

# THE MASTER'S SEMINARY JOURNAL



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Premillennialism and Hermeneutics  
BRAD KLASSEN

Premillennialism and the Old Testament  
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Premillennialism in the New Testament  
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Romans 4:11 and the Case for Infant Baptism  
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## EDITORIAL

### LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF THE FUTURE

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*“If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.” – C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>*

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This issue of the *Master’s Seminary Journal* primarily focuses on eschatology, the doctrine of last things. The articles found here present a compelling case for premillennialism—the teaching that, following His imminent return, the Lord Jesus will establish an earthly kingdom in Jerusalem for a thousand years, prior to the eternal state and the establishment of a new earth. The premillennial position rests on several key tenets, including: (1) the consistent application of literal hermeneutics to biblical prophecy (in both Old and New Testaments), (2) a proper distinction between national Israel and the church (cf. Rom. 11:26), and (3) a chronological reading of the book of Revelation, where the events described in Revelation 19 precede those depicted in chapters 20–21.

While sound arguments can be summoned to defend the premillennial position, as the articles that follow will demonstrate, it is vital to remember that eschatology is far more than an academic topic to be debated. In His Word, God has revealed truth about the end of the age, and that truth is intended to do more than merely generate colorful charts or provide fodder for bestselling novels.

Why has God revealed so much about the future to His people? At least three answers to that question might be considered, each of which demonstrates the fact that biblical truth *about the future* is meant to edify and encourage believers *in the*

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 134.

*present*. To say it more bluntly, eschatology is inherently practical. One's understanding of future events ought to impact his or her present reality in substantive ways. Like all of divine revelation, what the Bible reveals about last things is intended to transform believers presently and progressively into the image of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Consider the following three categories in light of what Scripture reveals about the future: (1) hope, (2) holiness, and (3) the honor of God.

### Hope

The truth about the future provides believers with hope for the future, even in the face of trials or death. Thus, Paul could tell the Thessalonians that Christians do not grieve “as the rest of the world who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Death for them was not the great unknown. Instead, it represented their final homegoing (cf. Phil. 1:21). Speaking of heaven, Charles Spurgeon observed:

The very happiest persons I have ever met with have been departing believers. The only people for whom I have felt any envy have been dying members of this very church, whose hands I have grasped in their passing away. Almost without exception I have seen in them holy delight and triumph. And in the exceptions to this exceeding joy I have seen deep peace, exhibited in a calm and deliberate readiness to enter into the presence of their God.<sup>2</sup>

Writing about his trials, the apostle Paul similarly explained to the Corinthians, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:17–18). Because believers know what the future ultimately holds, they can face the temporal troubles of this life with confidence and courage.

### Holiness

In addition to producing hope, any study of the future ought to promote holiness in the lives of the redeemed. In the words of one commentator, writing about the eternal state, “The New Jerusalem is the reality that finalizes the hopes of God’s people and rewards them for all they have endured. It also is intended to spur the readers to greater faithfulness in the present, knowing what is at stake.”<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing that they will soon be in the presence of their heavenly King, those who belong to Christ desire to please Him and reflect His perfect character in every way possible. As the apostle John wrote in his first epistle, “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2b–3).

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon at His Best* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 51.

<sup>3</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 727.

Believers understand that they will be rewarded by Christ for their faithfulness in this life (Rom. 14:10; 2 Tim. 4:8). The reality of a heavenly future puts the priorities and pursuits of this life in proper perspective (cf. Matt. 6:19–21). Such an eternal mindset motivated the nineteenth-century missionary, Adoniram Judson, who said:

A few days and our work will be done. And when it is once done, it is done to all eternity. A life once spent is irrevocable. . . . Let us, then, each morning, resolve to send the day into eternity in such a garb as we shall wish it to wear forever. And at night let us reflect that one more day is irrevocably gone.<sup>4</sup>

Those words echo the heartbeat of the apostle Paul, whose entire ministry was motivated by eternal concerns. As he told the Corinthians, “Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:9–10).

### The Honor of God

Finally, biblical eschatology provides a vivid reminder of the fact that the purpose behind all of salvation history is the glory of God. After Christ returns, His glory will be marvelously seen on earth during His millennial reign. Ultimately, the manifestation of that glory will culminate in the blazing light of the new heavens and earth. It will radiate throughout the New Jerusalem and engulf every one of heaven’s inhabitants. For all of eternity, believers will bask in the wonder of God’s grace and glorify Him for His infinite mercy and kindness. The unmerited favor of God will forever thrill the hearts of the redeemed, and they will praise and exalt Him as a result. The awe of redemptive love will fuel their worship. As Richard Baxter so aptly expressed,

As we paid nothing for God’s eternal love and nothing for the Son of His love, and nothing for His Spirit and our grace and faith, and nothing for our eternal rest. . . what an astonishing thought it will be to think of the unmeasurable difference between our deservings and our receivings. O, how free was all this love, and how free is this enjoyed glory. . . . So then let DESERVED be written on the floor of hell but on the door of heaven and life, THE FREE GIFT.<sup>5</sup>

With inexhaustible joy, believers from every age of human history will join together in unending adoration and thanksgiving to God for the unmerited kindness of His grace (cf. Rev. 5:9–14). Clearly, eschatological truth ought to motivate believers in their homeward journey, as they navigate through this world as sojourners and citizens of another realm (Phil. 3:20). To do that effectively, they must set their

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<sup>4</sup> Adoniram Judson as cited in Edward Judson, *The Life of Adoniram Judson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1883), 14–15.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (Reprint; Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 36–37.

eyes on Him and the glorious future He has promised (Col. 3:1–2; Heb. 12:1–2). Focusing on God’s reign during the Millennial Kingdom and beyond is not a hindrance to the life of faith; it is the essence of it (Heb. 11:16).

It is no wonder, then, that Lewis can say, “[T]he Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. . . . It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.”<sup>6</sup> In that spirit, the following articles are presented to the reader, so that in studying eschatology he or she might respond in worship, obedience, and faith.

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.

## PREMILLENNIALISM AND HERMENEUTICS

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*The purpose of this article is to identify the primary hermeneutical issues at the center of the divide over eschatology, while providing a brief premillennial response to each. The first of these issues concerns the legitimacy of literal interpretation with respect to prophetic texts. The second concerns the function of progressive revelation and the relationship of subsequent revelation to antecedent revelation. The third concerns the influence of presupposition, particularly as it relates to the analogy of faith and the impact of Platonic dualism on the Christian’s approach to Scripture.*

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### Introduction

Discussions about biblical eschatology—the study of the Bible’s teaching about future things—divide over one pivotal event: *the timing of the second coming of Jesus Christ*. In particular, disagreement over this central piece in God’s redemptive plan relates to what the apostle John described as a “thousand-year” reign of the Messiah in Revelation 20:1–6.<sup>1</sup> Three general positions developed throughout church history.

First, the oldest view of the church, *premillennialism*,<sup>2</sup> contends that the second coming of Christ occurs *prior to* (“pre-”) the millennium described by John.<sup>3</sup> In other words, premillennialism teaches that Christ will return in order to establish a physical kingdom on earth as described by a non-figurative interpretation of Revelation 20:1–

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase “thousand years” (χίλια ἔτη) is repeated six times in Revelation 20:1–7. The term “chiliasm” is derived from the Greek adjective χίλια (*chilia*, “thousand”). Chiliasm was the designation used in the early church to describe the belief that Jesus’ reign on earth during this “thousand years” was to be understood literally. Early proponents of chiliasm included Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian. See Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), 614.

<sup>2</sup> Donald K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1988), 155; Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 38; and Roger E. Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 171.

<sup>3</sup> The prefix *mille* in “millennial” or “millennium” is the Latin equivalent of the Greek χίλια.

6. This kingdom will not begin until Christ returns, and it will end one thousand years later with the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth of Revelation 21–22.

*Amillennialism*, a later development in church history,<sup>4</sup> rejects the concept of a literal, one thousand-year period of history (hence the “a-” negation). Amillennialists certainly assert that Christ will return, but not with respect to an earthly kingdom. The description given in Revelation 20:1–6 is to be understood symbolically—not literally. Christ *already* reigns in his kingdom—not from earth, but from heaven; and not for a thousand years, but for an indefinite period of time. This kingdom does not necessarily manifest itself in world politics but is largely invisible. This kingdom ends with the second advent of Christ, who returns to inaugurate the new heavens and the new earth.<sup>5</sup>

*Postmillennialism*, the most recent view in church history,<sup>6</sup> places the second coming of Christ *at the end of* (“post-”) the millennium. Like amillennialism, postmillennialism does not believe that Christ will reign physically on the earth. He already reigns as Lord of all. Either Christ’s church will eventually overtake all aspects of society in every nation of the world through the spread of the gospel (and thus inaugurate a distinctively “Christian” millennium of world history), or this millennium—understood figuratively—already began with the preaching of the gospel at Pentecost. In any case, Christ will return *after* this “millennium” in order to usher in the eternal state.

Discussions about biblical eschatology do not get easier at this point. In fact, within each of these three main views we find variations. For example, under the umbrella of premillennialism we find “historic” premillennialism (which is better called “covenantal” premillennialism) and “dispensational” premillennialism (sometimes called “futuristic” premillennialism).<sup>7</sup> While both covenantal and dispensational premillennial proponents believe that Christ will return prior to an earthly reign, they disagree on a good number of important points about the nature of His return and reign—particularly as it relates to the nation of Israel. Disagreements within the camps of amillennialism and postmillennialism are also noteworthy.

Ultimately, advocates of all three major perspectives stand in solidarity with each other over the authority, necessity, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture. They agree over the person and work of Jesus Christ—His virgin birth, His divine and human natures, His sinless life, His substitutionary atonement, His bodily resurrection, and His future return. They stand with each other in their proclamation that man

<sup>4</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 619.

<sup>5</sup> Because of its symbolic interpretation of Revelation 20:1–6, amillennialism can be described as *realized millennialism*—as teaching that the “thousand years” of Christ’s reign, Satan’s incarceration in the abyss, and the believer’s reign with Christ is a present reality, not a future stage of God’s plan for human history.

<sup>6</sup> R. G. Clouse, “Views of the Millennium,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 772.

<sup>7</sup> See Richard Mayhue, “Why Futuristic Premillennialism,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 59–84.



is saved only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. However, they are intensely divided over the Bible's teaching about the future. Such disagreement raises an all-important question: *Why are there so many significant differences?* Or as John Walvoord expressed, "How can it be that reputable scholars who agree on many basic Christian doctrines interpret the prophetic portions of Scripture with such differing results? How can this be explained?"<sup>8</sup>

In a word, the cause for the divergence is *hermeneutics*. Certainly, there are other presuppositions which affect the discussion to varying degrees.<sup>9</sup> But the most fundamental cause for the disagreement that exists over eschatology relates to the principles employed in the process of interpreting the pertinent texts. While pre-, a-, and post-millennialists may all agree that the Bible is the ultimate authority and the only source of knowledge pertaining to future events, the problem is that they do not agree over the method of its interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

This article's purpose is to identify and summarize the decisive hermeneutical issues at the crux of the divide over eschatology. Three issues specifically can be identified as having exceptional influence on one's eschatological position:

- (1) the legitimacy of literal interpretation;
- (2) the function of progressive revelation; and
- (3) the influence of theological presupposition.

Where one falls on these three hermeneutical issues will largely determine where one stands concerning the timing of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

### 1. The Legitimacy of Literal Interpretation

The first key hermeneutical issue which affects any discussion about eschatology is *the position one takes regarding the legitimacy of a literal approach to interpretation*. The term "literal" has traditionally been used to summarize the premillennialist approach to biblical interpretation.<sup>11</sup> But more than just affirming literal interpretation as one good approach among many, premillennialism—and dispensational

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<sup>8</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy," in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (reprint; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 14.

<sup>9</sup> E.g., see Stanley N. Gundry, "Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist* as the Determining Factor in the History of Eschatologies?," *JETS* 20, no. 1 (March 1977): 45–55.

<sup>10</sup> Walvoord states, "the diversity is not based on the premise that the Bible in some respects is untrue; instead, the difficulty arises in various schools of interpretation" ("Basic Considerations," 14). Postmillennialist Loraine Boettner agrees, stating that eschatological differences arise "primarily out of the distinctive method employed by each in the interpretation of Scripture" (Loraine Boettner, *Christianity Today* 2, no. 25 [September 29, 1958], 13).

<sup>11</sup> It is not within the scope of this article to provide a detailed definition of "literal interpretation" and its defense. To summarize, "literal interpretation" can be equated with the grammatico-historical method, which Robert Thomas succinctly defines as "a study of inspired Scripture designed to discover under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the meaning of a text dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history" (Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis* [Tyndale Seminary Press, 2014], 24).

premillennialism in particular—is committed to the *consistent practice* of literal interpretation in all parts of Scripture, including its prophetic portions.<sup>12</sup> So central is this commitment that Charles Ryrie claimed it as a *sine qua non* of dispensational premillennialism.<sup>13</sup>

Until more recently this connection was acknowledged even by premillennialism’s critics.<sup>14</sup> For example, O. T. Allis, a prominent twentieth-century spokesman for the amillennial camp, described dispensational premillennialism in this light:

Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of Premillennialism; in Dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that Israel must mean Israel, that it cannot mean the Church, that the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel concern the earthly Israel, and that the Church was a mystery, unknown to the prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul. Now if the principle of interpretation is adopted that Israel always means Israel, that it does not mean the Church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or Israelitish age.<sup>15</sup>

Another critic of premillennialism, Floyd Hamilton, also acknowledged that “we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”<sup>16</sup> Postmillennialist Loraine Boettner concurred, stating, “It is generally agreed that if the prophecies are to be taken literally, they do foretell a restoration of the nation of Israel in the land of Palestine with the Jews having a prominent place in that kingdom and ruling over the other nations.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 86, 89. See also the first four chapters of J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), which are devoted to matters of interpretation. Covenantal premillennialism, though generally committed to a literal hermeneutic, differs from dispensational premillennialism in its consistency in applying that method.

<sup>13</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 43ff. Ryrie justified this connection by claiming that (1) the nature of language itself requires literal interpretation as its starting point; (2) the literal fulfillment of OT prophecies concerning Christ’s first advent establishes literal interpretation; and (3) the danger of subjectivity in interpretation demands literal interpretation (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 54).

<sup>14</sup> The connection between non-premillennial eschatologies and an anti-literal stance is illustrated in the shift from premillennialism to amillennialism in the third and fourth centuries of church history. As the influence of the Alexandrian school’s allegorical approach to Scripture grew, premillennialism was increasingly viewed as a heretical aberration (cf. Gundry, “Hermeneutics or *Zeitgeist*,” 47).

<sup>15</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 244. Allis admitted that if this literal approach is applied consistently to all of Scripture, one will end up in the premillennial camp: “the Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this present age” (ibid., 238).

<sup>16</sup> Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of the Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Loraine Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 95.

How is the validity of this commitment to consistent literal interpretation challenged? Critics contest it on two primary fronts.

### Literal Interpretation and Its Sustainability

First, the older and more traditional critique is that a commitment to a consistently literal approach to the Bible is simply *unsustainable*. While it can be applied to certain kinds of literature in Scripture, it cannot be applied generally to all. And while it may serve as one step of the interpretive process, it is not all there is to that process.

