the consummated kingdom of God.”²²

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

Did you notice the sleight of hand? RT replaces “the whole house of Israel” (Ezek. 37:11), to whom these promises were made, with a different group. Ezekiel 37 insistently describes that rebellious nation; yet, God really meant (says RT) to bless others instead. What He meant was to bless the present church—the church composed mostly of Gentiles but excluding Israel as a nation. From studying Ezekiel, who could have guessed that meaning? But parts of the New Testament require it; we have RT’s word for it!

God will do all He promised because He chose Israel, as we will discuss later. He chose them unconditionally and promised to bless them in spite of rebellion. In no prophecies did He suggest that He would replace Israel. But if RT’s interpretation is right, He should have so warned them and us.

NT prophecies from Luke 1. Inaugurating the NT era, these were spoken by the angel Gabriel and by godly prophets. They clearly pertained in part to ethnic Israel, but RT implies that they were misleading. If RT is right, for example, Gabriel misled the Virgin Mary. He knew she would misunderstand his prediction: “[Your son] will reign over **the house of Jacob** forever; and his kingdom will have no end” (Luke 1:33). She could only think he meant that her son would reign over ethnic Israel, which according to RT is wrong.

In the same way, RT considers Zacharias misguided. Though he spoke a prophecy when “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Luke 1:67), he would misunderstand it. So would other godly Jews who heard these samples from it (notice bolded words):

The Lord God of **Israel...**
has...accomplished redemption for **His people**,
And has raised up a horn of salvation **for us...**
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—
Salvation **FROM OUR ENEMIES**,
AND FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US
To show mercy toward **our** fathers,
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to Abraham **our** father,
To grant **us, that we being delivered from the hand of our enemies**,
Might serve Him without fear.... (Luke 1:68–74)

Does anyone doubt that Spirit-filled Zacharias expected blessings on his own people, ethnic Israel? He looked for a kingdom with material and political aspects, such as the prophets had predicted. Who dares to affirm that he was mistaken? RT does. In his chapter on “The Kingdom of God,” Riddlebarger notes (p. 106) that

several messianic expectations were widely held throughout Palestine in the days of Jesus. First, when the Messiah appeared, he would bring salvation and blessing to his people and judgment on the wicked nations that had oppressed Israel. Second, God would return this long-promised messianic king to David’s royal throne. Third, this

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

messianic king would liberate Palestine from Israel's Gentile oppressors, especially the Romans. When Jesus announced that the kingdom of God was at hand, these were the expectations his hearers used to interpret his words.

But this would have been a thoroughly secularized and politicized kingdom. In many ways it is the kingdom envisioned by dispensationalists and postmillenarians. Jesus spoke of a different kingdom, where God would bring deliverance from humanity's true enemy, the guilt and power of sin. Because Jesus did not offer the economic, political, and nationalistic kingdom so many in Israel longed for, he was put to death.

Is Riddlebarger aware that much of what he calls "thoroughly secularized and politicized" is what Spirit-filled Zacharias said? Yes, he is.²³ In another context he quotes Gabriel's prophecy (p. 76), then comments negatively on Luke 1–2 (see words I emphasize):

According to Matthew and Luke, the prophecies of Samuel, Isaiah, and the Psalmist were fulfilled in Jesus. But how does his birth fulfill the prophecy of an everlasting kingdom? The answer to this is also found in Luke's writings, though **not in the infancy narratives**. When Peter delivered the Pentecost sermon...[he] pointed out that the eternal kingdom promised to David's son was finally realized in the resurrection of Jesus.

Thus, Riddlebarger assumes that by sitting at God's right hand Jesus is now ruling on David's throne. To Riddlebarger that is proof that the obvious meaning of OT kingdom promises, reflected by Zacharias, is mistaken.

2. RT considers the apostles misguided even after Jesus "opened their minds." RT assumes that the apostles were wrong as late as the day Messiah was taken back to heaven. On that occasion they asked Him, "Lord, is it at this time You are **restoring the kingdom to Israel?**" (Acts 1:6). By "**Israel**" they could mean only ethnic Israel; no other "Israel" had lost the kingdom. The "**kingdom**" they expected to be restored would be an enhanced form of the kingdom Israel had before.²⁴ RT loudly disagrees. It teaches that Jesus has already started a different (purely "spiritual") kingdom with a different Israel (the church). As an example, listen to RT teacher John Stott strongly criticize the apostles. He thinks their question

must have filled Jesus with dismay. Were they still so lacking in perception?...The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. For the verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting its immediate establishment. In his reply (7–9) Jesus corrected their mistaken notions of the kingdom's nature, extent and arrival.²⁵

But in fact, the apostles were right about the kingdom in Acts 1:6. It was still future, still glorious, and still to be Israel's. Jesus had repeatedly described it in ways that substantiated their Jewish expectations. For example, He had called it "the regeneration [rebirth of the world],

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne.” At that time, he had added, the apostles “shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). He had nearly always referred to His kingdom as future, never as established. Verify this for yourself by looking up every reference to the Lord’s kingdom in the final chapters of Luke’s Gospel: Luke 19:11, 12, 15; 21:31; 22:16, 18, 29, 30; 23:42, 51. Every reference is to the future. In fact, the Lord specifically designed a parable in Luke 19:11–27 to show that the kingdom would not come until His return.

The kingdom had also been Jesus’ subject during the forty days after His resurrection. He had taught His apostles “the things concerning the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Did they understand His teaching? Of course they did. He had “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). So how could they be wrong asking in Acts 1:6 if it was **time to restore the kingdom to Israel?** If they had been wrong, He would have corrected their assumption. Instead, He reinforced it: “It is not for you to know **times or epochs which the Father has fixed** by His own authority; but you shall receive power...and you shall be My witnesses” (Acts 1:7–8a). If the Father has not fixed a time to restore the kingdom to Israel, why did Jesus imply that He has?

In short, the apostles, taught and enlightened by the Lord, still expected ethnic Israel to regain the kingdom. Their only mistake was to think they could know the time. Who are more likely to be mistaken, they or the propagators of RT?²⁶

3. RT proponents often misunderstand Romans 11 and the salvation of Israel. Some miss the main point of Paul’s whole theodicy in Romans 9–11. His main concern there is not the church but ethnic Israel, to show that Israel’s current condition does not invalidate the gospel. He answers a question posed in 9:1–5: Since God **chose Israel and gave them the promises**, why did Messiah’s coming not bless them? Does their unbelief mean that the gospel is mistaken? Or has God’s word failed?

For now, consider what the apostle says will happen to Israel. The determining factor is divine election. God will save that nation (“all Israel”) because He chose them. He was not obligated to choose them nor to make the promises He made. He could have chosen them under specified conditions, then rejected them for violating the conditions. Instead, He chose Israel with no conditions at all, and promised to finally bless in spite of rebellion. Never did He warn that He would replace them (though He should have warned if RT were right). Indeed, He set them aside partially and temporarily but not fully nor eternally.

A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has 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...” (Rom. 11:25b–26, which quotes from Isa. 59:20–21 and 27:9)

Godet correctly expounds this passage as “the final and collective revolution which will be wrought in the nation [of Israel] at the end of the times.” But he marvels that many miss the point:

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

It is almost incredible how our Reformers could have held out obstinately, as they have done, against a thought so clearly expressed. But...they dreaded in particular everything that appeared to favor the expectation of the thousand years' reign.... [Some wrongly interpreted "all Israel" to mean] the totality of God's people, Jews and Gentiles....²⁷

Charles Hodge, likewise, remarks that "[All Israel] is not therefore to be here understood to mean, all the true people of God, as Augustin, Calvin, and many others explain it; nor all the elect Jews...but the whole nation, as a nation."²⁸

For many years most RT writers considered Romans 11:25-26 a promise for the church. God's new people will be saved, they said, through the means already mentioned: (a) the present believing remnant of ethnic Israel (11:5-7) and (b) the engrafted Gentiles (11:17-21). That interpretation turned Paul's whole argument upside down. But more and more of the recent RT writers are getting Romans 11 right. Waltke says it proves "Israel's spiritual salvation" (see below). Riddlebarger says, partly quoting Holwerda,

The context dictates that the phrase "all Israel" should be understood in the same manner as it was set forth in Romans 9:6 in which ethnic Israel ("all Israel") was clearly set apart from the believing remnant ("not all Israel"). Since "all Israel" has now been saved [he speaks from a future standpoint] in this manner, i.e., after the hardening in part has been lifted and now that the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, "all Israel" should, therefore, be understood as "Jewish Israel in its eschatological fullness."²⁹

Look again at 11:25-26, quoted above. The "Israel" that "will be saved" (v. 26) has been "partially hardened" (v. 25). How could that describe Gentiles? Instead, it is the same ethnic "Israel" as in verses 1 and 2, where Paul twice assured us that "God has not rejected His people." He will not reject them because He "foreknew" them (v. 2). That verb means the same that it did in 8:29, that He chose them. Paul reiterates that same thought—and again identifies Israel—in the summation he gives after 11:26:

From the standpoint of the gospel **they are enemies** for your sake, but from the standpoint of **God's choice** they are beloved...for the gifts and **calling of God are irrevocable**. For just as you once were disobedient to God but now have been shown mercy because of **their disobedience**, so these also now have been **disobedient** in order that because of the mercy shown to you **they also may now be shown mercy**. (11:28-31)³⁰

There will be many nations in God's eternal kingdom (Rev. 21:24, 26; 22:2). Among them will be one descended physically from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They will be saved as a nation (not every individual) after "the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25) and "the Deliverer" has come to them (v. 26; see Zech. 12:10; 13:1; 14:1-7). Can RT give an adequate

reason why God would forget that He elected Israel? Can RT justify transferring Israel's promises to someone else?³¹

4. RT contradicts the earthly aspect of Abraham's hope. Of course, RT has to be selective in its use of both OT and NT Scriptures, since it contradicts many of them. This is true even in an RT "proof text" like Hebrews 11:8–16. RT rightly notes that Abraham and his successors died without receiving their inheritance (11:13, 39). It observes that they were seeking the eternal heavenly "country" and city, just as we are. This is "the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God," to which we have all come by faith (Heb. 12:22). But RT cannot understand another fact from the same passage: Abraham was "called to go to a **place that he would later receive** as his inheritance" (11:8).³² This points back to the first of many mentions of the Promised Land. Since Abraham inherited nothing, God will raise him from the dead and give him and his nation special assignment to that area. Why should RT neglect or contradict that aspect of God's plan?

5. RT invalidates the NT use of *Israel* and *Jew*. You have already seen that many proponents of RT misunderstand the theodicy in Romans 9–11. That would not have happened if they had observed how the apostle Paul uses the terms *Israel* and *Israelite* in those chapters. In every case there (Rom. 9:3–4, 6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:1, 2, 7, 25, 26), those terms can mean only the **physical** descendants of Abraham. In fact, that is the meaning of *Israel* every time it is used in the NT.³³ Test that claim by reading every passage in which Luke uses the term.³⁴ As in Romans 11:11–16, *Israel* is often contrasted to Gentiles but never clearly includes them.

This meaning for *Israel* is a well-established pattern. Nevertheless, RT leans on one ambiguous verse plus other specious arguments (e.g., from James 1:1) to overturn it. For a doubtful theological reason it argues that *Israel* now refers to the church. I will copy comments from my Waltke critique about the meaning of its proof text,

Galatians 6:16. This is the only verse some cite to prove that "Israel" supposedly means the church. In the NIV it says, "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even [Greek *kai*] to the Israel of God." By translating *kai* as "even" (appositional), it equates "the Israel of God" with "all who follow this rule," seeing them as one group. But that translation is doubtful. The apostle Paul always uses *kai* as a connective ("and"), not in apposition. Here he shows he is talking about distinct groups by using "upon" (*epi*) with each one. The NASB has it right: "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be *upon* them, and *upon* the Israel of God." Who are these two groups? The first ("those who will walk by this rule") is or includes believing Gentiles. The second ("the Israel of God") is the converted Jewish remnant, including Paul. (The first group may refer to all believers and the second group be a subset of the first.) This meaning meshes with the preceding verse (15), which also mentions two groups: the "circumcision" and the "uncircumcision," both now in the "new creation."

The same thing goes for New Testament use of the term *Jew*. It always refers to a physical descendant of Abraham—even in Romans 2:17 to 3:8, where Paul uses it often. Speaking to

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

Jews, he says, “Circumcision has value if you observe the law.” But if not, obedient Gentiles are better off, “regarded as though they were circumcised” (Rom. 2:25, 26). Spiritual circumcision makes us acceptable but does not make us Jews. “A man is a Jew if he is one inwardly” (v. 29) still refers to a physically Jewish man. Paul’s very next verse (3:1) continues to use *Jew* and *circumcision* in that physical sense.