This bias against consistently literal interpretation can be observed in all non-dispensational (i.e., covenantal) forms of eschatology. For example, postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry states, “Despite the vigorous assertions of dispensationalists, ‘consistent literalism’ is an impossible ideal.”<sup>18</sup> Another critic, amillennialist Vern Poythress, argues that “Grammatical-historical interpretation”—a synonymous designation for literal interpretation—“is only one moment in the total act of interpretation.”<sup>19</sup> After reviewing the commentary produced by dispensationalist Robert Thomas on Revelation 1–7, Poythress concludes,

This principle of “literal if possible” is particularly misleading when used with apocalyptic literature, since it forces on the literature an inappropriate, stringent idea of “literalism,” wildly underestimating the pervasiveness of symbolism. Thomas makes sound judgments on some minor points . . . but the over-all impact is dominated by the initial decision in favor of literalism. The book cannot be recommended.<sup>20</sup>

Also responding to a literal approach to the book of Revelation, Craig Blomberg states, “the exclusively prophetic interpretation usually insists on an *impossibly literal hermeneutic* which is therefore inevitably applied inconsistently.”<sup>21</sup>

To a large extent such criticism reflects confusion or disagreement over the meaning of the term “literal.” While proponents from all three main eschatological views openly embrace literal interpretation to some extent, it is common for critics

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), 146.

<sup>19</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 91.

<sup>20</sup> Vern S. Poythress, “Review of Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary*,” *WTJ* 55, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 165. Poythress makes this comment in response to Thomas’ admission of his hermeneutical commitment: “The proper procedure is to assume a literal interpretation of each symbolic representation provided to John unless a particular factor in the text indicates it should be interpreted figuratively” (Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992], 36).

<sup>21</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “New Testament Genre Criticism for the 1990s,” *Themelios* 15, no. 2 (January/ February 1990), 46; emphasis added.

to describe dispensational premillennialism’s interpretive approach as “woodenly literal” or even as “hyper-literalism”<sup>22</sup>—as if premillennialists by default reject the existence of figures of speech in Scripture or have no appreciation for its diverse literary styles. Gentry even warns that a commitment to consistent, literal interpretation would inevitably lead to some of the same kind of errors advocated by Mormon founder Joseph Smith, who interpreted Scripture’s anthropomorphic descriptions of God “literally” and concluded that God did indeed have a physical body.<sup>23</sup> Gentry argues that any claim to consistency in literal interpretation would seem to require the dispensationalist to conclude that Jesus is actually a physical door (cf. John 10:9).<sup>24</sup> But, he contends, the fact that no dispensationalist believes that Jesus is indeed a literal door demonstrates that a commitment to consistent literal interpretation is ultimately untenable.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, critics of premillennialism argue that an anti-premillennial stance is necessitated even by the sheer need to oppose such interpretive naiveté and its devastating consequences.

### Literal Interpretation and Its Credibility

A second and more recent argument against the claim to consistent literal interpretation made by dispensationalists in particular is that it turns out to be *misleading*—and perhaps even *untruthful*. Critics argue that dispensationalists are actually much more inconsistent or selective in their application of a literal hermeneutic than they acknowledge. Gentry’s criticism is representative: “Besides being naïve, the dispensational claim to ‘consistent literalism’ is frustrating due to its *inconsistent* employment.”<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, non-dispensationalists increasingly claim that they are much more literal in their methods of interpreting Scripture than previously recognized. For example, amillennialist Kim Riddlebarger states:

The dispensationalists’ literalistic reading of prophetic passages must not be confused with a literal reading. . . . *It is amillennarians, not dispensationalists,*

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<sup>22</sup> E.g., William Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972), 21, 23, 64, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 152–53. Gentry shows his misunderstanding of the premillennial claim to literal interpretation when he asks in response, “May not so rich a work as the Bible, dedicated to such a lofty and spiritual theme (the infinite God’s redemption of sinful man), written by many authors over 1,500 years employ a variety of literary genres? No symbols? No metaphors? No analogies?” (ibid., 147). Dispensationalists do not deny the existence of these things.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>26</sup> Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 153; emphasis original. See also Anthony Hoekema, “An Amillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 105–27; Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 6.

who interpret prophecy literally in that they follow the literal sense of how the writers of the New Testament interpret Old Testament prophecy.<sup>27</sup>

Even some who still prefer to call themselves “dispensationalists,” but who seek considerable rapprochement with non-dispensational schools of thought, now argue that a commitment to the literal, grammatico-historical approach “is shared broadly in evangelicalism,” to such an extent that dispensationalists cannot think of themselves “as having an exclusive hermeneutic.”<sup>28</sup> Blaising states, “for many scholars to say the difference (between a dispensationalist and a non-dispensationalist) is simply between literal and spiritual exegesis is not accurate and is in fact misleading.”<sup>29</sup> According to this line of argumentation, the cause of the divergence between the different eschatological views is actually *not* hermeneutical in nature.

Consequently, critics of premillennialism, especially of its dispensational perspective, now call for the claim to “literal interpretation” to be abandoned. The terminology is considered unhelpful and misleading. It has no clear definition. It has suffered the defeat of a thousand qualifications. Moreover, to claim it as a *sine qua non* of a particular eschatological position lacks integrity, since all sides appeal to it and yet no side can employ it consistently. Boettner states,

One does not have to read far in the Bible to discover that not everything can be taken literally. We find no labels in the Scripture itself telling us, “Take this literally,” or “Take that figuratively.” Evidently the individual reader must use his own judgment, backed by as much experience and common sense as he can muster. And that, of course, will vary endlessly from individual to individual.<sup>30</sup>

Willem VanGemenen is even more pessimistic:

[A]ny eschatological discussion presupposes the Creator-creature distinction, as God is God and his revelation to man of himself and of the eschaton is in the form of accommodation, permitting us to see through a glass darkly. We stand in the presence of God with awe, as he is sovereign and free. In his sovereignty and freedom he has revealed aspects of his eternal plan in *time*, in the *language*

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<sup>27</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, *The Case of Amillennialism: Understanding End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 40; emphasis added. Or as John H. Sailhammer states, “Both millennialists and nonmillennialists hold tenaciously to the claim of a ‘literal’ hermeneutic, though both sides apply it in quite different ways and in ways largely unacceptable to the other” (“The Hermeneutics of Premillennialism,” *Faith and Mission* 18, no. 1 [Fall 2000], 97).

<sup>28</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 380; cf. also Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993) 35–37. For an analysis of this “progressive” form of dispensationalism, see Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” *MSJ* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 79–95.

<sup>29</sup> Craig A. Blaising, “Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” *BSac* 145 (July–September 1988), 270–71.

<sup>30</sup> Boettner, “Postmillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 134.

of man, and in *metaphors*. Therefore, it is impossible to *bind* God to any eschatological (millennial) system.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps Vern Poythress sums up the criticism best when he states, “What is literal interpretation? It is a confusing term, capable of being used to beg many of the questions at stake in the interpretation of the Bible. We had best not use the phrase.”<sup>32</sup>

### Reaffirming the Legitimacy of Consistent Literal Interpretation

Despite these criticisms, the claim to a consistently literal hermeneutic must not be abandoned. To do so would be to concede the argument at its most fundamental level. But how can it be correctly affirmed?

First, discussions about eschatology must give attention at the very start to identifying the key terms related to hermeneutics and providing clear and careful definitions. Feinberg points to this need when he states, “The difference is not literalism v. non-literalism, but different understandings of what constitutes literal hermeneutics.”<sup>33</sup> He continues,

With this kind of confusion, it is understandable that dispensationalists have many questions about nondispensational hermeneutics. My main point, though, is that confusion (and surely there is also confusion among dispensational thinkers) over whether these practices are literal or non-literal (let alone confusion over what practices are correct) illustrates the need for clearer thinking on the issue. Raising these issues does not settle them, but we can make some headway while noting hermeneutical differences between the systems.<sup>34</sup>

Confusion over and misuse of terminology is a significant cause of frustration for believers navigating discussions about eschatology. While some wish to disband with such terms as “literal” for the very reason that they require careful definition and qualification, in reality many very important and essential theology terms require the same nuancing (“trinity,” “inerrancy,” etc.).

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<sup>31</sup> Willem VanGemeren, “Systems of Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testament*, ed. by John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 62; emphasis original.

<sup>32</sup> Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 96. A similar position is taken by Darrell L. Bock, “Why I Am a Dispensationalist with a Small ‘d,’” *JETS* 41, no. 3 (September 1998), 388–89.

<sup>33</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 74. An example of this can be seen in the confusion of terminology. For example, whereas in the past an affirmation of the grammatico-historical method of exegesis—interpreting language according to its natural grammatical sense as dictated by its original historical-linguistic context—was synonymous with an affirmation of literal interpretation, some critics of dispensational premillennialism today argue for what is called “historical-grammatical, yet non-literal interpretation” (R. Fowler White, “On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Rev 20:1–3: A Preconsummationist Perspective,” *JETS* 42, no. 1 [March 1999], 54).

Second, a consistent literal hermeneutic does not deny or ignore the presence of figurative language in Scripture.<sup>35</sup> Instead, a literal hermeneutic attempts to interpret language as it was ordinarily employed in the original context in which the writer delivered his text. Bernard Ramm explains this well:

To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a “wooden literalism,” nor to a “letterism,” nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any “mechanical” understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, traditional range of designation, which includes “tacit” understanding.<sup>36</sup>

Martin Luther—in his debate with Desiderius Erasmus over the clarity of Scripture—articulated this same approach when he wrote, “we must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.”<sup>37</sup> In fact, it is a grammatical-historical hermeneutic which best preserves the power of figurative language. As David Turner states, “sensitivity to historical, grammatical, and cultural matters is the only way to arrive at the meaning intended by the figure.”<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, the interpreter committed to consistent literal interpretation embraces the reality that figurative language is part of the capacity for communication that God has created in man. But he nonetheless recognizes that what makes figurative language powerful is that it represents a *departure* from the norm. Furthermore, the author of the text—and not the interpreter—is the only one with the authority to indicate when his language makes this departure, and he does so by leaving hints recognizable to his original audience.

In other words, literal interpretation emphasizes that the meaning of any text is synonymous with the author’s intent.<sup>39</sup> To decide when language should be treated

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<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that one of the most extensive treatments ever written about figures of speech found in the Bible—E. W. Bullinger’s work, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated*, first published in 1898—was written by a dispensational premillennialist.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 121.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, “On the Bondage of the Will,” in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S Watson, LCC 17 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969), 221. Luther emphasized this rule in response to the *quadrige* of literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical meanings espoused by the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Luther did not abandon his allegorical interpretation of texts like Revelation 20:1–6.

<sup>38</sup> David L. Turner, “The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology,” *GTJ* 6, no. 2 (1985), 278. In the words of Bernard Ramm, “The literal meaning of the figurative expression is the proper or natural meaning as understood by students of language. Whenever a figure is used its literal meaning is precisely that meaning determined by grammatical studies of figures. Hence, figurative interpretation does not pertain to the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture, but to the literal sense” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 121).

<sup>39</sup> As E. D. Hirsh stated, meaning is “that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent” (E. D. Hirsh, *Validity in Interpretation* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967], 8). See also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Meaning

figuratively is not the prerogative of an interpreter apart from the author; nor does the mere content of a text automatically render it metaphorical, such as when texts are *prophetic* in nature—as if prophecy was always figurative in nature.<sup>40</sup> Whether language is used literally or figuratively is a decision made by the writer alone, and once he makes this decision, his intent becomes frozen in the text. Literal language cannot later become figurative; nor can figurative language morph into the literal at some subsequent point in time. It is the interpreter’s responsibility simply to recognize what the writer intended to do with the words he chose. This commitment to consistent literal interpretation maintains a clear distinction between *appreciating figurative uses of language* and *interpreting figuratively*.<sup>41</sup> Nineteenth-century Presbyterian pastor E. R. Craven sums this up well:

The *Literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that is manifestly literal being regarded as literal, that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.<sup>42</sup>

This understanding of “literal” has too often been ignored by non-dispensationists. Alva J. McClain expressed this frustration when he wrote, “This [literal, grammatico-historical] method, as its adherents have explained *times without number*, leaves room for all the devices and nuances of language, including the use of figure, metaphor, simile, symbol, and even allegory.”<sup>43</sup> Consequently, in the same way that it is incorrect for dispensationalists to charge that non-dispensationist systems proceed from an “allegorical” hermeneutic, so it is unacceptable for non-dispensationists to continue to describe the method of dispensationalism as “woodenly literal” or “literal extremism.” Misapplied or provocative labels always impede fruitful discussion.

Simply stated, a dispensational premillennialist consistently approaches the biblical text with the assumption that it must be first read literally, and its literal meaning

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of Meaning,” in *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, rev. ed., Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 38–42.

<sup>40</sup> See Robert L. Thomas, “Genre Override in Revelation,” in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 323–48.

<sup>41</sup> John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” 74. Feinberg elsewhere states, “The claim that dispensationalists actually interpret figuratively on occasion is definitely erroneous. The error stems from neglecting to distinguish between figurative language (e.g., figures of speech) and interpreting figuratively” (John S. Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 47).

<sup>42</sup> E. R. Craven, ed., “The Revelation of John,” in *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968), 12:98.

<sup>43</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 139; emphasis added.



must be accepted as *the* meaning unless it communicates an *absurdity*.<sup>44</sup> Again, this is not to deny the reality of figurative language in divine revelation. Rather, a consistently literal approach to interpretation, rightly employed, acknowledges that the biblical writer is in the seat of authority. He alone is the one who can determine the function and meaning of his words.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. The Function of Progressive Revelation

The second key hermeneutical issue which affects every discussion about eschatology is *the view one takes regarding the function of progressive revelation*. Simply stated, progressive revelation refers to the manner by which God revealed his propositional, redemptive knowledge. God did not reveal this knowledge instantaneously, but *progressively*—through a process covering 1,500 years and including dozens of authors. It was a process which began with foundational truths and progressed to more specific details. But the later, more specific revelation never contradicts the earlier, more general revelation.

Proponents across the eschatological spectrum can affirm this basic understanding concerning the delivery of special revelation. The question, however, concerns the way in which one understands the relationship of subsequent revelation to antecedent revelation. Does subsequent revelation *merely expand and add to* the knowledge God previously revealed (like a house that is built from its foundation upwards and outwards), or does it *expand and alter* this knowledge in some way (like the metamorphosis exhibited by an insect as it moves from an immature form to a mature one)?

The issue comes down to what is called “testament priority.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, to understand a text of Scripture correctly, which “testament” serves as the starting

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<sup>44</sup> Matt Waymeyer, “What about Revelation 20?” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2012), 132. Waymeyer provides a helpful paradigm for recognizing the presence of figurative language: “To determine whether something in Scripture should be interpreted symbolically, it is helpful to ask three questions. First, *does it possess a degree of absurdity when taken literally?* With symbolic language, there is something inherent in the language itself that compels the interpreter to look beyond the literal meaning. . . . Second, *does it possess a degree of clarity when taken symbolically?* Symbolic language is essentially clear and understandable, vividly portraying what it symbolizes. . . . And third, *does it fall into an established category of symbolic language?* Because figures of speech are legitimate departures from the normal use of language, they are limited in number and can be defined in accordance with known examples.”

<sup>45</sup> As Benware argues, “when an interpreter leaves literal interpretation, he also leaves the guidelines and restraints of history and grammar. There is truth to the idea that when one spiritualizes the Scriptures the interpreter becomes the final authority instead of Scripture itself” (Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 109).