[See also Part A.] Another reason some call the church *Israel* is that “those who believe are children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7). Paul proceeds to show why this is true. It begins with the fact that God has chosen to bless the world through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). The real heir to Abraham’s promise(s) is his “seed, meaning one person, who is Messiah” (Gal. 3:16). That *seed* is a collective noun in which *one* includes *many*. Thus, the one Messiah is cosmic, with a body composed of many. In Him are “all sons of God through faith in Messiah....If you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs” (3:26-29). We are in Messiah, also called (the true) Israel (Isa. 49:3). Nevertheless, the title *Israel* is used for Abraham’s physical descendants only.

6. RT logic would deny the eternal existence of nations. Many prophecies, like Isaiah 11 quoted earlier, picture ethnic Israel living in peace with other nations.³⁵ RT considers some of these prophecies as being fulfilled now.³⁶ Others, such as Revelation 21:24, 26; and 22:2, clearly belong to the eternal state. In either case RT usually denies any present or future claims for Israel and implies that the other nations have no material or political reality. What, then, are they? Only representatives. Thus, RT transforms each such prophecy.

It is true that prophecies use symbols and other figures of speech. Yet, there must be a minimum of literality; otherwise, we could know nothing for sure about the end.³⁷ Since there is no evidence to the contrary, the nations will be just as real—with ethnic Israel as one of them.

RT emphasizes the fact that there will be one people of God, with one grand future. But that does not forbid diversity within God’s people—the many nations that the prophets foresaw. Messiah’s kingdom assembly, the *ekklesia*, can include many colors. Among them will be redeemed Israel. And God will fulfill what He promised to them. Instead of being forever replaced, they will glorify Him forever. Won’t that be marvelous!

7. RT misunderstands the promised kingdom. I have touched on this fact in most of these arguments, especially #2. Here I will sketch some arguments I deal with at length elsewhere.

Consider evidence from the Gospel of Matthew, which has the King and His kingdom as its main theme. On three separate occasions Matthew informs us that the same message was being repeated:

- John the Baptist was preaching that the kingdom had drawn near—Matthew 3:2.
- Jesus was preaching that the kingdom had drawn near—Matthew 4:17.
- The apostles were preaching that the kingdom had drawn near—Matthew 10:7.

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

The Greek verb *engidzo* is used in these three key passages in Matthew, also in Luke 10:9, 11 on the final journey to Jerusalem. It never means to arrive or be present but to draw near, as should be obvious in James 5:8 and 1 Peter 4:7.

So John, Jesus, and the apostles repeatedly preached that the kingdom had come near. How did they define the near kingdom? They did not!³⁸ Why not? Why did they consider no definition necessary or suitable? The best answer is that the Jews knew what the kingdom would be. The Jewish definition, gained from the prophecies, was basically right.

Another answer, a misguided one, has been devised: that Jesus did not define the kingdom but inaugurated it.³⁹ In that case, its very presence proved that it was spiritual, transformed from the prophetic pictures. In that case, Jesus didn't tell the Jews but showed them that they were wrong. **But if that were the case**, Matthew would have said so clearly. He would have recorded when and where the kingdom began. Matthew did record a great deal about the kingdom: its importance, requirements for entering it, its ultimate triumph. He even noted that it touched earth in its representatives (12:28). But nowhere did he record that it began. Rather, he assigned that to the Second Coming (e.g., Matthew 13:40–43; 19:28; 25:31), always picturing it just as the OT did.

So can you find a transformed kingdom in Matthew? Only by overlooking the main argument and skewing certain verses out of context!

Nevertheless, great numbers of preachers and teachers now assume that the kingdom began in an unexpected form. They do so based on a mistake that affects not only Bible interpretations but some translations. Their mistake is to define Messiah's promised kingdom according to current theology rather than according to biblical prophecies. The usual definition nowadays is that it is the spiritual rule of God in the individual, with no material or political aspects. By assuming that meaning, most modern interpreters feel free to assert that Messiah has begun His rule.

To repeat, the modern definition of Jesus' kingdom disagrees with the many OT prophecies that anticipated it. It also disagrees with the consequent Jewish expectations for the kingdom, based on those prophecies. Rather than correct those expectations, however, Jesus often affirmed them.

How do RT teachers reconcile their kingdom theology with such Scriptures? Many "spiritualize" the prophecies and/or claim that there are both present and future forms of His kingdom. Instead, we ought to believe the prophecies for what they say, and alter our theology. I have dealt with many relevant Scriptures in writings available on my website, www.kingdominbible.com.⁴⁰

8. RT misunderstands the NT use of the OT. The principal RT argument is that the apostles show us how to interpret the Scriptures. That is sometimes correct, when we understand what they are doing. But by no means do they intend to give the only or even the best meaning every time they quote.

C. Some Arguments Against Replacement Theology

Consider the following example, in which Matthew 2:15 comments on Hosea 11:1. Matthew says that the holy family went to Egypt “that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying ‘OUT OF EGYPT DID I CALL MY SON.’” Now look at Hosea 11:1 in context (see at least 11:1-2). It is simply a statement about the past history of the nation—no prediction at all. Does Matthew’s comment obligate us to interpret it primarily as a messianic prophecy? If it did, how could we understand anything in the OT without such help? But Matthew is not interpreting that verse. Instead, he is showing us that even Israel’s history is recapitulated in Jesus, who is the true Israel. He does not change the meaning or value of what Hosea said about Israel. The same goes for many other “prophecies” fulfilled in Jesus. Their original reference to Israel is still valid, not canceled by NT “explanations.”⁴¹ When we see an additional level of meaning, why reject the first level?

Appendix A: Israel and the New Covenant

Jeremiah 31:27–37, like Ezekiel 37, proclaims promises God made to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:27, 31; see also 13:11). These were the two components of “the **whole** house of Israel” referred to in Ezekiel 37:11; 39:25; and 45:6. Most prophecies in Jeremiah and Ezekiel deal with that nation God had ruled over. The first component of that nation, “the house of Israel,” had gone into captivity years before Jeremiah was born. During Jeremiah’s ministry the second component, “the house of Judah,” was going into captivity.