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Bateman defines “testament priority” as “a presuppositional preference of one testament over the other that determines person’s literal historical-grammatical hermeneutical starting point” (Herbert Bateman IV, “Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 38). But “preference” here must not be understood as an appreciation for the content of one testament over the other.

point? Must the interpreter read Scripture *forwards*, beginning first with the OT context and moving forward to the NT in order to understand God's redemptive plan accurately? Or does he read *backwards*, beginning with the NT and then reading the OT through the NT lens? The significance of this issue cannot be overstated. As Paul Feinberg acknowledged, "It is difficult to think of any problem that is more important or fundamental than the relationship between the Testaments."<sup>47</sup>

For dispensational premillennialists, the starting point is the OT.<sup>48</sup> The OT text, beginning with the Pentateuch, is the starting point for the development of a truly biblical theology, for it provides the essential framework through which to understand everything that follows. The meaning of the OT has been fixed on the page by the inspired writer. Subsequent revelation never changes this meaning, though it adds to it and even applies it in ways not seen in its original context. As such, the NT is not required in order to understand what Isaiah meant in Isaiah 53, for example. The NT certainly describes the *fulfillment* of Isaiah 53 with specific details that Isaiah did not know, but it does not add to or alter the *meaning* Isaiah intended for his own words in that specific context. As stated by Michael Vlach, "Progressive revelation from the New Testament does not interpret the Old Testament passages in a way that cancels the original authorial intent of the Old Testament writers as determined by historical-grammatical hermeneutics."<sup>49</sup>

Covenantalists counter this forwards-reading, OT-priority approach with two primary arguments.

#### Progressive Revelation and Old Testament Interpretation

First, covenantal theologians reject this forwards-reading approach by asserting that *the NT is given to interpret the OT correctly*. Covenantal premillennialist George Ladd explains the difference between the approaches this way:

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 110. Or as Wayne House stated, "How the Old and New Testaments relate to one another is one of the central issues in biblical hermeneutics" (H. Wayne House, "The Hermeneutics of Historic Premillennialism and Jeremiah 31:31–34," unpublished paper, 1).

<sup>48</sup> As Ryrie states, "only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation; [only it] can give a proper place to the idea of later development" (Charles Ryrie, "The Necessity of Dispensationalism," in *Vital Prophetic Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995], 152).

<sup>49</sup> Michael Vlach, "What is Dispensationalism?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012), 24.

<sup>50</sup> George E. Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 20–21.

For covenantalists, the only truly “Christian” way of understanding the Bible is to read from the NT *backwards*. In other words, the covenantal approach gives priority to the NT, which it sees as the necessary interpretive key for unlocking the full meaning of the OT text.<sup>51</sup> True, an OT prophecy may have meant something concrete to its writer and original audience based on their historical context, and God would have held that original audience to the standard of the literal meaning of the text at that time. But God was not finished revealing his redemptive plan. Audiences subsequent to that original audience must therefore interpret that earlier revelation through the lens of subsequent revelation.<sup>52</sup> If not, the OT text will inevitably be interpreted incorrectly. Postmillennialist Kenneth Gentry explains it this way: “*the Christian exegete must allow the New Testament to interpret the Old Testament. . . . This approach to biblical interpretation allows the conclusive revelation of God in the New Testament authoritatively to interpret incomplete revelation in the Old.*”<sup>53</sup> Kim Riddlebarger echoes this when he writes,

The historic Protestant (or the amillennial) position holds that the New Testament is the final arbiter of the Old Testament. We must interpret all Old Testament prophecy as do the writers of the New. We should place such prophecy in its redemptive-historical context if we are to interpret it correctly.<sup>54</sup>

Or as Michael Lawrence writes,

In the case of prophecy, the shape of the story of the Bible as a whole is crucial. We need to remember that revelation is progressive, and in the revelation of Jesus Christ, we’ve been given both the main point and the end of the story. This means that we have an advantage over Old Testament readers. We work from the story of the whole Bible back to the prophecy, not the other way around. . . . Therefore the New Testament determines the ultimate meaning of Old Testament prophecy, not the other way around.<sup>55</sup>

Conversely, the forwards-reading approach of the dispensationalist, who interprets the NT in light of the antecedent revelation of the OT, is considered guilty of

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<sup>51</sup> This approach takes the Reformation principle *Sacra Scriptura sui interpres* (“sacred Scripture is its own interpreter”) and limits the function of “interpretation” to the NT alone.

<sup>52</sup> Sidney Greidanus states, “Since the literary context of the Old Testament is the New Testament, this means that the Old Testament must be understood in the context of the New Testament” (*Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Model* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 51). Cf. also Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 160, n. 51.

<sup>53</sup> Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion*, 156; emphasis in original. Gentry quotes VanGemenen, “Christian students of the Old Testament must pass by the cross of Jesus Christ on their return to the Old Testament, and as such they can never lose their identity as a Christian” (cf. Willem VanGemenen, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to New Jerusalem* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 21).

<sup>54</sup> Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 49.

“nullifying progressive revelation,”<sup>56</sup> or worse, of reading the Bible as an old covenant Jew rather than a new covenant Christian.<sup>57</sup>

The inevitable consequence of this backwards-reading approach is that the reader must see the meaning of the OT text as subject to *change*. While the OT text meant one thing to the writer and his original audience, its meaning for NT-era saints is different. Although proponents of NT priority avoid describing this change as “correction,” they nonetheless see it as “transformation.” As such, the word “progressive” in “progressive revelation” not only describes the general nature of God’s revelatory activity, but also describes what antecedent revelation undergoes as new revelation is given. As more revelation is given, the meaning of antecedent revelation undergoes “progression.”

For example, Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum state that “many of the themes that were basic to the Old Testament have now been *transposed* and *transformed*.”<sup>58</sup> Beale states that “the NT storyline will be a *transformation* of the OT one in the light of how the NT is seen to be an unfolding of the OT.”<sup>59</sup> Referring to the modification in meaning that took place between the time OT promises were originally given to Israel and the way those promises are to be interpreted today, Ladd writes,

In principle it is quite possible that the prophecies addressed originally to literal Israel describing physical blessings have their fulfillment exclusively in the spiritual blessings enjoyed by the church. It is also possible that the Old Testament expectation of a kingdom on earth could be reinterpreted by the New Testament altogether of blessings in the spiritual realm.<sup>60</sup>

To justify this understanding of *progression in the meaning of revelation*, proponents point to the Christ’s first advent as a paradigm-shifting event. Ladd explains, “The fact is that the New Testament frequently interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way *not suggested by the Old Testament context*. . . . *The Old Testament is reinterpreted* in light of the Christ event.”<sup>61</sup> N. T. Wright states it this way, “Jesus spent His whole ministry redefining what the kingdom meant. He refused to give up the

<sup>56</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 106.

<sup>57</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15–21.

<sup>58</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 598; emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 6; emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> George E. Ladd, “Revelation 20 and the Millennium,” *Review and Expositor* 57 (1960), 167. Ladd bases this assertion on Augustine’s hermeneutical rule: *Novum testamentum in vetere latet; vetus testamentum in novo patet*—“the New Testament is concealed in the Old; the Old Testament is revealed in the New” (ibid.).

<sup>61</sup> Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, 20–21; emphasis added.

symbolic language of the kingdom, but filled it with such a new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations.”<sup>62</sup>

In short, it is argued that Christ’s first advent forever changed the way in which the OT was to be read. The straight-forward promises in the OT concerning a land, a nation, a temple, etc., are now to be read metaphorically in a way that does not represent their original historical and grammatical context. The Christ event allows these OT promises to be fulfilled in a very different way that does not correspond to the way they were originally delivered.<sup>63</sup>

Importantly, this debate over the function of progressive revelation relates closely to the previous issue of literal interpretation.<sup>64</sup> As stated above, it is not uncommon today for non-dispensationalists to argue that they are the ones who truly practice a “literal” method of interpretation. The primary basis for such an argument is the belief that the NT writers interpret prophetic portions of the OT in a non-literal fashion. Interpreting the NT writers *literally* then requires them to interpret OT writers *non-literally*, since this is what the NT writers themselves did.<sup>65</sup> The literal interpretation of the NT necessarily overrides the literal interpretation of OT texts, and imputes to those OT texts a new, non-literal or spiritualized meaning. Conversely, in order for dispensationalists to read the OT *literally*, it is argued that they must treat the NT *non-literally*, because they inevitably downplay or ignore the non-literal interpretive approach established by the NT writers in their reading of the OT.<sup>66</sup>

### Progressive Revelation and Old Testament Perpetuity

The second challenge brought against the forwards-reading approach of dispensationalists is through the claim that *a truth revealed in the OT does not necessarily maintain authority if the NT does not explicitly validate that truth*. Consider again these words of Ladd:

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<sup>62</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 471.

<sup>63</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy states emphatically, “It follows that the first coming of Christ fulfilled all, I repeat, *all* the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament since these all deal in some way or other with the restoration of reality” (“Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics,” *SBJT* 10, no. 2 [Summer 2006], 15).

<sup>64</sup> House states, “At the core of these issues is the interpretive relationship between the Testaments. Both views claim to employ a literal interpretation, and interpreters in both premillennial camps work hard at understanding the historical, grammatical issues inherent in rightly understanding the Scriptures. But the interpreters look at the timeline of progressive revelation from different ends” (Wayne House, “The Hermeneutics of Historic Premillennialism,” 2).

<sup>65</sup> Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 68–70; cf. Robert Saucy, “The Crucial Issue between Dispensational and Nondispensational Systems,” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (1986), 155. As Riddlebarger argues, “If the New Testament writers spiritualize Old Testament prophecies by applying them in a nonliteral sense, then the Old Testament passage must be seen in light of that New Testament interpretation, not vice versa” (*A Case for Amillennialism*, 37).

<sup>66</sup> For a robust challenge to the presupposition that the NT writers interpret the OT non-literally, see Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018).

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament.<sup>67</sup>

The last sentence of Ladd's explanation—and especially his use of the adjective “explicit”—is crucial. Because of his view of NT priority, Ladd allows only “explicit teaching of the NT” to contribute to the formation of his eschatology. Explicit teaching of the OT is not permitted to fulfill this function. Later he states it again plainly: “a millennial doctrine cannot be based on Old Testament prophecies but should be based on the New Testament alone.”<sup>68</sup>

Certainly, how a truth measures up to “explicit teaching” is open to interpretation. But in essence, Ladd and other covenantalists assert that the NT has *ultimate veto power* over the OT.<sup>69</sup> It exercises this power not only *by direct nullification* (such as its setting aside of the applicability of the Mosaic Law; e.g., Gal 5:18)—a fact upon which dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists agree—but also *by mere silence*. In other words, whatever the NT does not explicitly restate from a literal interpretation of the OT it essentially invalidates, at least at it applies to eschatology.

Proponents support this assertion through appeal to a dualistic view of redemptive history. Old Testament revelation was predominantly *earthly and provisional* in nature, accommodated to the primitive materialism of OT Israel. New Testament revelation, on the other hand, speaks of that which is *spiritual and eternal*. It provides a more advanced understanding of reality based on what God accomplished through the Christ event. Consequently, only the NT can speak with clarity and authority regarding the lofty things of the future.

Operating from this viewpoint, Ladd concludes that “The Israel which will experience salvation is the ‘church’ rather than the nation, the spiritual rather than the physical Israel. The national and physical elements are not sloughed off, but they are subordinated to the spiritual factors.”<sup>70</sup> Bruce Waltke echoes this basic sentiment:

With the transformation of Christ's body from an earthly physical body to a heavenly spiritual body, and with his ascension from the earthly realism to the heavenly Jerusalem with its heavenly throne and the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, the earthly material symbols were done away and the spiritual reality portrayed by the symbols superseded the shadows. Consequently, OT prophecies about Israel's future kingdom that pertain to the church again, which began at Pentecost, find a spiritual fulfillment.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” 20–21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Mike Stallard, “Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 31.

<sup>70</sup> George E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 74.

<sup>71</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 282.

## Reaffirming a Forwards-Reading Approach to Progressive Revelation

Several dangerous consequences must be observed in response to the assertion of NT priority. First, what is at stake is our understanding of *the OT as revelation*. The backwards-reading, NT-priority approach places limitations on our understanding of the OT as a fully authoritative and fundamentally clear Word of God.<sup>72</sup> What is called *NT priority* in principle becomes *NT exclusivity* in practice, since only that which is explicitly stated in the NT is deemed authoritative or clear enough to inform our theology. This creates a bifurcation, whereby OT revelation—at least as it appears at face value—is treated as inferior, and NT revelation as inherently superior. This plays directly into the hands of those who already dismiss the language of the OT as divine “accommodation.”

Challenging the presupposition that the NT must explicitly repeat OT teaching if that OT teaching is to contribute to Christian theology, S. Lewis Johnson writes,

There is no need to repeat what is copiously spread over the pages of the Scriptures. There seems to be lurking behind the demand a false principle, namely, that we should not give heed to the OT unless its content is repeated in the New. The correct principle, however, is that we should not consider invalid and worthy of discard any of the OT unless we are specifically told to do so in the New, as in the case of the Law of Moses.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, in pondering the consequences of reading the NT back into the OT, Paul Feinberg asks: “How can the integrity of the OT text be maintained? In what sense can the OT really be called a *revelation* in its original meaning? Similar objections can be made to any approach which advocates a subsequent or consequent meaning ascribed by the NT.”<sup>74</sup> Or as Turner states, “If NT reinterpretation reverses, cancels,

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<sup>72</sup> An example of the challenge the NT-priority approach issues to the clarity of OT revelation is found in the words of E. J. Young: “Since the revelation granted to the prophets was less clear than that given to Moses; indeed, since it contained elements of obscurity, we must take these facts into consideration when interpreting prophecy. We must therefore abandon once and for all the erroneous and non-Scriptural rule of ‘literal if possible.’ The prophetic language belonged to the Mosaic economy and hence, was typical. Only in the light of the New Testament fulfillment can it properly be interpreted” (Edward J. Young, *My Servants the Prophets* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952], 215 n. 21).

<sup>73</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “Evidence from Romans 9–11,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffery L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 223. Similarly, Robert Thomas writes, “Single revelations of divine truth without elaborations must be allowed” (Robert L. Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology: The Analogy of Faith,” *JETS* 23, no. 1 [March, 1980], 45). John Feinberg also states, “If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc., it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat it in the NT for it still to be true and operative. . . . To argue that it is canceled because it is not repeated is a classic case of arguing from silence” (“Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 76).