Their God had “watched over them to pluck up, to break down, to overthrow, to destroy, and to bring disaster” (Jer. 31:28a). But just as surely He would “watch over them to build and to plant” (v. 28b). He would “make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (v. 30). This would be better than the covenant made with their fathers (vv. 31–33), because it would be written in their hearts. It would be possible to make the new covenant because He would forgive their sin (vv. 34–35).

This new covenant is now in operation for us (2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8:6-13). It was inaugurated by Jesus’ death. We celebrate it in every Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:25). In fact, this Jeremiah passage is quoted and given a present application throughout Hebrews 8–10 (see especially 8:8–13 and 10:14–18). Seeing that the covenant is already in force, RT draws wrong conclusions about Jeremiah 31. It says that the (mostly Gentile) church (a) is the new Israel and (b) has taken over that promise. Both RT conclusions are unwarranted. The new covenant will not be limited to one or even several groups. It reaches all the universe, including “heavenly things themselves” (Heb. 9:23; cf. 8:5; 9:12). Therefore, why should its present application cancel the obvious meaning of Jeremiah 31? In Jeremiah it is promised to the same nation that did the wrong described throughout the book. That is what God announced in His conclusion to the prophecy:

“If the heavens above can be measured,
And the foundations of the earth be searched out below,
Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel
For all that they have done,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 31:37)

RT comes to a different conclusion: God has indeed cast off “the offspring of Israel” and made the covenant with the present church instead of them. Such a conclusion implies that the covenant is limited and the prophecy is misleading. Instead, why not suppose that the covenant is big enough for us and for Israel, too? Remember that the same covenant was first and often promised to converted Israel. When they are baptized in the Spirit, they too will become part of the *ekklesia* (church), the body of Messiah. In Him there will be many levels of inheritance.

Appendix B: The Kingdom Described in Ezekiel 40–48

Ezekiel 40-48 describes the core of a kingdom of God future to that book. Here I will summarize an appendix to my Ezekiel Study Guide, which discusses the interpretation of those chapters. I will (A) list important factors affecting their interpretation, (B) list four categories in which their literal interpretation is difficult, then (C) discuss three different views.

A. Important factors affecting the interpretation of Ezekiel 40–48

1. The climactic function of those chapters in Ezekiel. They picture God’s glory returning to earth and the temple in contrast to its leaving during the early chapters, when the earthly kingdom was being suspended.
2. The importance of the nation *Israel* in the OT. The term primarily designated the people physically descended from Jacob, either ethnically or as God’s kingdom.
3. The same consistently ethnic meaning of *Israel* in the NT. Its repeated use in Romans 9-11 is a significant example.
4. The key importance of Israel in all the history and prophecies in Ezekiel.
5. The church (*ekklesia*) as referring to Messiah’s kingdom assembly, to which converted Israel will be joined. The OT used the same term to mean the assembly then and in the future.
6. The effect of Messiah’s baptizing in the Spirit. By that means He currently builds His mostly-Gentile *ekklesia* (also called His body)—and will add future converted Israel to it.
7. The inauguration of the kingdom when the Lord comes again. Starting when He began teaching in parables, the Lord predicted the kingdom for when He “comes in his glory.”
8. The beginning of our great hope at the millennium. That will be the first stage of the “new heavens and new earth.”
9. The disaccord of Ezekiel 40-48 with the NT. As premillennial teacher J. Sidlow Baxter said, “Certain of its main features are such that a literal fulfilment of them is surely unthinkable.”⁴²

B. Four categories in which Ezekiel’s picture does not harmonize with NT teaching

1. Ezekiel pictures barriers in place that have been demolished. Those barriers are to God’s own presence and between Israel and the nations.
2. Ezekiel pictures only unglorified participants, whereas only glorified people can rule or inherit in the final kingdom. That requires a resurrection body. Even the main Ruler, Messiah Himself, is completely missing in Ezekiel’s picture.
3. Ezekiel pictures worship led by Levitical priests and including animal sacrifices, both of which have been superseded. Hebrews says “the priesthood is changed” (Heb. 7:12) and “there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:18).
4. Ezekiel apparently pictures the capital city as earthly Jerusalem (48:30–35). Instead, it must be “the Jerusalem that is above [which] is our mother” (Gal. 4:26).

To fulfill Ezekiel 40-48 literally would sometimes contradict the NT. It would perpetuate the conditions of the old covenant, which has passed away (Gal. 3:19, 24–25; Heb. 7:12; 9:13). Instead, our Lord’s kingdom is based on the new covenant (Heb. 7:18–19). How do we resolve

these matters? I will list with related problems three views that have been suggested of the kingdom Ezekiel pictures.

C. Three different views of Ezekiel 40-48

View 1. Ezekiel describes a temporary form of the promised kingdom. Many or most dispensationalists hold this view. It expects literal fulfillment of all aspects of this prophecy right after Jesus returns in glory and Israel gets converted. This will supposedly be a “Jewish” form of the kingdom, with temporary aspects to fulfill Israel’s promises. Dispensationalists identify it with the “thousand years” rule of Revelation 20. In fact, they often call it “the millennial kingdom” or merely “the kingdom,” as though what follows it will not be the kingdom.⁴³ What do they think will happen to the church, which is not mentioned in Ezekiel? It will be kept distinct from Israel and rule with Messiah as His bride. After the thousand years, they say, eternal conditions will come for all believers. Those will be the “new heavens and...new earth” which, “according to His promise, we are looking for” (2 Pet. 3:11–14).

Problems. The kingdom cannot come in the form Ezekiel pictures. This supposed “Jewish” view of the kingdom contradicts NT changes and prophecies, and misunderstands our final goal. For example, Ezekiel gives no hint of our glorified Messiah or any glorified heirs of the kingdom (no church). Ezekiel’s picture reverts to the old covenant with its priesthood and sacrifices, which have forever disappeared (Heb. 8:13).

Instead, our goal is the new world Messiah promised to create at His return (Matt. 19:28; cf. Acts 3:20–21). When He returns, not a thousand years later! That is what He told us to pray for: “Our Father...your kingdom come” (Matt. 6: 9–10). He and the apostles said we will inherit it (Matt. 25:34, 46; Acts 14:22; James 2:5; Heb. 2:5–10; 11:16). Indeed, it will begin with a transitional thousand-year (millennium) phase. But, once started, it “will never end” (Luke 1:33). Even that introductory, imperfect phase is called the “new heavens and new earth.”⁴⁴ It will be eternal heaven on earth under the eternal new covenant and ruled by the eternal Messiah. With Him His servants “will reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:5). Israel will receive its distinctive promises as part of the same kingdom, not a different kingdom on a different earth.⁴⁵

View 2. Ezekiel describes the promised kingdom in old covenant language that must be interpreted “spiritually.” Amillennialists hold this view. It says that this picture of the kingdom must be transformed to a later, new covenant, version.⁴⁶ As I have shown above, Ezekiel’s picture includes elements that the NT shows to be OT “types” that have been updated.⁴⁷ Such prophecies describe the coming world as though it were just like the past. For example, Israel used horses instead of tanks, suffered from national enemies that have since disappeared, and counted on first-covenant priests and their sacrifices. This second view modifies Ezekiel’s whole picture to fit the supposed meaning of NT teachings and prophecies.

Problems. Indeed, there is scriptural authorization to transform some prophetic elements. But features supported by God’s covenants and statements of purpose will remain the same. It is wrong to cancel such things on the pretext of updating prophecies. For example:

- The locale for God’s eternal kingdom will be the whole earth, not heaven. Genesis 1, as reflected in Psalm 8, Hebrews 2, and in many prophecies, makes God’s design obvious. Transferring Ezekiel’s picture to heaven—or making it temporary—would contradict His plan.
- God will fulfill His promises for ethnic Israel. Such promises are obvious in repetitions of the Abrahamic covenant and in many other prophecies (including Romans 11). So we are not free to reinterpret kingdom prophecies so as to exclude that nation.

View 3. Ezekiel describes a proffered form of the kingdom that will never be fulfilled. It was described as an offer made at the prophet’s time, so was not a definite prediction. This view fits the fact that Ezekiel’s generation was apparently invited to secure what he described:

Let them consider the plan, and if they are ashamed of all they have done, make known to them...its whole design and all its regulations and laws....Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations. (Ezek. 43:10d–11)

So Ezekiel’s generation was challenged to “be faithful to [that plan’s] design.” If they had been faithful, the whole plan—with all its old covenant features—would have been enacted. But it was a proffer contingent on a response Israel could not make. God knew that Israel was incapable and would refuse. He knew the kingdom would never become a reality in that form. This view of Ezekiel 40-48 seems to be the best.

Problems. Here are some objections (with rebuttals) to View 3.

- Why would God go into so much detail to describe an unreal kingdom, which some have called “a holy fiction”? Would that be a proper ending for Ezekiel? Since God’s glory really departed early in the book, shouldn’t it really return forever at the end?
George Peters answers that this passage fills out “what otherwise would prove *a blank* in Jewish history.” It “fully answers the question, *what* the state of the Jewish nation *would have been* provided it had on its restoration been obedient to God.”⁴⁸ If so, it does not describe final kingdom conditions, which must be determined from other prophecies.
- Would God indeed make a proffer that He knows will be rejected?
Yes, He did so various times; for example, Jeremiah 17:19-26. In the Gospels He offered the promised and hoped-for kingdom to Israel while knowing that He would “postpone” it.⁴⁹
- Would this view of Ezekiel 40-48 mean that some other Old Testament prophecies were contingent too?
Possibly so, under the same conditions. George Peters reminds us from Jeremiah 18:7-9 that many prophecies about people depended on their response.⁵⁰

Appendix C: The Church Was Not a Secret

We all read the Bible through our own eyeglasses. Amillennial glasses obscure a great many prophecies of the Lord's kingdom and/or Israel. Dispensational glasses obscure different teachings. I grew up with the latter.

I profited a lot from dispensationalism. We were strongly committed to Bible study and literal (normal) interpretation. However, the way we understood some Scriptures made us distrust some others for church truth. That is just what happens to amillennialists. Therefore, both groups end up with skewed understanding of the church and the kingdom.

Here I will discuss a basic though inaccurate dispensational premise: "the church as a mystery." The terminology comes from the apostle Paul's explanation in Ephesians and Colossians of a previously unrevealed secret (Greek *mysterion*). I used to think he was giving the first clear revelation of the church, and that even apostles did not understand the church previously. Accordingly, I was afraid to base church doctrine on the Gospel of Matthew, which I considered written for Jews. No use in looking for the rapture there! And when I looked where I did trust, I saw it all through dispensational glasses. Here I will advocate a different approach to the key "mystery" passages.

Premises in Common. Evangelicals generally agree about the following:

1. There is only one church which is the body of Messiah, the one Jesus predicted in Matthew 16:18 and instructed about discipline in 18:15-20.
2. Jesus began building His church when He began baptizing in the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Matt. 3:11; Acts 1:5; 11:15-17; 1 Cor. 12:12-13).
3. All New Testament books were divinely inspired, and authoritative for their addressees. They were written (a) well after the church began, (b) by church members/leaders, (c) usually for church congregations or members.

Related Observations. I hope you will consider the following:

1. When Jesus said, "on this rock I will build my *ekklesia*" (Matt. 16:18), the term had a well-known biblical meaning. *Ekklesia* was often used in the Old Testament for God's kingdom assembly (e.g., Deut. 9:10), even the future one (e.g., Ps. 22:22, quoted in Heb. 2:12). Jesus knew that His disciples would understand in the same sense the one He predicted.
2. Acts provides a record of the church's beginning and growth, also the context in which we should interpret New Testament church literature: the Epistles and Gospels. Even epistles written near the end of the Acts period were relevant to the church that began in chapter 2.
3. Only the apostle Paul, and only in his "Prison Epistles," uses "mystery" terminology regarding the church. But he does not claim exclusive knowledge nor use: "It has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (Eph. 3:5). Seeing the importance of this revelation, we would suppose that others discuss its substance, even if using other terminology. For example, 1 Peter 2:9 describes the mostly Gentile church in terms lifted right out of Exodus about Israel.

4. Paul never calls it “the mystery of the church” but “the mystery of Messiah” (Eph. 3:4). Specifically, he says, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Messiah Jesus” (3:6). This is the same unity Paul had described in the verses just previous (2:11-22): Gentiles, who “were separate from Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God” (in short, “far away”), “have been brought near.” Now they are part of the “one new man” in which both Gentiles and Jews no longer are hostile but live together in peace with access to the Father. What was it, then, that had been previously unrevealed about this? In other words, just what was “the mystery”? That in Messiah Gentiles could share such glorious things with Jews without themselves becoming Jews.
5. Colossians 1:24-27 states the same mystery regarding Messiah’s body the church. Again, the mystery is not the church itself but God’s unforeseen mercy to “Gentiles...Messiah in you, the hope of glory.”