<sup>74</sup> John Feinberg, “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 116.

or seriously modifies OT promises to Israel, one wonders how to define the word ‘progressive.’ God’s faithfulness to his promises to Israel must also be explained.”<sup>75</sup>

Second, what is at stake is our understanding of *revelation in general*. If the NT reinterprets the OT text, sometimes even “radically” as some covenantal theologians claim,<sup>76</sup> one is forced either to believe that significant portions of God’s verbal revelation contain hidden meanings not accessible by the original author and his audience (*sensus plenior*), or you have to believe that the meaning of revelation can actually *mutate* over time. What a given revelation *meant* to its original audience is no longer what it *means* today. Progressive dispensationalist Darrel Bock admits this when he writes,

Does the expansion of meaning entail a change of meaning? This is an important question for those concerned about consistency within interpretation. . . . The answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, to add to the revelation of a promise is to introduce “change” to it through addition. But that is precisely how revelation progresses, as referents are added to the scope of a previously given promise.<sup>77</sup>

In varying degrees covenantal theologians press this even farther, arguing that such change not only entails *addition* to the meaning of specific texts, but complete *alteration*. Thus, promises given to national Israel in the OT no longer have national Israel in view at all. These promises now are to be understood as directed at and fulfilled in the church exclusively. In other words, today’s readers of the OT are to understand its promises in ways that the OT prophets themselves never intended or envisioned.<sup>78</sup>

Walvoord recognized the challenge this presents to one’s understanding of the nature of revelation, and why a dispensational approach avoids the credibility problem of believing in meaning that mutates: “The issue . . . is whether progressive revelation ever reverses preceding revelation and denies its validity. It is on the basis of consistency of fulfillment of prophecy historically that premillenarians project a consistent literal fulfillment of prophecy in the future.”<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Robert Thomas writes,

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<sup>75</sup> Turner, “The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology,” 281.

<sup>76</sup> E.g., George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 373.

<sup>77</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *TrinJ* 15, no. 1 (1994), 71. Bock here blurs the line between “sense” and “referent.”

<sup>78</sup> E.g., Waltke argues for “the hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant,” and that “The Jewish *nation* no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel” (“Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 274–75).

<sup>79</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program? (Part 1)” *BSac* 137 (January 1980), 29.



Progress in divine revelation is quite apparent in tracing through the books of the Old and New Testaments chronologically, but “progress” in the sense only of adding to what has already been revealed, not in any sense of a change of previous revelation. To change the substance of something already written is not “progress”; it is an “alteration” or “change” that raises questions about the credibility of the text’s original meaning.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, the summary of the relationship of the NT to the OT provided by Michael Vlach best preserves a consistent hermeneutic as well as a consistent view of revelation in general:

The NT *continues* the storyline of the OT prophets in a literal and straightforward manner. No transforming or transcending of the Bible’s storyline is necessary. God does not reinterpret His previous inspired revelation. Nor is there a reality shift from OT expectation to NT fulfillment. NT fulfillment is consistent with the original message and intent of the OT writers.<sup>81</sup>

This understanding of progress in revelation best upholds the clarity, authority, and immutability of *all* of God’s Word—not just the NT.<sup>82</sup>

### 3. The Influence of Theological Presuppositions

The third key hermeneutical issue which affects discussions about eschatology is *the view one takes regarding the influence of theological presuppositions*. Under consideration here is not whether interpreters have such presuppositions. Rather, the issue under question is whether these presuppositions are recognized, and whether these presuppositions are of the nature that they facilitate faithful *exegesis*, or whether they inevitably contribute to *eisegesis*.<sup>83</sup> Stated another way, is one’s interpretation

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” 90 n. 47. William Barrick also states, “It is an inherent contradiction to declare that Scripture (in the NT) conveys a meaning not intended by Scripture (in the OT). However, that is exactly the dilemma faced by a hermeneutic that assumes NT priority over the OT” (William D. Barrick, “New Covenant Theology and the Old Testament Covenants,” *MSJ* 18, no. 1 (Fall 2007), 167).

<sup>81</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2017). Or consider Ryrie’s simple but helpful definition of progressive revelation: “new revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 94).

<sup>82</sup> As noted above, opponents to this understanding of progressive revelation point to supposed non-literal “fulfillments” of OT promises cited by NT writers. It is not within the scope of this article to analyze the meaning of πληρώω (*plēroō*, “to fulfill”) in the NT when used together with OT citations. But it must be noted here that it is too simplistic to interpret the term as referring always to final fulfillment. Paul Feinberg summarizes the issue succinctly: “The relationship between the OT and the NT is more complex than OT prediction and NT fulfillment” (“Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” 122). For a helpful list of the different ways the NT writers use OT citations, see Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 260–70.

<sup>83</sup> The word *exegesis* is derived from the Greek verb ἐξηγεῖσθαι (*eksēgeomai*), a compound of the Greek preposition ἐκ (*ek*, “out of”) and the verb ἡγεῖσθαι (*ēgeomai*, “to lead, guide”). “Exegesis,” therefore,

to be driven by a predetermined eschatology (deductive reasoning), or is one's eschatology to be driven by a predetermined hermeneutic (inductive reasoning)?

Though certainly not without inconsistencies and failures, dispensational premillennialism—based on its commitment to a consistent, literal hermeneutic—is most openly devoted to the pursuit of an inductive study of Scripture that attempts to limit the role of presuppositions to the area of interpretive methodology, rather than allow it to determine the meaning of texts. In the words of Richard Mayhue, “Dispensational theology is merely a descriptive term applied to the scheme of theology which is inductively systematized from the Bible.”<sup>84</sup> It is the result of an approach that “comes to the text with no other preunderstanding than a consistent grammatical-historical hermeneutic that is employed consistently throughout the Scriptures in all realms of theology.”<sup>85</sup> Warning against the deductive approach, Mayhue states that “it is enticing, but wrong, to form one's theology apart from a complete inductive study of Scripture. It is wrong, having done this, to start looking for biblical texts that seem to support our conclusions, all without carefully interpreting the text to which we appeal.”<sup>86</sup>

Certainly, dispensationalists are not innocent of imposing theological preunderstandings on the biblical text—a fact Mayhue and many others acknowledge.<sup>87</sup> Yet its commitment to form eschatological convictions from an inductive approach distinguishes it adequately from covenantalism. The words of covenant theologian J. I. Packer illustrate this well. In response to the question, “What is covenant theology?” Packer openly admits that

The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that undergirds it. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretive procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself. . . . Once Christians have got this far, covenant theology of the Scriptures

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is the leading of meaning *out* of a text. It implies that the meaning of a text has been placed in it by the author, and the interpreter's job in exegesis is to discover it. The word *eisegesis* comes from the Greek verb *εισηγεομαι* (*eisēgeomai*), a compound of the Greek preposition *εις* (*eis*, “into”) and the verb *ēgeomai* (*ἡγεομαι*, “to lead, guide”). “Eisegesis,” therefore is the leading of meaning *into* a text. It implies that the interpreter comes to the text with a predetermined meaning in mind and finds a way to insert it into the author's words.

<sup>84</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, “The Bible's Watchword: Day of the Lord,” *MSJ* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 88.

<sup>85</sup> Mayhue, “Why Futuristic Premillennialism,” in *Christ's Prophetic Plans*, 66.

<sup>86</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, *How to Study the Bible* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009), 87.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 115, 173–75, etc. Mayhue writes, “As a mild dispensationalist, I take this warning to heart. We should never let the dispensational system unwarrantedly color our interpretation of individual Scripture texts” (*ibid.*, 175).

is something they can hardly miss.<sup>88</sup>

In other words, Packer's covenantal presupposition serves as his hermeneutic for interpreting biblical texts, naturally making covenant theology "hard to miss" when he reads Scripture. This illustrates how theological preunderstanding is both acknowledged and enthusiastically employed.

While the scope of the discussion concerning the influence of presuppositions is vast, two particular issues related to eschatology merit attention here.<sup>89</sup>

### Theological Presupposition and the Analogy of Faith

First, the influence of presuppositions on eschatological discussions comes to the forefront in the debate over *the definition and application of the analogy of faith*. According to its most basic definition, the analogy of faith refers to the "general harmony of fundamental doctrine that pervades the entire Scriptures."<sup>90</sup> Since Scripture has one ultimate author who communicated his intent successfully through specially-prepared human writers, there are no contradictions between the parts that comprise the whole. No passage—when correctly understood—will contradict what is taught by another.<sup>91</sup>

As simple as this rule sounds, there is disagreement over how this rule applies in the exegetical process.<sup>92</sup> Rather than employing the analogy of faith as a *preventative* check at the end of the exegetical process (one designed to preclude the acceptance of contradictory interpretations), it is often used as a *prescriptive* tool introduced at the beginning of interpretation. Theology formed from other, "similar texts" is used as a grid through which to interpret a given text—the implicit expectation

<sup>88</sup> J. I. Packer, *Revelations of the Cross* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 9–10. See also his "Introduction" to *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, by Herman Witsius (1677; reprint, Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1:7.

<sup>89</sup> For a broader treatment of the issues involved, see Robert L. Thomas, "The Origin of Preunderstanding: From Explanation to Obfuscation," in *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 41–62.

<sup>90</sup> Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1885), 579.

<sup>91</sup> The phrase "analogy of faith" (Lat., *analogia fidei*) is taken from Romans 12:6, "Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly; if prophecy, according to *the proportion of his faith*" (emphasis added). The phrase "the proportion of his faith" (τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως) could also be translated as "the analogy of the faith"—with "the faith" referring to the standard of apostolic doctrine. According to this rendering, Paul stipulates that those with the gift of prophecy must exercise it in agreement with apostolic teaching if it is to be received as prophecy. Thus, with respect to the interpretation of Scripture, the *analogy of faith*—or better, the analogy of *the faith*—requires that an interpretation be accepted if it is harmonious with the standard of apostolic teaching.

<sup>92</sup> As Walter Kaiser noted, "Few theological concepts have been more confusing and without clear development in the history of the church than this concept" (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Hermeneutics and the Theological Task," *TrinJ* 12, no. 1 [Spring, 1991], 4).

being that the text under consideration must not only harmonize with but also reaffirm the theology derived elsewhere. The result is a deductive approach to interpretation which looks suspiciously on single revelations of divine truth.<sup>93</sup>

Several statements from non-dispensationalists regarding this expanded use of the analogy of faith illustrate its impact on the formation of eschatological convictions. For example, Riddlebarger's definition of the analogy of faith is representative of many covenant theologians. Referring to the analogy of faith, he writes, "This refers to the importance of interpreting an unclear biblical text in light of clear passages which speak to the same subject rather than taking the literal sense in isolation from the rest of Scripture."<sup>94</sup> In other words, a given text can be interpreted literally if it reaffirms what has been gleaned from "clearer" texts in the rest of Scripture. Consequently, if a literal interpretation does not reaffirm what is considered "clear" elsewhere, a different interpretive method is to be considered for the text at hand. This finds direct expression in Louis Berkhof's treatment of Revelation 20:

When a doctrine is supported by an obscure passage of Scripture only and finds no support in the analogy of the faith, it can only be accepted with great reserve. Possibly, to say probably, the passage requires a different interpretation than the one put on it. Cf. Rev. 20:1–4.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, because Revelation 20:1–4 finds no parallel elsewhere in Scripture, Ladd uses the analogy of faith to dismiss its literal interpretation. A single revelation of truth—the "one thousand years" repeated numerous times in Revelation 20:1–6—does not fare well with this application of the analogy of faith.

This prescriptive function of the analogy of faith evidences itself in various systems alien to an inductive approach to the Bible.<sup>96</sup> For example, proponents of the *canonical approach* to Scripture insist that the theology of all of Scripture is necessary for the correct interpretation of any of its parts.<sup>97</sup> This naturally assumes a NT priority position. Those who espouse *theological interpretation* expand the boundaries of the analogy of faith even beyond Scripture to include ecclesiastic creeds and

<sup>93</sup> Thomas, "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology," 45.

<sup>94</sup> Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 37.

<sup>95</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1950), 166.

<sup>96</sup> This is not to say that dispensationalists have not been guilty of employing their own "analogy of faith" in the interpretation of Scripture—an interpretive grid which guarantees that they will extract their particular views from the biblical text. By and large, however, dispensationalists have been much more vocal in their commitment to pursue an inductive approach to Scripture.

<sup>97</sup> Waltke writes, "By the canonical process approach I mean the recognition that the text's intention became deeper and clearer as the parameters of the canon were expanded. Just as redemption itself has a progressive history, so also older texts in the canon underwent a correlative progressive perception of meaning as they became part of a growing canonical literature" (Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg [Chicago: Moody Press, 1981], 7).

confessions.<sup>98</sup> Certain expressions of the *biblical theology* movement also include the dogma of theological systems, confessional traditions, or a preferred redemptive storyline as part of the analogy of faith.<sup>99</sup>

What characterizes all these approaches is the willingness, under the aegis of the analogy of faith, to interpret Scripture deductively—to preunderstand the text. In the best of cases it results in sound theology being imported into texts which actually speak about other issues.<sup>100</sup> At the very worst of cases it results in the insertion of human opinions into the Word of God. Ultimately, while abuses of the analogy of faith can be observed in all areas of biblical study, they are more common in the exegesis of prophetic texts than elsewhere.<sup>101</sup>

### Theological Presupposition and Platonic Dualism

A second issue related to presuppositions and its impact on eschatology is more philosophical in nature. It concerns *the influence Platonic dualism has had on Christians' understanding of God's purposes in redemption*.<sup>102</sup>

Established by the Greek philosopher Plato (428–347 BC), Platonism espouses a dualistic worldview which considers material things as inherently inferior to the non-material realm. Things belonging to the world of the physical and concrete are considered “imperfect copies of transcendent, objective and eternal ‘forms.’”<sup>103</sup> R. C. Sproul summarizes Plato's worldview as follows:

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<sup>98</sup> One commentary series which employs this approach to Scripture describes its methodology as follows: “This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances on the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian Scripture. . . . Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of Scripture” (R. R. Reno, “Series Preface,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005], 13–14).

<sup>99</sup> Goldsworthy has this application in mind when he states, “Biblical theology involves us in a *dialogue between* our exegesis and our dogmatic formulations” (“Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics,” 16; emphasis added). In other words, there is not a one-way street that travels from exegesis to systematic theology. Rather exegesis informs one's systematic theology as much as one's systematic theology informs his exegesis.

<sup>100</sup> As Kaiser states, this occurs when the Bible is “‘leveled out,’ resulting in the fact that whenever the Bible spoke on any subject, it said everything that the latest revelation included, since in this sense ‘Scripture interpreted Scripture’” (“Hermeneutics and the Theological Task,” 9).

<sup>101</sup> Thomas, “A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology,” 46.

<sup>102</sup> For a helpful treatment on this issue, see Michael J. Vlach's unpublished paper, “Platonism's Influence on Christian Eschatology.”

<sup>103</sup> “Platonism,” in *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, ed. Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 91.

Plato saw people living in two different worlds: the world of ideas and the world of physical objects. He called material objects “receptacles”—things that receive or contain something else. The physical object contains its idea or form. The form is distinguished from the object. The form causes the essence of a thing. In this sense a material object participates in or imitates its ideal form. But it is at best a copy of the ideal form, and an imperfect copy at that.

This concept of the relationship between form and matter, idea and receptacle, lies at the heart of the Greek view of the inherent imperfection of all things material, which led inevitably to the denigration of physical things. This negative view of physical reality influenced many Christian theologies.<sup>104</sup>

As Sproul points out, the impact of Plato’s dualism on Christian thought has been significant. Gary Habermas also points to this when he writes,

Christian thought also came under the influence of Platonism, as scholars of the third century such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen mixed this Greek philosophy with their theology. In particular, Augustine’s interpretation of Plato dominated Christian thought for the next thousand years after his death in the fifth century.<sup>105</sup>

This dualistic preunderstanding asserts itself particularly in the study of the Bible’s teaching concerning future things. Not surprisingly, if the material world is viewed as inherently imperfect and the spiritual world as infinitely superior, the belief that the Messiah will set up an earthly kingdom upon his return—a kingdom with a physical throne in the earthly city of Jerusalem, ruling over the nations of this material world—is to be considered “crass materialism.”<sup>106</sup> Prophecies of the future cannot possibly refer to realities in this present world. Instead, God’s plan of redemption has moved from a material focus (the nation of Israel, land, and a physical temple) to a spiritual focus (heaven). Correspondingly, the essence of biblical interpretation moves from the concrete (literal) to the abstract (allegorical or spiritualized), or from type to antitype.