My Conclusions

1. The church did not change its basic character after Pentecost, although church leaders had more to learn about it. What Paul said about the mystery/secret in Ephesians and Colossians was true from the beginning. Other apostles and prophets also learned it and taught it early. Their descriptions of the church are just as valid as Paul’s.
2. The whole New Testament is church truth: Gospels, Acts, and Epistles. Jesus promised that “the Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). After Pentecost the Spirit inspired nothing that should confuse the church. Take Matthew for example. Its Sermon on the Mount, Great Confession, Great Commission, emphasis on the King, prophecies, are all for the church. We cannot automatically exclude the church from its predictions or assume that apostles represented Israel rather than the whole church.
3. Ethnic Israel still has an eternal future as a saved nation. Being part of the “one body” does not abrogate their peculiar promises, elaborated primarily in the Old Testament. Both Gentiles and Jews “have been brought near” (Eph. 2:13) as co-equals (Gal. 3:28-29) and look for the same eternal kingdom. But in it different groups will inherit different shares (Luke 19:15-19).
4. Believing Gentiles should honor God’s people Israel, through whom our salvation came to us (Rom. 9:1-5). We have been brought near to them and to God to share in the church as “one body” (Eph. 2). God will never totally reject them but finally save “all Israel” (Rom. 11). In the heavenly kingdom as part of the *ekklesia*, they will shine as the greatest trophy of God’s grace.

Notes

¹ I will discuss the label *Replacement Theology* under the biblical context of RT. Though considered tendentious by its adherents, the term is convenient and not unfair. Also, RT is recently evolving, making absolute descriptions of it difficult.

² Joseph A. Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 248-262. This is a reprint of Alexander's two volumes in 1846-1847 revised in 1875 by John Eadie. Though I usually refer to Riddlebarger or Waltke, neither of them provides an explanation of Isaiah 11 as a whole.

³ Consider the following from Alexander's comments (*Isaiah*, p. 253) on Isaiah 11:5-6:

Most Christian writers...explain the prophecy as wholly metaphorical, and descriptive of the peace to be enjoyed by God's people...under the new dispensation...commonly regarded as descriptive of the change wrought by Christianity in wicked men themselves....Calvin and Hengstenberg suppose the passage to include a promise of a future change in the material creation, restoring it to its original condition (Rom. viii. 19-22), while they agree with other writers in regarding the pacific effects of true religion as the primary subject of the prophecy.

Waltke (*An Old Testament Theology*, p. 819) affirms that "Diverse hyperboles give rise to apparent discrepancies. Some prophets describe the peace of the messianic times...by the domestication of wild beasts (Isa. 11:6-8; 65:25) and still others, by their riddance (Ezek 34:25)." Why does Waltke make domestication and riddance into figures of speech instead of related aspects of "the renewal of all things" (Matt. 19:28)? He does believe that "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage" (Rom. 8:19-22). That includes the survival of animals beautiful and interesting but no longer dangerous.

⁴ Alexander (*Isaiah*, p. 256) on Isaiah 11:10: "The reference is not to Christ's crucifixion, but to his manifestation to the Gentiles through the preaching of the gospel."

⁵ Alexander (*Isaiah*, p. 261, emphasis added) on Isaiah 11:13: "The only fulfillment it has ever had is in the **abolition of all national and sectional distinctions** in the Christian Church (Gal. iii.27, 29, v.6), to which converted Jews as well as others must submit. Its full accomplishment is yet to come, in the re-union of the tribes of Israel under Christ their common head (Hosea i.11)."

⁶ Alexander (*Isaiah*, p. 261) on Isaiah 11:14: "Most Christian writers understand it spiritually of the conquests to be achieved by the true religion, and suppose the nations here named to be simply put for enemies in general, or for the heathen world...."

⁷ Alexander (*Isaiah*, p. 262) on Isaiah 11:16.

⁸ Riddlebarger complains about the RT label in an internet response (<http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/a-reply-to-john-macarthur/>). He labels his view as "Reformed amillennialism" and complains that the term *RT* is

a label slapped on us by those who disagree with our eschatology. But this is not (and never has been) how we identify ourselves....Reformed amillennarians do not believe that the church "replaces" Israel....Rather, we do believe that there is one people of God, the elect. In the Old Testament most of the elect are members of the covenant line, culminating [in] the formation of national Israel at Mt. Sinai....Thus under the New Covenant believers are now called out from among all nations (including Israel) to belong to Christ's church, which is the visible manifestation of the New Covenant people of God.

⁹ Later we will consider how RT deals with promises of blessing that even to them must refer to ethnic Israel.

¹⁰ *Christ* represents *Cristos* in Greek, which is equivalent to *Mashiac* in Hebrew or *Messiah* in Aramaic. All these terms refer to one anointed to be king, as David was.

¹¹ This is the main point of the first verse of the NT, Matthew 1:1, and those that follow. They document the fact that Jesus the Messiah was indeed descended from David and Abraham.

¹² "You killed the author of life" (Acts 3:13-15). Regardless of whoever else was guilty, Israel had His blood on them (Matt. 27:25). The reasons for this tragic response are probed in all four Gospels, especially in John chapters 1 to 12.

Notes

¹³ In all four Gospels—as in Acts—the Great Confession was that Jesus is the expected king (Messiah). Matthew records that Jesus congratulated Simon for making that confession—and changed Simon’s name to Peter. Then He announced that He would build the *ekklesia* to share His authority in the future kingdom. See Matthew 16 in my study course on that Gospel.

¹⁴ McClain argues that “the Israel to whom the Kingdom shall be given will be a *new* nation spiritually but also the same nation historically which came from the loins of Abraham.” Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God As Set Forth in the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 296-297.

¹⁵ Here are two examples of Church Fathers who espoused RT. Bishop Irenaeus often used *Israel* ethnically, as the Bible does. But about A.D. 180 in “Against Heresies,” he wrote, “They who boast themselves as being the house of Jacob and the people of Israel, are disinherited from the grace of God.” (*The Anti-Nicene Fathers*, ed. A Roberts and J. Donaldson, vol. 4 [1885; reprint, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993], 3.21.1.) This was another way of referring to the “branches [that] were broken off because of unbelief” (Rom. 11:19).