The impact of this dualism can be observed in premillennialism’s fall out of popularity in the early church. Pointing to the growth of Platonism on the early church Fathers, Craig Blaising states that,

Ancient Christian premillennialism weakened to the point of disappearance when the spiritual vision model of eternity became dominant in the church. A

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<sup>104</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Consequence of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 36.

<sup>105</sup> Gary R. Habermas, “Plato, Platonism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 929.

<sup>106</sup> Cox, *Amillennialism Today*, 67; cf. also Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 110.

future kingdom on earth simply did not fit well in an eschatology that stressed personal ascent to a spiritual realm.<sup>107</sup>

Even amillennialists agree. William Masselink states, “The Gnostic [dualistic] philosophy of this period and the Alexandrian school with its allegorical interpretations of the scripture were . . . a great detriment to the progress of Chiliasm.”<sup>108</sup>

Evidence of this dualism can thus be found in Augustine (AD 354–430), generally considered to be the father of amillennialism. In his famous theological treatise, *The City of God*, he explains the “kingdom” of Revelation 20 as follows:

And this opinion [of a physical millennial kingdom after the first resurrection] would not be objectionable, if it were believed that the joys of the saints in that Sabbath *shall be spiritual*, and consequent on the presence of God; for I myself, too, once held this opinion. But, as they assert that those who then rise again shall enjoy the leisure of immoderate carnal banquets, furnished with an amount of meat and drink such as not only to shock the feeling of the temperate, but even to surpass the measure of credulity itself, such assertions can be believed only by the carnal. They who do believe them are called by the spiritual Chiliasm, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians.<sup>109</sup>

In summarizing Augustine’s view, Benedict Viviano writes,

Augustine was attracted to the spiritual interpretation of the kingdom we have already seen in Origen. Indeed, ultimately for Augustine, the kingdom of God consists in eternal life with God in heaven. That is the *civitas dei*, the city of God, as opposed to the *civitas terrena*.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Craig A. Blasing, “Premillennialism” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 170. Benware echoes this same conclusion when he writes, “Origen (AD 185–254) and other scholars in Alexandria were greatly influenced by Greek philosophy and attempted to integrate that philosophy with Christian theology. Included in Greek philosophy was the idea that those things that were material and physical were inherently evil. Influenced by this thinking, these Alexandrian scholars concluded that an earthly kingdom of Christ with its many physical blessings would be something evil” (*Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 119).

<sup>108</sup> William Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 27, cited in Nathan Busenitz, “Did the Early Church Believe in a Literal Millennial Kingdom,” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans*, 187.

<sup>109</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, vol. 2, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 356–57. Augustine acknowledges in this statement that he had previously held a premillennial view, but abandoned it because of the extreme materialism advocated by other premillennialists (cf. David McKay, “Augustine on Revelation 20: A Root of Amillennialism,” *Foundations* 60 (Autumn 2013), 59–60. Augustine’s response demonstrates that what is needed is not an “either/or” dualism with respect to the Messiah’s kingdom (either material or spiritual) but a “both/and” (both material and spiritual).

<sup>110</sup> Benedict T. Viviano, *The Kingdom of God in History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 52–23; cf. also Howard A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 54.

Similarly, Calvin—who was significantly impacted by Augustine’s view of human history—commented as follows in response to the eschatological blessings promised in Joel 3:18–19:

But we must remember that when the Prophets so splendidly extol the blessings of God, they intend not to fill the minds of the godly with thoughts about eating and drinking; but profane men lay hold on such passages as though the Lord intended to gratify their appetite. We know, indeed, that God’s children differ much from swine: hence God fills not the faithful with earthly things, for this would not be useful for their salvation.<sup>111</sup>

This dualism is perpetuated in more recent times by assertions like that of covenant premillennialist George Ladd, who boldly stated, “Jesus did not offer to the Jews the earthly kingdom any more than he offered himself to them as their glorious earthly king. Here we may take our stand on firm ground.”<sup>112</sup> In the same kind of absolute language, Francis Andersen states,

The prophets who give warning of threatened deportation from Palestine also hold out hopes of redemption by restoration to the promised land. *But in the New Testament such a matter is wholly spiritualized*; the land of promise is “a better heavenly city” (Heb 11:10, 16), a thought in line with Paul’s teaching that Sarah, as the mother of us all, is “Jerusalem which is above” (Gal 4:26). The promised rest continues to remain, then, to the people of God and those who believe in Jesus enter into it (Heb 4).<sup>113</sup>

Or consider the words of Waltke, who states that “in the NT, in contrast to the expectation of Judaism, the kingdom’s character is ‘heavenly’ and ‘spiritual,’ not ‘earthly’ and ‘political.’”<sup>114</sup>

Without question, it would be unwarranted to characterize all covenantalists as having an eschatology influenced by Platonic dualism. It would also be incorrect to suggest that dispensationalists have not been influenced by movements and worldviews incongruent with God’s Word. The purpose instead is to highlight the fact that philosophical preunderstandings are often unwittingly allowed to influence biblical interpretation. This is especially the case with eschatology, and especially the case with respect to the understanding of the theme of the “kingdom.” One’s pre-suppositions concerning the material and immaterial worlds have an immense impact on the hermeneutics one chooses to interpret prophetic texts (literal vs. spiritualized;

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<sup>111</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 2, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 138–39.

<sup>112</sup> George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 113.

<sup>113</sup> Francis Andersen, “The Scope of the Abrahamic Covenant,” *Churchman* 74, no. 4 (1960): 243–44; emphasis added.

<sup>114</sup> Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” 270; cf. also Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 560.



reading the text at face-value, or reading it through a process of abstraction), and ultimately, on one's interpretive conclusions concerning God's redemptive purposes (whether it is both earthly and spiritual in nature). More attention needs to be devoted to recognizing and assessing this influence, particularly as it relates those who claim Augustine as their champion.

### Reaffirming the Pursuit of Interpretive Objectivity

If there is to be progress made in discussions over eschatological differences it must arise out of renewed commitment to pursue interpretive objectivity. This commitment includes not only the recognition the presuppositions impacting our reading of the pertinent texts, but the commitment to assess these presuppositions and the validity of their influence on the process of interpretation. Several challenges are noteworthy in light of the discussion above.

First, if there is to be any hope of hearing the text clearly, *the analogy of faith must be employed as a preventative check rather than a prescriptive mechanism*. In describing this way of understanding the role of the analogy of faith, Thomas writes,

Its value would thereby become of a negative type: Is there any reason why the meaning of the text reached by a more restricted exegesis cannot be accepted? Or, is there any reason why this interpretation cannot be harmonized with previous impressions as to the unified teaching of Scripture? This has much advantage over the approach that asks, "How can I find this meaning in my text?"<sup>115</sup>

Kaiser advocates a similar view:

*After* we have finished our exegetical work of establishing what, indeed, the author of the paragraph or text under consideration was trying to say, *then* we must go on to set this teaching in its total Biblical context by way of gathering together what God has continued to say on the topic. We should then compare this material with our findings concerning the passage being investigated. But mind this point well: canonical context must appear only as part of our summation and not as part of our exegesis.<sup>116</sup>

If the analogy of faith is employed otherwise, the possibility for progress in eschatological disagreements disappears into the mist of circular reasoning.<sup>117</sup> Kaiser notes this when he asks,

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas, "A Hermeneutical Ambiguity of Eschatology," 53.

<sup>116</sup> Kaiser, *Towards an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 83.

<sup>117</sup> As finite creatures we cannot avoid circular reasoning. We must presuppose a first principle—a fundamental starting point which we accept on its own account. There is a difference, however, between virtuous circular reasoning and vicious circular reasoning. Virtuous circular reasoning, in this case, presupposes the *nature* of the biblical text—that it is necessary, inspired, inerrant, clear, authoritative, and

Whose analogy of faith will be used? Calvinists surely have an analogy of faith that is different from Arminians; dispensationalists from covenantal theologians; and charismatics from cessationists. In other words, if the faith used in the analogy is one's own set of confessions or doctrines, then the reasoning is circular. And even if we claim that that faith is radically biblical, who or what principle will tell us which verses are the "clear" ones and which are not (on the principle that clearer passages should interpret the unclear ones)? And what Scriptures should be given the status of being norms or standards for the rest?<sup>118</sup>

Daniel Fuller echoes this concern: "So long as the exegesis of biblical passages is conducted by such analogy-of-faith hermeneutics, it would be difficult for systematic theology to be nourished and corrected by exegetical considerations from the biblical text."<sup>119</sup>

Second, a much higher priority than buttressing our preferred eschatological view or winning the debate over the meaning of "kingdom" must be *our commitment to form our theology from exegesis and not our exegesis from our theology*. We hunger for profound theology and are dismayed at the superficial spirituality that characterizes much of the church today. Some interpreters fear that if they fail to allow their theology to impact their exegesis, the text will not yield the profound truth they hunger for. But the opposite is true. Becoming a slave to the biblical writer and his text is what yields the profoundest theology. We must heed the words of Milton Terry, who in response to "theological exegesis" gave the following advice:

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.<sup>120</sup>

## Conclusion

These three issues lie at the center of the divide over eschatology: (1) the legitimacy of literal interpretation; (2) the function of progressive revelation; and (3) the influence of theological presupposition. These issues are of immense importance, for the position we take on them does not just determine to which eschatological camp

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sufficient, that it is "truth" (John 17:17). This is believed by faith, not proven by an external set of standards. Vicious circular reasoning, however, presupposes the specific *content* of what the biblical text says.

<sup>118</sup> Kaiser, "Hermeneutics and the Theological Task," 10.

<sup>119</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, "Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith," *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 14 no. 2 (April–June 1997), 67.

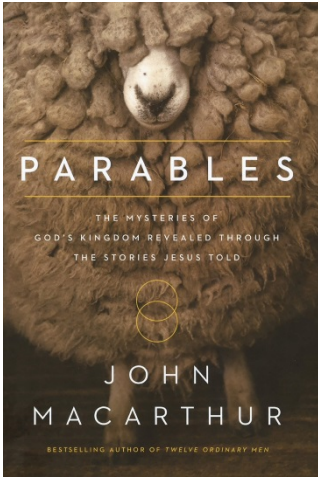
<sup>120</sup> Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 595.

we belong. It directly impacts our handling of God's Word in general, and that is the highest of responsibilities. As Bernard Ramm reminds us,

We need to know the correct method of Biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every one of those places where our interpretation is at fault, we have made substitution of the voice of man for the voice of God.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 2.



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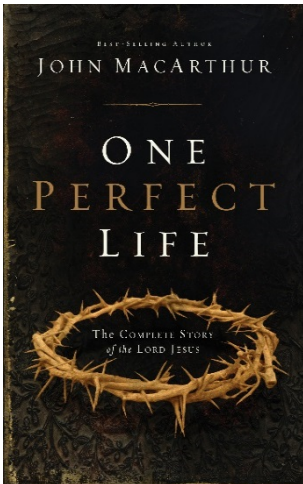
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## PREMILLENNIALISM AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Michael A. Grisanti  
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*From the time of God's creation, God declared His intention to establish His rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:26–27). What God does in and through Israel is part of that plan to establish His rule over all creation. The biblical covenants repeatedly affirm that God will provide certain realities as part of His plan for the nation of Israel as well as for the entire world. The ultimate fulfillment of those provisions rests on God's character—the God who manifests His glory by bringing to pass what He promised.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### Introduction

While happily embracing other core biblical doctrines, as an OT professor I am also passionate about the importance and biblical accuracy of a futuristic premillennial view of end-time events. Unfortunately, besides the customary debate between dispensationalism, non-dispensationalism, and covenant theology, there seems to be a general malaise about eschatology, including the millennial question. I have heard and read many Christian leaders and pastors affirm that compared with the Gospel, eschatology is much less important, generating a kind of “who cares” attitude.

While I agree that a person's view on the millennium is not as eternally significant as their view on the Gospel, a person's view on this issue has far-reaching significance for their understanding of scores of biblical passages. One's view on Christ's coming in relation to the millennium directly impacts one's understanding of the storyline or metanarrative of the Bible.

Finally, as a student of the OT I view the biblical teaching on the millennium as an important endeavor because the interpretation of many OT passages by the other views of the millennium creates a biblical storyline that does not match the passages being interpreted.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here are some of the most helpful futuristic premillennial resources for the subject of this article: several essays in Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend, eds., *A Case for Premillennialism: A New*

After a very brief consideration of Genesis 1:26–28, this article will provide an overview of the key significance of the biblical covenants, devoting most of the space to the Abrahamic Covenant. The rest of the article will look at the general prophetic message and the recurring prophetic pattern relating to God’s future intentions, especially in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

### **God’s Intentions for His Creation: Genesis 1:26–28**

In Genesis 1:26–28, we read:

Then God said, “Let Us make man as Our image, according to Our likeness. *Let them (or so that they) will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.*” So God created man in His own image; He created him in the image of God; He created them male and female. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, *and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.*”

Among all the things God could have said to man, the pinnacle of His creation, God commissioned him to rule over His created world. As Merrill points out, “man is created to reign in a manner that demonstrates his lordship, his domination (by force if necessary) over all creation”<sup>2</sup> (cf. Gen. 2:15, 19–20; Ps. 8). God created mankind to have dominion over His creation, as God’s vice-regent. In other words, a central part of God’s plan for His creation from the moment He brought it into being was to establish His rule over all the earth.

### **The Biblical Covenants—The Backbone of Premillennialism**

The biblical promissory covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and New) delineate the framework and content of God’s intentions for His creation, both from immediate and ultimate perspectives. The following sections, although spending the most time and space on the Abrahamic Covenant, consider the three promissory covenants that present the most essential aspects of God’s plan for mankind. The Davidic and New Covenants, though significant, are not as impactful (or debated) as the Abrahamic Covenant as it relates to the concrete, earthly, and future millennium.

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*Consensus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992) (esp. the essays on evidence from Genesis, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) as well as the essays on the theology of the Pentateuch, Isaiah, Jeremiah–Lamentations, and Ezekiel–Daniel found in Roy B. Zuck, ed., *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991). See also the insightful works by my colleagues, Michael Vlach: *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017) and *Premillennialism: Why There Must Be an Earthly Kingdom of Jesus* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies, 2015), and Keith Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999): 191–212.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 15. See Vlach’s helpful summary of this passage and his chart that delineates the foundation and structure of premillennialism, Michael Vlach, *Premillennialism: Why There Must Be an Earthly Kingdom of Jesus*, 18–21.

## Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12–50)

### Basic Provisions

God established the Abrahamic Covenant in wake of the divine judgment He brought upon rebellious humanity (Gen. 11:1–9). According to Desmond Alexander, “After the division of humanity into different peoples and nations, Abraham is introduced as the one through whom God’s blessing will once again extend to humans.”<sup>3</sup>

The major transition from all of humanity, crushed by divine judgment at the end of Genesis 11, narrowing in focus to God’s initiating a relationship with Abraham (and his descendants), highlights the concept of divine blessing. As Alexander points out, “At the heart of this speech [Genesis 12] is God’s desire to bless humanity and so reverse the negative effects of the divine curses under which they live.”<sup>4</sup> Chris Wright states: “The overwhelming impression through all this study of promise and covenant is God’s unwavering intention to bless. . . . God’s covenant with Abraham proclaims his purpose of blessing all humanity in and through the descendants of Abraham.”<sup>5</sup>

God’s call for Abraham to leave his home in Ur and set out for a land of God’s choosing constitutes Yahweh’s election of Abraham to father a special people for Himself. In Genesis 12:1–3 (the initial expression of the Abrahamic Covenant, restated and developed in subsequent chapters [Gen. 15, 17]), Yahweh delineates *His intentions for Abraham* and the means by which He will accomplish His purposes *for the world*.

God is the only one who speaks in verses 1–3, and all the action comes from Him. These words are God’s promises, irrespective of Abraham’s obedience (as will become immediately clear when Abraham goes to Egypt and yet God’s protection remains). In this call narrative, Yahweh commissions Abraham to travel to a land God would show him and makes several initial promises. Abraham quickly obeys, leaving his cherished home, following God’s directive (Gen. 12:4–6).

The LORD said to Abram: Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

*Then I will/so that*<sup>6</sup>I might make you into a great nation,

And bless you, and make your name great,

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<sup>3</sup> T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 146.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 152. Alexander adds: “All the material in the Abraham story relates in one way or another to the promises highlighted in the opening verses of Genesis 12 and so to the theme of blessing” (*Ibid.*, 153–54).

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 107.

<sup>6</sup> When an imperative verb (here “go out”) is followed by cohortatives (the next three verbs), those verbal forms signify purpose or result—“then” or “so that”; Bruce K. Waltke and Michael Patrick O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 577, §34.6a (example #7).

*so that*<sup>7</sup> you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,<sup>8</sup>  
But whoever curses you/treats you with contempt I will curse;  
and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

In the Abrahamic Covenant statement in Genesis 12, Yahweh promises five realities to Abraham and his descendants. First, He would make them into a *great nation*—the one who had no child will father a multitude of heirs who will be God’s kingdom of priests. Second, He would give them a *great name*—in contrast to those at Babel who tried in vain to make a name (i.e., reputation) for themselves, God will make Abraham famous. God will advertise His surpassing character by working powerfully through Abraham and his descendants. Third, He would pour *blessing* on Abraham and his descendants—apparently looking back at the blessing of creation.<sup>9</sup> Fourth, Yahweh promises to *bless those who bless you*. Abraham was God’s chosen representative on earth, and as such, the way that people responded to him reflected their attitude towards God (cf. Obad. 15–21). Finally, *all peoples will be blessed through you*. God’s purpose in choosing Abraham was to bless the world and He would do that most significantly in providing the seed (Messiah) who would crush the serpent and restore fallen man to fellowship with God (Gen. 3:15).

### The Issue of Unconditionality

Scholars have long debated the question of the unconditionality of the biblical covenants, particularly the Abrahamic Covenant. Along with denying the unconditionality of this covenant, covenant theologians customarily argue that its provisions are finally realized through Abraham’s spiritual offspring, the church.<sup>10</sup>

On the one hand, the clear language of the covenant provisions, the longevity language that occurs in the various reaffirmations of the covenant, and the unique ceremony in Genesis 15:8–21 point to the “unconditional” nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. On the other hand, some of the restatements of the covenant include clear

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<sup>7</sup> When an imperative prefixed with a simple *waw* (12:2-”and you will be”) follows a cohortative (“I will make your name great”), that imperative “frequently expresses also a consequence which is to be expected with certainty, and often a consequence which is intended, or in fact an intention” (cf. Gen. 45:18; Exod. 3:10). E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> English ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 325, §110i.

<sup>8</sup> These four verbal forms occur chiasmically (1cs finite verb, mp participle, ms participle, 1cs finite verb), presenting these two statements in a vivid and memorable fashion.

<sup>9</sup> According to the note on Genesis 12:2 in the NET Bible, “In the garden God blessed Adam and Eve; in that blessing he gave them (1) a fruitful place, (2) endowed them with fertility to multiply, and (3) made them rulers over creation. That was all ruined at the fall. Now God begins to build his covenant people; in Gen 12–22 he promises to give Abram (1) a land flowing with milk and honey, (2) a great nation without number, and (3) kingship.” *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Just a few examples of this are Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 31–36; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 295–97; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 538. Horton (ibid.) states that Jesus reconstitutes “Israel” (twelve tribes/twelve apostles, etc.)—not with a replacement but by announcing that He is the Seed in whom alone believers can be blessed.



conditions. One can legitimately ask, “How can an unconditional covenant have conditions?”

In an attempt to answer that question, the next section will overview the various restatements of the Abrahamic Covenant. This will help us see the repetitive nature of the promises made by God to successive generations. After looking briefly at the unique ceremony in Genesis 15, we will consider the dilemma of conditions in an unconditional covenant.

### The Several Reaffirmations of the Abrahamic Covenant to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

It is helpful to recognize the central role played by the Abrahamic Covenant in the patriarchal narratives as well as narratives in the rest of the Pentateuch. The below chart focuses on those restatements in Genesis.

	Situation/Occasion	Contextual Impact	Covenantal Provision
<b>Initial Statement (Gen. 12:1–3)</b>	Abraham’s transition to Canaan	Initial statement of Abrahamic Covenant provisions	vv. 1, 7– Land v. 2- Nation vv. 2–3- be blessed and be a blessing
<b>Reaffirmation (Gen. 13:14–17)</b>	Immediately after Lot and Abraham parted ways.	God will provide what He promised	vv. 14–17- land (forever) vv. 15–16- Nation (descendants)*
<b>Reaffirmation (Gen. 15:1–21)</b>	Abraham’s intent to adopt Eliezer	God’s unilateral role to fulfill covenant and reaffirmation of promise—He passes through the animal carcasses alone	vv. 1–6- Nation (descendants)* vv. 7, 19–21- Land v. 18- covenant-making
<b>Reaffirmation (Gen. 17:1–22)</b>	Abraham’s age—Past child-bearing years	God will give a son; circumcision—setting apart His people	v. 2a, 7–10, 13, 19, 21- covenant-making (forever) v. 2b, 4–8, 16, 19–20- Nation (descendants) v. 7- relationship with Yahweh v. 8- Land (forever)
<b>Reaffirmation (Gen. 22:16–18)</b>	Abraham trusted Yahweh in the near-sacrifice of Isaac.	God will provide what He promised, which may have seemed threatened by God’s demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac.	v. 17a, 18b- be blessed and be a blessing v. 17b- Nation (descendants)* v. 17c- victory over enemies
<b>Reaffirmation (Gen. 26:2–5)</b>	Isaac faces famine in the land of Canaan	God will provide what He promised	v. 3- covenant-making vv. 2–3- Land v. 4- Nation (descendants)*

<b>Reaffirmation</b> (Gen. 28:3–4, 13–15; 35:11–12; cf. 48:3–4)	Jacob’s departure from and return to Bethel	God will provide what He promised	28:3–4, 14- be blessed and be a blessing 28:3–4, 13–14; 35:11- Nation (descendants)* 28:13; 35:12–13- Land
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\*In several passages, the expressions “like the sand of the sea” (Gen. 22:17; 32:12), “as numerous as the stars in the sky” (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; 26:4; Exod. 32:13; Deut. 1:10; 10:22; 28:62), or “like the dust of the earth” (Gen. 13:16; 28:14; Num. 23:10) occur in the Pentateuch to emphasize the extent of God’s intended blessing of Abraham’s descendants numerically.

What should we conclude from the above overview of repeated statements of Abrahamic Covenant provisions? Here are four observations. First, God promises these provisions in the context of a committed relationship, not as a grocery list of potential ideas. Second, these covenant provisions are not just mentioned once and forgotten but reaffirmed to each of the patriarchs. Subsequent passages regularly look back at these provisions as concrete realities. Third, God presents His intentions through serious, committed language of covenant, oath, and promise. Fourth, the ceremony of Genesis 15 (see below as well) affirms that the hope for fulfillment does not *ultimately* rest in the conduct of the descendants of Abraham, but on the flawless, surpassing character of a God who is committed to bringing to pass what He promised in a way that matches the manner in which He said it would happen.

**The Significance of the Ceremony in Genesis 15:8–21**

Notice the progression of Moses’s presentation immediately after Yahweh reaffirms His promise to make Abraham into a nation, i.e., He will provide Abraham a descendant, a promise that Abraham embraces (Gen. 15:1–6). Abraham’s conversation with Yahweh seems to switch the focus from a descendant for Abraham to God’s promise of land to Abraham and his descendants.

In the very next verse (15:7) Yahweh promises: “I am Yahweh who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” Abraham replies with a question (15:8): “Lord God, how can I know that I will possess it?” Abraham’s question is clearly connected to the land promise. In the following verses (15:9–21), Yahweh delineates what He needs for this ceremony and explains what took place. This ceremony is integrally connected to God’s land promise to Abraham and his descendants.

The following overview only gives attention to key details that are especially significant for this presentation. First, God has Abraham gather five animals: cow, goat, ram, turtledove, and pigeon (15:9, all of which also served as sacrifices in the Mosaic Law). Abraham divided the carcasses of the cow, goat, and ram in half, then put the halves on two sides of a path/open area. He put one bird on each side as well (15:10). As the sun was setting, God caused Abraham to fall asleep. After restating His covenant promises to Abraham, a “smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” passed between the divided animals. The Lord concluded the ceremony by restating His

promise that He would give<sup>11</sup> “this land” to Abraham and his descendants—from the brook of Egypt to the Euphrates River (15:18–19).<sup>12</sup> Weinfeld points out that: “Delineation of borders ... constitute an important part of the documents of grant.”<sup>13</sup>

At least two key issues demand attention so we can grasp the primary significance of this ceremony. First, the reference to smoke and fire are commonly symbolic of God’s presence (Exod. 13:21; 19:18; 20:18; Isa 4:5; 6:4; 31:9).<sup>14</sup> It is God who passed through the middle of those animal carcasses. That leads to the second issue. What does that divine action, God passing through the carcasses, signify in general and in Genesis 15 in particular?

Although scholars have offered many diverse interpretations of this passage over the years<sup>15</sup>, two options are frequently proposed. First, some affirm that this ceremony functions as an acted-out self-curse or conditional self-cursing<sup>16</sup>, i.e., “an effective sign of what will happen to the covenanter who dares to be faithless.”<sup>17</sup> Proponents of this view point to Jeremiah 34:18 as another example of this self-cursing statement. According to that interpretation, Ross concludes that “in forming such a covenant, the one who passed through was binding himself by the symbolism, under punishment of death, to fulfill the oath or promise.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> According to the NET Bible note, “the perfect verbal form is understood as instantaneous (‘I here and now give’). Another option is to understand it as rhetorical, indicating certitude (‘I have given’ meaning it is as good as done, i.e., ‘I will surely give’).” Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), s.v. Genesis 15:18. C. Westermann states that the “perfect נתתי is the form of legal agreement (cf. Gen. 1:29; 9:2; 3; 20:16) with the enactment of the oath ‘this land’ has become the possession of Israel, Abraham’s descendants. Nothing in this agreement can be cancelled” (Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–26*, Continental [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995], 229). Although I agree that the details of this passage point to the idea of unilateral ratification, the examples he cites for this meaning seem like poor illustrations of that concept.

<sup>12</sup> These two rivers form the southwestern (river of Egypt) and northeastern boundaries. K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 176; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 333.

<sup>13</sup> M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970): 200. Cf. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 117.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller explanation of other OT occurrences of this symbolism, see Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 175–76.

<sup>15</sup> For a helpful survey of the main interpretations of this ceremony, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15,” *JSOT* 19 (Feb 1981): 61–63.

<sup>16</sup> Westermann writes that in light of Jeremiah 34:18–22 the most likely meaning is that this ceremony “represents a conditional self-cursing under the form of the split animals; the one who passes between them calls their fate upon himself should he violate the obligation.” Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–26*, 1995, 228. Cf. D. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Analecta Biblica 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 57. So too, R. Polzin, “HWQYC and Covenantal Institutions in Israel,” *HTR* 62 (1969): 227–40.

<sup>17</sup> D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 93–94; J. J. Mitchell, “Abram’s Understanding of the Lord’s Covenant,” *WTJ* 32 (1969): 38–40; Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 16–17; and many others.

<sup>18</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 312.

One of the challenges this interpretation faces is that God is the party who passed between the pieces. D. Petersen traces the history of this practice and finds that the idea of putting oneself under a curse by passing between the pieces did not arise until the first millennium B.C. In the earlier period this rite was to create a new relationship.<sup>19</sup> Beyond that, Weinfeld points out that in the so-called covenant of grant, the curses devolve upon “the one who will violate the rights of the king’s vassal . . . ,” not upon the grantor.<sup>20</sup> Finally, it is difficult, however, to reconcile this idea of God pronouncing a curse on Himself theologically and impossible to explain how the imprecation could be carried out.<sup>21</sup>

Second, several scholars regard the ceremony in Genesis 15 as a covenant ratification sacrifice “in which Yahweh binds himself in a promise to the patriarch,”<sup>22</sup> making Genesis 15 “a promissory covenant.”<sup>23</sup> Hasel adds that by passing through the pieces of the animals, Yahweh “irrevocably pledges the fulfillment of his covenant promise to the patriarch.”<sup>24</sup>

Both views consider other potentially parallel biblical passages as well as somewhat similar ceremonies in ANE literature. In light of the clear differences between the ceremony in Genesis 15 and the potential biblical and ANE parallels, the context and content of Genesis 15 provides the clear basis for understanding the primary significance of this ceremony. Since Abraham’s question in 15:8 concerns how he can know that he will inherit this promised land, the ceremony had to address that specific issue. The killing of the animals and splitting their carcasses suggest solemnity as well as sacrifice. God alone passing through those carcasses must represent His affirmation that, without question, He will provide the promised land to Abraham and his descendants. This ceremony formalized and ratified the Abrahamic Covenant and assured Abraham that the promise God made was indeed *ultimately* unconditional— a done deal in the mind of God.

<sup>19</sup> D. L. Petersen, “Covenant Ritual: A Traditio-Historical Perspective,” *BR* 22 (1977): 7–11.

<sup>20</sup> Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant,” 185.

<sup>21</sup> Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 172.

<sup>22</sup> Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15,” 69. Cf. John E. Hartley, *Genesis. Understanding the Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 161; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1990), 433; T. C. Vriezen, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 109; H.J. Kraus, *Worship in Ancient Israel* (London: Blackwell, 1966), 120; H. H. Rowley, *Worship in Ancient Israel: Its Forms and Meaning* (London: S.P.C.K., 1967), 30. G. J. Wenham (“The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15: A Response to G. F. Hasel,” *JSOT* 19 [1981] 61–78;” *JSOT* 22 [1982] 134–37) agrees with Hasel that the rite is not a divine self-imprecation. He states (p. 136), “It is not a dramatised curse that would come into play should the covenant be broken, but a solemn and visual reaffirmation of the covenant that is essentially a promise.” According to R. Hess, “The implication of this is that God’s own divine life forms the surety for the promise,” “The Slaughter of the Animals in Genesis 15: Genesis 15:8–21 and its Ancient Near East Context,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12–50*, ed. by R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 62–63.