Justin Martyr, about A.D. 160, in “Dialogue with Trypho,” 11: “For *the true spiritual Israel*, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ...”

¹⁶ RT does recognize that some promises of blessing were definitely for ethnic Israel (as stated in Rom. 9:4). The contexts for such promises were unambiguous. How can RT understand them? It can allege that some of them were fulfilled but others were abrogated because of conditions (sometimes implied) that Israel did not meet. The allegations RT makes should be tested. Certainly God is not careless when He speaks; He knows how to give clear promises to clear recipients and fulfill them clearly. And He would not add conditions that later change the character of His promises (Gal. 3:15, 17). Therefore, we would expect Israel to see unconditional blessings fulfilled at the right time regardless of her intervening failures.

¹⁷ For the same reason, RT expects no literal millennium. Probably all RT adherents think that the kingdom described in Revelation 20 is already in progress.

¹⁸ I have written many papers on the character of the kingdom. See my website, www.kingdominbible.com.

¹⁹ In my Waltke critique I suggest some

“certainty rules” to help determine which prophecies, in God’s good time, *must be fulfilled literally or not*. They assume that God’s unconditional covenants (a) give an essential framework for all other revelation, (b) mean what God said and was understood to mean, and (c) will be fulfilled in that sense, plus additions God makes.

- The following must be fulfilled literally: (a) Essential elements of such covenants (e.g., the physical descendants of Abraham and the Promised Land); (b) Other elements often predicted in either OT or NT (e.g., Messiah on the throne of David).
- The following will be fulfilled non-literally: (a) Elements stated only in figurative terms (e.g., the unquenchable fire for Edom); (b) Elements now irretrievably gone (e.g., the ancient enemies of Israel); (c) Elements now clearly canceled, not just by inference (e.g., the Levitical priesthood, animal sacrifices).

²⁰ Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, pp. 584-585.

²¹ Here my main interest is that the LORD will bring His people “back to the land of Israel” (Ezek. 37:12). Does “open your graves” also imply their bodily resurrection? George N.H. Peters argues in detail that it does—in his masterful three-volume defense of premillennialism: *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ, As Covenanted in the Old Testament and Presented in the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1957). In Proposition 126 (III:244-263) he argues that the OT “clearly teaches a Pre-Millennial resurrection of the saints.” Among many passages he deals with are Ezekiel 37:11-12 (in detail); Isaiah 26:19; and Hosea 13:14.

²² Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, pp. 191-193.

²³ Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, does not comment on details of Zacharias's prophecy, except the word "servant" (p. 69).

²⁴ In his second speech in Acts, Peter told Israel that by repenting they might get God to send back the Messiah. He then described the kingdom that would result, in language equivalent to Matthew 19:28. It would be "the restoration of all things, about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time" (Acts 3:21). RT admits that the world will be restored but denies that ethnic Israel will be exalted.

²⁵ John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 41.

²⁶ This question by the apostles in Acts 1:6 is a bone in the throat of amillennialists. Though not as harsh as Stott, Waltke agrees with him. "The disciples still think like the primitive church," he says, and have "Jewish expectations." In other words, the apostles did not profit from being taught and enlightened by the Lord. They still did not understand either the kingdom or Israel's fate. But in "the book of Acts," Waltke assures us,

we can trace...**Luke's redefinition of the kingdom** of God from a reference to life in territorial space to a reference to life in Christ. **The primitive church expected Jesus Messiah to rule from David's throne in Jerusalem and reestablish Israel's glory...** However, the Spirit-enlightened and Spirit-empowered church came to understand that Messiah Jesus rules the world from David's throne in heaven in a universal kingdom without national boundaries.... (Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, pp. 570-571, emphasis added)

See my separate lengthy critique of Waltke's amillennialism.

²⁷ F.L. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 409-410.

²⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 374.

²⁹ Riddlebarger, 192, quoting Holwerda in *Jesus and Israel*, 170.

³⁰ Read Riddlebarger's careful discussion of Romans 9–11 on pp. 183–194. For Romans 9 he cites the typical RT argument that the true Israel, elected by God, is the church. But that is not his own view.

³¹ When amillennialists come to understand Romans 11, it makes their views on Israel more confusing. Consider Waltke's contradictory statements. (a) On the one hand, he repeatedly rehearses that nation's sins, culminating in their crucifying Messiah. Notice this example and my bolding to show his "Replacement Theology":

With that rejection [by Israel], there is no one else to send. In other words, **the end** has come for national Israel. As the prophets and his Son have foretold, *I AM forsakes them* as a nation and chooses **instead** to form **a new Israel.**" (p. 329)

Yet, (b) two pages later, commenting on Romans 11:26, Waltke adds this note and approves its conclusion:

Before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1947, most Christians held to the doctrine of supersession (i.e., the church replaced or superseded Israel). Since then, many Christian theologians have supported the notion that **ethnic Israel still has a role to play in salvation history.** Exegesis confirms what Blaising calls "the new consensus"....

³² Riddlebarger insists that Romans 4 reinterprets the Promised Land to mean the whole world. "The inheritance promised to Abraham, which was couched in premessianic terms as a reference to the land of Canaan, was...subsequently reinterpreted by Isaiah, Paul, the author of Hebrews, and Peter as a new heaven and earth" (p. 72). "It was Paul who spiritualized the promise of a land, which originally extended from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River (Gen. 15:18) to now include the whole world (Rom. 4:13)" (p. 235).

Indeed, eventual inheritance of the Promised Land—as core of Messiah's worldwide kingdom—will imply world dominion. But in this case the thing implied (the world) need not cancel the thing that implies it (the Promised Land). The promise of a specific land for Abraham and his nation could hardly be clearer either in Genesis or in Hebrews 11.

Notes

³³ In all its sixty-seven NT uses, there are only one or two where the Greek word for *Israel* can even be considered to mean other than ethnic Israel. The word for *Israelite*, used nine times, is equally unambiguous: John 1:48; Acts 2:22; 3:12; 5:35; 13:16; 21:28; Romans 9:4; 11:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22.