<sup>23</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, “Davidic Covenant,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 189.

<sup>24</sup> Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite,” 70.

## How Can an Unconditional Covenant Have Conditions?

Nondispensational scholars dismiss the future fulfillment of the land and nation promises of the Abrahamic Covenant along different lines. Here are two of the most common interpretive answers they offer. One option is to affirm that these concrete provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant find their complete fulfillment typologically in the post-Cross “people of God” or Abraham’s spiritual offspring.<sup>25</sup> Another argument is that since the conditions of the Abrahamic Covenant were not met by the rebellious descendants of Abraham, those promised provisions were withdrawn.<sup>26</sup> This section primarily interacts with that latter argument.<sup>27</sup>

### Unilateral and Unconditional

Part of the resolution of this interpretive dilemma is to notice an important feature in the ceremony in Genesis 15:7–21. Remember that God *alone* passed through the sacrificed animals. Abraham was sound asleep when Yahweh ratified His covenant with Abraham. By passing through the animal carcasses alone signifies that He was making a *unilateral*, unconditional covenant.<sup>28</sup> If God meant that the Abrahamic covenant was bilateral (like the Mosaic Covenant where both Yahweh and Israel had ultimate covenant responsibilities), we would have expected something representing Abraham as well to pass through. The fact that only God (represented by smoke and fire) passed between the rows of flesh shows that this covenant is unilateral.<sup>29</sup> As such, the ultimate fulfillment of the provisions of this covenant rests on God alone.

Various scholars show that the basic etymology of the Hebrew word for “covenant” (*bʿrīt*, cf. 15:18) suggests that the term, in the biblical sense, is not an agreement between two parties, but something that is imposed on another party, an obligation.<sup>30</sup>

As Hamilton points out, nothing, however, “in this chapter is imposed on Abram. He is free of any obligations. The only imposition or obligation that Yahweh

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Thomas Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World*, Short Studies in Biblical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 56–58; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 707–8.

<sup>26</sup> R. Youngblood states, “Obedience language presupposes the withholding of promised blessing in the absence of obedience.” Ronald Youngblood, “The Abrahamic Covenant: Conditional or Unconditional?” in *The Living and Active Word of God: Studies in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. by Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 41. Cf. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 31–36, 56–58.

<sup>27</sup> I briefly interact with Gentry and Wellum’s hermeneutical approach to the Abrahamic Covenant and the land promise in this article: Michael A. Grisanti, “A Critique of Gentry and Wellum’s Kingdom through Covenant: An Old Testament Perspective,” *TMSJ* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 129–37.

<sup>28</sup> Hartley, *Genesis*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 437. Skinner says that “Yahwe[h] alone passes (symbolically) between the pieces, because He alone contracts obligation” (J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, ICC, 2nd ed. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930], 283).

<sup>30</sup> See M. Weinfeld, “*bʿrīt*,” *TDOT*, 2:253–79.

lays upon anybody is upon himself, and that is the obligation to implement his promise of descendants, and especially of land, to Abram and to his descendants.”<sup>31</sup>

With a conditional or bilateral covenant like the Mosaic Covenant, human conduct determined whether a given generation of Israelites would enjoy the fulfillment of these covenant provisions. The key point to grasp in light of this *unilateral* status of the Abrahamic Covenant is that God’s ultimate fulfillment of His covenant promises was not dependent on human conduct.

#### Conditional Expectations under the Umbrella of the Unconditional Divine Reality

Here are some of the conditional statements that are part of the presentation of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis. For the sake of clarity, the condition is presented followed by the author’s explanation.

**Condition:** 12:1- “Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you, so that . . . .”

**Explanation:** Without Abraham obeying God’s call to leave Ur of the Chaldees and travel to the land of God’s choosing, none of this would happen. The “going” was necessary for the “so that.”

**Condition:** 17:1b–2- “I am God Almighty. Live in My presence and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you greatly.”

**Explanation:** God expects Abraham to conduct a blameless life.

**Condition:** 17:9–12, 14:

God also said to Abraham, “As for you, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations are to keep My covenant. This is My covenant, which you are to keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every one of your males must be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin to serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and you. Throughout your generations, every male among you at eight days old is to be circumcised . . . . If any male is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”

**Explanation:** Circumcision of male babies was not an optional idea but a required part of Israel’s status as a covenant nation. As Chisholm points out: “Though future generations were obligated to observe the rite (cf. 17:11–13), their failure in

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<sup>31</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 437–38.

this regard would jeopardize only their personal participation in the promised blessings, not the oath itself.”<sup>32</sup>

**Condition:** 18:19- “For I have chosen him so that he will command his children and his house after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just. This is how the LORD will fulfill to Abraham what He promised him.”

**Explanation:** Yahweh expected Abraham to pass on a clear understanding of his expectations of his descendants in a way that would impact the way they conducted their lives. As N. Sarna states, this verse indicates that obedience by Abraham’s descendants was “the indispensable precondition for the fulfillment of the divine promises.”<sup>33</sup> However, as Chisholm points out, “this does not put the promises themselves in jeopardy. It speaks of their fulfillment or realization, not their ratification. Though the promises would not actually materialize in history until the specified conditions were realized, their status as solemnly ratified divine oaths remained certain, thus guaranteeing that God Himself, if necessary, would eventually cause the specified conditions to be met.”<sup>34</sup>

### Summary

In light of the unilateral status of the Abrahamic Covenant, to the question of “whether or not” these covenant provisions would find full and complete fulfillment, from God’s point of view, there was no debate—it was a done deal. The surety of the fulfillment of the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant rested exclusively on the flawless and surpassing character of God. He is a God who does what He says *in a way that matches His promise!*

What about these conditional statements? The conditions that appear as part of the statement or restatement of the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant have nothing to do with the “whether or not” issue. They deal with the question of “when and to whom.” In what time and to what generation will God bring the complete fulfillment of these covenant provisions is impacted by the conduct and spiritual condition of God’s people.

To summarize, this Abrahamic Covenant arrangement is *unconditional* in that God’s provision of the promised benefits is assured *regardless of the behavior of the recipient*. It is only the enjoyment of the covenant benefits by this or that generation of Israelites that is conditioned upon the obedience of the subordinate covenant partners.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Evidence from Genesis,” in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, eds. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 45.

<sup>33</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Chisholm, “Evidence from Genesis,” 46.

<sup>35</sup> Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” 26; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 93–94

Davidic Covenant—A Davidite Will Rule over God’s Kingdom on Earth<sup>36</sup>

McClain suggests that the Davidic Covenant “consisted of a reaffirmation of the regal terms of the original Abrahamic Covenant; with the further provision that these covenanted rights will now attach permanently to the historic house and succession of David; and also that by God’s grace these rights, even if historically interrupted for a season, will at last in a future kingdom be restored to the nation in perpetuity with no further possibility of interruption.”<sup>37</sup> Merrill points out that the Davidic Covenant is theologically rooted in the Abrahamic Covenant rather than the Mosaic Covenant. He contends that

there are important connections and correspondences between the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. This is most apparent in Ruth itself. The narrator is writing, among other reasons, to clarify that the Davidic dynasty did not spring out of the conditional Mosaic covenant, but rather finds its historical and theological roots in the promises to the patriarchs. Israel as the servant people of Yahweh might rise and fall, be blessed or cursed, but the Davidic dynasty would remain intact forever because God had pledged to produce through Abraham a line of kings that would find its historical locus in Israel but would have ramifications extending far beyond Israel.<sup>38</sup>

The Davidic Covenant envisions an earthly kingdom ruled over by the promised Davidic Messiah.

New Covenant—God Will Provide Salvation  
for All Those Who Participate in the New Covenant

An important touchstone between the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants is the fact that the perfect descendant of David also functions as the mediator of the New Covenant. More broadly, the New Covenant appears to be the covenant that brings to fruition all the preceding covenants.<sup>39</sup> In addition to the locus classicus for the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34), other statements or allusions to the New Covenant include more tangible blessings (possession of the promised land, regathering

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<sup>36</sup> This author has given more detailed to key points of significance in the Davidic Covenant and its connections to the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New Covenants in another article: Michael A. Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant,” *TMSJ* 10/2 (Fall 1999): 233–50.

<sup>37</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1974) 156. McClain refers to the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant as “regal terms” because of their connection with the Mediatorial Kingdom.

<sup>38</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 204.

<sup>39</sup> Erich Sauer (*The Triumph of the Crucified* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951], 92) states, “In its essence this new covenant is the fulfilment of two Old Testament covenants, that with Abraham and that with David.”



of Jews, one kingdom ruled by one king centered in Jerusalem, etc.)<sup>40</sup> along with the intangible spiritual blessings conveyed by the New Covenant.

Having provided a brief consideration of how the promissory, biblical covenants contribute to our understanding of God's revelation of His plan for the world He created (and the people He chose), the rest of the article focuses on how prophetic passages build on those biblical covenants to help students of the Word grasp the consummation of that plan—God ruling over the entire world through His promised Son—the Messiah.<sup>41</sup>

## **The Prophetic Pattern for God's Dealings with Israel and the Nations**

Before we look at several prophetic passages that provide a clear picture of what Yahweh had in mind for His chosen nation after judgment and exile from the land, it would be helpful to consider an overview of the basic prophetic message.<sup>42</sup> Here are three key elements that make up the message of the biblical prophets, even though all three elements do not appear in every prophetic passage.

### **The Basic Prophetic Message**

#### **You Have Committed Covenant Treachery and Must Repent!**

The prophets emphasize the seriousness and extent of Israel's rebellion against Yahweh. Evidence of this rebellion falls into three categories—idolatry, social injustice, and religious ritualism.

#### **Without Repentance, You Will Experience the Curses of the Covenant!**

In addition to pleading with God's people to repent of their covenant treachery, the prophets promise severe consequences for continued rebellion—Deuteronomic expression of blessings and curses. The most serious consequence is expulsion from the land of promise.

#### **God Is Not Finished with You—There Is Hope beyond That Judgment**

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<sup>40</sup> Here is a listing of some of those material blessings with relevant Scripture references: regathering of Israelites (Jer. 32:37–40; Ezek. 36:24, 28, 33; 37:21), repossession of the land of promise (Jer. 24:6; 31:28; 32:41; Amos 9:15), taming of the animal kingdom (Ezek. 34:25–27; cf. Isa. 11:6–9), agricultural prosperity (Ezek. 34:25–27; 36:30, 34–36; Amos 9:13), cessation of war and the reign of peace (Jer. 30:10; Ezek. 34:28; 36:6, 15; 39:26), reuniting of Israel in one kingdom (Jer 50:4; Ezek 34:23; 37:22), Israel ruled by one king (Ezek. 34:23; 37:22, 24), a sanctuary rebuilt in Jerusalem (Ezek. 37:26–27a). The Davidic and New Covenants draw on themes presented in the Abrahamic Covenant, indicating that the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant will find concrete fulfillment in the future as well.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Kaiser suggests at least four great moments in biblical history that supply both the impetus for progressive revelation and the glue for its organic and continuous nature: (1) the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, 17; (2) the promise declared to David in 2 Samuel 7; (3) the promise outlined in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31, and (4) the day when many of these promises found initial realization in the death and resurrection of Christ. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity," *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, ed. John H. Skilton (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 298.

<sup>42</sup> Revised and summarized from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 373–77.

This aspect of the prophetic messages is found in the messianic promises and future predictions made by the prophets. The prophetic picture of Israel's future existence is both different from and better than what Israel had known before their experience of divine judgment. These marvelous promises center in the person and work of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, and His establishing a new (and better) covenant with them (cf. Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 7:19, 22; 8:6). However, this provision of abundance and prominence to God's chosen people was not an end in itself. As God had in mind from the beginning, Israel's prominence in world affairs was always to direct the attention of their fellow Israelites and the Gentiles around them to the awe-inspiring and incomparable nature of Israel's God (Exod. 19:4–6; Deut. 26:16–19). Numerous OT prophetic passages envision the *restoration of a redeemed nation of Israel* to the land of promise in the predicted millennium.

When you read the biblical prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, they repeatedly present a series of eschatological expectations that are grounded on and will follow God's promise of covenant judgment (“curse”) against His chosen people.

### General Pattern of Events

Here is the general pattern of events that numerous OT passages predict (not always presented in this exact order):

- **Near Future**—God will bring covenant judgment upon His rebellious covenant people because of their penchant to commit treachery against their covenant Lord.
- **Time gap implied**—While it is sometimes implicit and other times explicit, the prophets point to a series of future events that God will bring to pass on behalf of His covenant people, now experiencing the well-deserved consequences of covenant judgment.
- **Repentance**—God's covenant people will become aware of the sin and rebellion and repent. They will enjoy a vibrant, genuine relationship with their Lord.
- **Judgment of Gentile oppressors**—God will judge those Gentile nations that resist God's plan to restore His covenant nation to their homeland.
- **Restoration of covenant nation to the Promised Land (the same land from which they were evicted)**—God will regather His covenant people from their scattered locations and reinstall them in the land of promise.
- **The Promised Messiah**—God will raise up His Anointed One/Davidic Ruler who will rule over His covenant people as part of His rule over God's kingdom throughout the entire world.
- **Peace and Security**—This kingdom will be characterized by peace and security because of God's direction and protection through His Anointed One.

The below chart provides an overview of future events that the OT prophets predicted that Yahweh would bring to pass for His chosen nation, Israel.

**Progression of Predicted Events for the Nation of Israel**

<b>Divine covenantal judgment of God's Chosen People</b>	<b>Implied passage of time— Israel in Exile</b>	<b>Broad Promise— God will restore the fortunes of Israel</b>	<b>Yahweh will judge oppressive Gentile nations</b>	<b>Yahweh will return that nation of Israel to the Promised Land</b>	<b>The nation of Israel will enjoy a restored, vibrant relationship with Yahweh</b>	<b>Yahweh will install His anointed One, the Davidic King, over His chosen people</b>	<b>Yahweh will provide His chosen nation an abundant and peaceful existence in the Promised Land.</b>
Isa. 51:17–20			Isa. 51:21–23	Isa. 52:1–3	Isa. 52:6		
		Jer. 30:1–3	Jer. 30:10–11	Jer. 30:8	Jer. 30:17	Jer. 30:9	
Jer. 30:12–15			Jer. 30:16				
Jer. 30:20b		Jer. 30:18–20a			Jer. 30:22	Jer. 30:20–21	
				Jer. 31:7–14			
				Jer. 31:16–22			
				Jer. 31:23–28			
Jer. 32:36				Jer. 32:37, 42–44	Jer. 32:38–41		
Jer. 33:4–5		Jer. 33:6–7, 10–11		Jer. 33:12	Jer. 33:8–9		
				Ezek. 34:11–15	Ezek. 34:30–31	Ezek. 34:23–24	Ezek. 34:25–29
				Ezek. 36:8–12			
Ezek. 36:16–21				Ezek. 36:22–24	Ezek. 36:25–27		Ezek. 36:28–30
				Ezek. 36:33			Ezek. 36:34–36

## Important Underlying Principle

The prophet Jeremiah presents a key principle that provides a powerful foundation for how interpreters should understand predictive prophecy concerning God's chosen people, Israel. In Jeremiah 31:35–37, the prophet writes:

This is what the LORD says:

The One who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night,  
who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar—Yahweh of Hosts is His name:

If this fixed order departs from My presence—this is the LORD's declaration—then also *Israel's descendants will cease to be a nation before Me forever.*

This is what the LORD says: If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below explored, *I will reject all of Israel's descendants because of all they have done*—this is the LORD's declaration.