³⁴ Luke uses *Israel* twenty-seven times in his Gospel and Acts: (a) twelve times in the Gospel—Luke 1:16, 54, 68, 80; 2:25, 32, 34; 4:25, 27; 7:9; 22:30; 24:21; (b) fifteen times in Acts—1:6; 2:36; 4:10, 27; 5:21, 31; 7:23, 37, 42; 9:15; 10:36; 13:17, 23, 24; 28:20.

³⁵ For two other examples picturing Israel and the nations in the future kingdom, see Isaiah 19:23–25 and Zechariah 8:20–23. How does Riddlebarger deal with these passages and those I will refer to in Revelation? He does not.

³⁶ Riddlebarger is ambivalent about the time pictured by Isaiah 2:2–4 (and Micah 4:1–5). On p. 73 he says, “The author of Hebrews said the prophecy was already fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ.” But in a later chapter he says, “What is described in Isaiah 2:4 has to do with the renewed earth, not the millennial age [which he considers to be now]” (p. 207). Apparently Riddlebarger can take either view, depending on his interpretation of a particular passage. “When we speak of the premessianic prophetic expectations regarding the city of Jerusalem and the mountain of the Lord as fulfilled in Christ but awaiting a final consummation at the end of the age, we are speaking of the earthly Jerusalem serving as a type or a copy of the heavenly reality, which now is realized in principle” (p. 74). Many use the same logic to prove that the kingdom is “already...but not yet.”

³⁷ By the use of unchecked spiritualization, some have even denied physical resurrection and physical places to live in forever.

³⁸ “Since no explicit definition of this kingdom is found in either the Old or New Testaments, the kingdom of God has been interpreted in different ways depending largely on the presuppositions of the interpreter” (Riddlebarger, p. 100). Whether “defined” or not, there are many concordant OT and NT pictures of a coming kingdom of God on earth. (Amillennialist Waltke acknowledges as much but proceeds to spiritualize them because Jesus did not fulfill them as written.) Some OT examples are in Psalm 2, Isaiah 2, and Daniel 2. Why not accept that they will eventually be fulfilled normally?

³⁹ Most commonly it is claimed that the kingdom has “**already**” come but “**not yet**” in its fullness, which will be later. “On the one hand, Christ’s kingdom is a present reality; it arrived in Jesus’ person...” (Riddlebarger, p. 98). He proceeds to give references for proof texts, such as, Matt. 3:2; 12:28; Luke 10:17–20; Matt. 11:2–19; John 18:36; Luke 17:20–21; Rom. 14:17). But “let us not forget,” he adds, “that this present, spiritual kingdom also has an eschatological consummation yet to come” (p. 99). One big result of this dual definition is to redirect attention from the coming kingdom to the supposed present one.

⁴⁰ For NT teaching about the kingdom, see, for example, my course on [Matthew](#) and extracts from that course. Also, listed with the Gospel of Luke is a document called “What Kingdom of God Did Jesus Proclaim in [Luke](#)?” It deals with 36 passages in Luke that clearly refer to the kingdom. Only two or three of them “picture” His kingdom as somehow present when He was here.

⁴¹ Right after quoting Hosea 11:1, Matthew treats another historical note in the same way (Matt. 2:17–18). Similarly, as I pointed out before, 1 Peter 2:9–10 applied to the church OT verses that clearly referred to Israel.

⁴² J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book: A Basic and Broadly Interpretative Course of Bible Study from Genesis to Revelation*, six volumes (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, LTD, 1951), IV:31.

⁴³ Some dispensationalists recognize that the kingdom will last forever. However, in my experience few of them really believe that the eternal state is essentially the same as the “millennial kingdom.”

⁴⁴ “According to His promise, we are looking for new heavens and a new earth” (2 Pet. 3:11–14). When will this grand hope of ours begin? *At the beginning of the millennium!* Peter makes this obvious when he says it is “according to His promise.” The only previous promise using that terminology is in Isaiah 65 and 66 and certainly includes the millennium. Our hope is Messiah’s earthly, eternal rule, which will begin then.

⁴⁵ The church (Greek *ekklesia*) and Israel will not always be completely separate (see my writings on [Matthew](#)). Messiah will baptize in the Spirit every member of the future converted Israel. That same baptism was originally

promised to Israel (Matt. 3:11, reflecting OT prophecies, such as, Ezek. 36:27). Thus, they will all become part of His *ekklesia*, His “body,” which He builds by that procedure (1 Cor. 12:12–13). The resulting body of Messiah, the *ekklesia*, is His “assembly” for His coming kingdom. Jesus’ disciples certainly knew the Greek term in that meaning—as a common designation for God’s kingdom assembly in the OT (e.g., Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:1–3; 31:30; 2 Chron. 7:8; 20:5, 14; Acts 7:38).

⁴⁶ For a typical example of the amillennial view, I will quote from Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 843-844. An outstanding scholar of the Old Testament, Waltke comments on Ezekiel 33ff. as follows:

With the announcement that his oracles of reproach and judgment have been fulfilled, Ezekiel is filled with glorious visions of Israel’s salvation. He likens the Return to a return to Eden (34:25-30). For him, Israel’s restoration is assured, because *I AM*’s name must be upheld among the nations.... The reassembled nation will be purified in heart and spirit and united in one flock under I AM as their shepherd (36:16-38; 37:24)....

Next, Waltke admits that “in the book of Ezekiel, *I AM*, city, and temple are restored in the Land....” But he calls chapters 40-48 “the last of Ezekiel’s ‘visions of God,’ probably a proto-apocalyptic idiom.... Ezekiel’s visions represent spiritual realities, not physical geography....” This leads to Waltke’s non-physical (and non-Israel) conclusion:

In its canonical context, this idealized, visionary temple symbolizes the spiritual temple that begins with Christ’s body and is now being built up as a spiritual temple in his church....

⁴⁷ Though certain of its elements were types, the Old Testament kingdom was no type. In other words, things such as the priesthood, animal sacrifices, and tabernacle/temple arrangement pointed to better things. But the kingdom on earth, with God as Ruler and including Israel as His people, will itself be restored.

⁴⁸ George N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom of Our Lord Jesus, the Christ, As Covenanted in the Old Testament and Presented in the New Testament*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1957), III:86. See his entire Proposition 172 (III:83-91).

⁴⁹ The kingdom offered and postponed in the Gospels will certainly come. In contrast, this “proffer” view of Ezekiel 40-48 denies that the kingdom described there will ever come *in the form described*.

⁵⁰ Peters, *Theocratic Kingdom*, I:176-177.