God's commitment to His chosen people as a nation of His choosing and the role He has in mind for them is anchored in His character as the unchanging God.

## One Key Focus: Prophetic Progression in Ezekiel 34 and 36

After rebuking the false shepherds of Israel who had deceived and took advantage of God's people (34:1–10), notice four key parts of Ezekiel's message (for emphasis I have put certain phrases in italics):

**1. 34:11–14- Concerning His flock (Israel) that He had scattered among the nations, Yahweh promises to restore to the Promised Land:**

“For this is what the Lord GOD says: See, I Myself will search for My flock and look for them. As a shepherd looks for his sheep on the day he is among his scattered flock, so I will look for My flock. *I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered* on a cloudy and dark day. *I will bring them out from the peoples, gather them from the countries, and bring them into their own land.* I will shepherd them *on the mountains of Israel*, in the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the land. I will tend them with good pasture, and their grazing place will be on *Israel's lofty mountains*. There they will lie down in a good grazing place; they will feed in rich pasture *on the mountains of Israel*. I will tend My flock and let them lie down.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD.”

**2. 34:23–24- Yahweh will have the promised Messiah rule over them in that land:**

I will appoint over them *a single shepherd, My servant David, and he will shepherd them.* He will tend them himself and will *be their shepherd.* I, Yahweh,

will be their God, and *My servant David will be a prince among them*. I, Yahweh, have spoken.”

**3. 34:25–31- *Yahweh will provide them peaceful security, pour out abundant blessings on the land of promise, and be with them.***

**God Installs Them in an Abundant and Peaceful Land of Promise- 34:25–29:**

“I will make a *covenant of peace* with them and eliminate dangerous animals in the land, so that they *may live securely* in the wilderness and sleep in the forest. I will make them and the area around My hill a blessing: I will send down showers in their season—*showers of blessing*. The *trees of the field will give their fruit, and the land will yield its produce*; My flock will be secure in their land. *They will know that I am Yahweh* when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslave them. They will no longer be prey for the nations, and the wild animals of the land will not consume them. *They will live securely, and no one will frighten them. I will establish for them a place renowned for its agriculture, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land. They will no longer endure the insults of the nations.*

**Restored Relationship- 34:30–31:**

Then they will know that *I, Yahweh their God, am with them*, and that they, *the house of Israel, are My people*.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. “You are My flock, the human flock of My pasture, and I am your God.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD.

**4. 36:16–36- *Notice the progression and repetition of key ideas:***

36:16–21- Yahweh exiled His chosen nation from the land of Israel because of their sin

36:22–24- Yahweh will act in accordance with His holiness by restoring His chosen people to the Promised Land:

“For I will *take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries, and will bring you into your own land*” (v. 24).

36:25–27- Yahweh will spiritually transform His chosen people:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place My Spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances.”

36:28–30- Yahweh will restore them to the land of their fathers and bless that land abundantly!!

“Then *you will live in the land that I gave your fathers; you will be My people, and I will be your God.*”

The prophet Ezekiel forcefully and clearly promises that God has something in mind for Israel, the nation of God’s choosing, that lines up with His covenant promises of land and national status. After He judges His chosen nation, He will send His promised Messiah who will rule over that redeemed nation after their repentance. He will restore them to the land of promise from which He had evicted them (according to Ezekiel’s progression). Individual salvation is part of God’s plan for His servant nation *along with* restoring them as a nation to the Promised Land (matching the boundaries found in Genesis). He does not envision individual salvation instead of national restoration, but individual salvation (at a national level- Rom. 11:26) that is part of the national restoration to the land of promise.

#### Yahweh’s Promise to Restore Israel, His Chosen People

Some argue that the prophetic promise of restoration took place in Israel’s return from Babylonian exile. However, the language of the prophetic presentation of restoration does not at all match the reality of Israel’s post-exilic return from Babylon to the land of Israel.

The restoration of Israel that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel predict will take two forms or occur in two phases. First, according to Merrill: “It will come to pass in history under the beneficent policy of Cyrus the Persian, but that is *only a type, a foretaste*, of complete renewal and reconstitution that must await the eschaton.”<sup>43</sup>

Second, Merrill adds that:

“spiritual renovation, indeed, resurrection life, will be part and parcel of that day of grace. Israel, triumphantly recreated, will be the focus of Yahweh’s dominion on the earth. Through her king, the Messiah of David, she will at last be a holy nation and kingdom of priests fit in every way to administer saving blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Those nations that now exist in rebellion against the Lord will be visited with awesome judgment until that day comes when they too will know that He is God.”<sup>44</sup>

The image on page 176 depicts the two phases of the restoration described in the prophetic books. Two matching geometric shapes depict these two phases. The first phase is a subset of the final phase of divinely intended restoration for God’s chosen people. The dashed line rather than a solid line shows that the foretaste matches the pattern of what the prophets predicted but does not serve as the complete

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<sup>43</sup> Eugene Merrill, “A Theology of Ezekiel,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 387.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

fulfillment of consummation of those predictions. There is no meaning change between the foretaste and the consummation. Both phases are organically connected, part of the same predicted trajectory. The second phase brings to fulfillment the totality of God's intentions for His created world.

What should we learn from these prophetic passages concerning covenant judgment on the nation followed by spiritual and national restoration? First, biblical interpreters must recognize that God's appropriate judgment on His covenant nation is *not the end of God's story for that chosen nation*. Second, *the land from which He exiles them* as a nation/people is *clearly the land to which He will return them as a nation/people*. The prophetic predictions that God's chosen people would experience the pinnacle of covenant curse—eviction from the land of promise—point to an *objective reality, the literal land of promise*, Israel's God-given home. When those same prophets write of God's intention to return His people to that land of promise, sometimes in the same chapter as their prediction of being removed from that land, they clearly mean that the land to which God's servant nation will return is just as literal and objective as the land from which they were exiled. Finally, the salvation that God's chosen people will enjoy in the eschaton does not preclude or replace the idea that God will restore them to the land He promised them.

### Conclusion

From the time of God's creation of all that exists, God declares His intention to establish His rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:26–27). What God plans to do in and through Israel is part of that plan to establish *His rule over all creation*. The biblical covenants repeatedly affirm that God will provide certain realities as part of His plan (for the nation of Israel as well as for the entire world). The ultimate fulfillment of those provisions rests on God's character—the God who manifests His glory by bringing to pass what He promised:

- Abrahamic Covenant: Yahweh promises land, nation/people, blessing to His chosen people, blessing for the entire world.
- Davidic Covenant: A Davidite will rule over God's future kingdom on earth.
- New Covenant: God will provide salvation for all those who participate in that covenant.

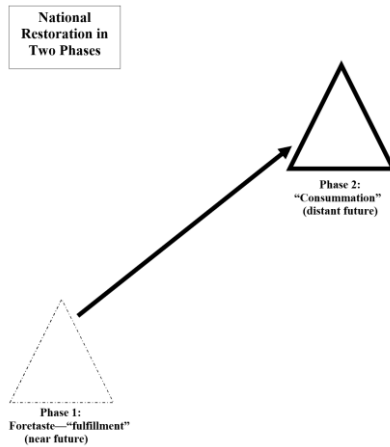
The Abrahamic Covenant is specifically presented as a unilateral covenant (Gen. 15)—a done deal in God's mind. The provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant are presented repeatedly in Genesis alongside statements of oath, covenant, and ratification.

The biblical prophets, who graphically describe the appropriate covenant judgment God will bring on His chosen nation, also depict the covenant restoration that God will bring to that same nation. The land from which God evicts His covenant nation is the same land to which He will restore them.

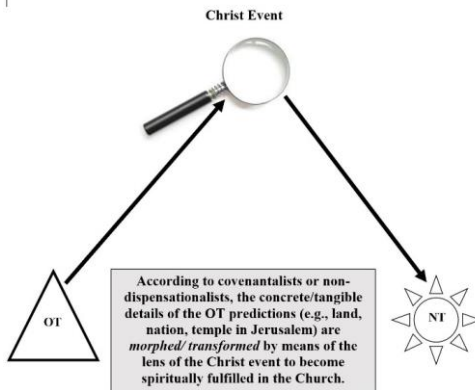
To dismiss or reinterpret the concrete realities (land, nation) that abound in the words of the biblical prophets does not just involve a passage here and there, but scores of prophetic passages. Even though the prediction that God intends to restore

His repentant people to the land of promise occurs in numerous passages, many scholars dismiss the future concrete realities described in those prophetic predictions to the nation of Israel, generally by means of typology or Christocentricity (see below image as an attempt to depict that interpretive approach).

This writer has argued that we best handle God’s Word when we read the biblical covenants and prophetic predictions that point to the consummation of God’s kingdom plan with a certain expectation—that the God who fulfills His covenant promises in a way that matches the promise/prediction, will establish His kingdom on earth, ruled over by His Son, the Messiah. That concrete fulfillment of His repeated predictions and promises exalt God as the incomparable God—the only one that exists and the only one that keeps His promises in a way that matches His predictions/promises.



Proposed Hermeneutical Justification for the Transformation of OT Prophecies  
(by Non-Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians)





## **PREMILLENNIALISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: FIVE BIBLICALLY DOCTRINAL TRUTHS**

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*Many scholars hold that premillennial statements are found only in Revelation 20:1–10. Although these verses are extremely important in supporting the premillennial doctrine, many other verses throughout the New Testament also offer support for premillennialism. Our study limits itself to five biblically doctrinal premillennial truths from the New Testament that seamlessly blend throughout the Bible with the person and work—and reign—of Jesus the Messiah on earth after His Second Coming.*

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### **Introduction**

Whenever discussions between premillennialists and amillennialists occur, Revelation 19 and 20 is usually the section of Scripture on which many base their argumentation, especially Revelation 20:1–11. Before we examine these specific passages, we know that God has already made several prophecies elsewhere. And how one interprets these passages has been determined long before by how those other related futuristic biblical texts have already been interpreted, before ever approaching certain crucial biblical passages such as Revelation 20:1–10. So, as we shall see, one should actually end the argumentation for this important component of eschatological theology in Revelation 19–20, not start there. In setting forth the New Testament case for premillennialism we will present the following: (1) a presentation of three of the five premillennial biblical truths from the New Testament; (2) a brief examination of two totally different approaches to Revelation 20 among evangelicals; (3) initial considerations of what being in the abyss requires; (4) the biblical definition and requirements for being imprisoned in the abyss; (5) an examination of when did or when will the binding of Satan in the abyss occur; (6) a consideration of two of the different biblical accounts for the actual Triumphal Entry and their significance; and (7) a presentation of the final two of five premillennial doctrinal truths from Revelation 20:1–10.

### Three Foundational Biblical Premillennial Truths from the New Testament

Although many additional Scriptural supports could be added, we will limit these to five biblically doctrinal truths from the New Testament supporting premillennialism. Since our first premillennial doctrine comes from Matthew, it is relevant to note the chronological switch and emphasis the author made: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Everything in Matthew’s Gospel sets out to prove that Jesus and He alone is the promised Christ/Messiah Whom God sent—and we clearly see this in Matthew 21.<sup>1</sup>

New Testament Premillennial Doctrinal Truth #1: The real Triumphal Entry has not yet occurred (Matt 21:1–11) because very specific promises and prophecies from the Davidic and the Abrahamic Covenants remain—that must be fulfilled—and will not be fulfilled until Jesus’ next entry into Jerusalem, which will occur at the real Triumphal Entry.

Matthew 21:1–11 is almost universally—and erroneously—called the Triumphal Entry, but Scripture clearly shows this is not the Messiah’s true Triumphal Entry. We must remember that chapter titles and/or subtitles placed in Scripture are human inventions and are not inspired. Some of the chapter headings are much more helpful and factual than others, but Matthew 21 and parallel accounts that subtitle this, “The Triumphal Entry,” contain one of the most inaccurate and misleading chapter headings or subtitles in the Bible, and yet this erroneous name has become deeply entrenched in the minds of many people as biblical doctrine. A more accurate subtitle would be “The Lowly Entry of the Messiah Who Will Give His Life for Ransom for Many in the Blood of the New Covenant,” as seen in Matthew 21:1–5:

And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And if anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.”

Now this took place that what was spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying,

“SAY TO THE DAUGHTER OF ZION, ‘BEHOLD YOUR KING IS COMING TO YOU, GENTLE AND MOUNTED ON A DONKEY, EVEN ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A BEAST OF BURDEN.’”

Matthew used a direct quote of Zechariah 9:9 and presented this prophecy as specifically being fulfilled that day when Messiah Jesus, the King of the Jews, humble

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 20, writes: [Son of David] “used here shows that Matthew plans to bring out what is meant by the Davidic Messiah. Interestingly, he uses it most frequently when people are appealing to Jesus for help (9:27; 15:22; 20:30–31). But it also appears in the story of the triumphal entry (21:9, 15), indicating that Matthew is not unaware of the royal associations of the term. His book is to be about one who fulfilled all that is meant in being the descendant of Israel’s greatest king.”

and gentle, entered Jerusalem:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation,  
Humble, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

Jesus the Messiah fulfilled even the smallest detail of God's prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 when He rode silently into Jerusalem, including using the two animals that Scripture required that the Messiah use, which we should expect with this fulfillment because Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). However, what many people omit in their theology is the next verse, Zechariah 9:10, that continues to disclose divine revelation about God's Messiah, and *nothing* from that verse was fulfilled that day. The prophecies in this verse remain at the present time unfulfilled prophecies that *must* be fulfilled at the true Triumphal Entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. Zechariah 9:10 continues:

And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem; and the bow of war will be cut off. And He will speak peace to the nations; and His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the [Euphrates] River to the ends of the earth.

When the Messiah returns, as part of His activities under the Davidic Covenant requirements, He will break the bow of war and speak peace to the nations, with Jerusalem being the capital of His worldwide rule. And in keeping with the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, He will have the Euphrates River as the northern border of the Abrahamic Covenant land promises as part of His worldwide reign. All of Zechariah 9:10 must be exactly fulfilled as was every part of Zechariah 9:9. We should expect God to do no less.<sup>2</sup>

New Testament Premillennial Doctrinal Truth #2: Christ Jesus did not accept the praise of the collective Jews at what most people call "the Triumphal Entry" (Matt. 21:1–11), but vows to accept these exact praises—and many more—at some undisclosed time in the future from the descendants of these same Jewish people (Matt. 23:37–39), thus making Jesus' next entry into Jerusalem His real Triumphal Entry, at the beginning of His Millennial Kingdom reign.

In describing what is generally accepted as "The Triumphal Entry," the Jewish multitudes shouted out from Psalm 118:25–26 Messianic titles attributed to Jesus, as Matthew 21:8–11 reveals:

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<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *God Remembers: A Study of Zechariah* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1965), 129, writes: "Having laid the foundation for peace in the blood of His Cross, He now puts into effect peace for all the world. He destroys all instruments of war from His people and by so much from all the nations. Compare Isaiah 9:4–6 for some order or method of peace is given her. No defenses for carnal reliance will be left. All symbols of earthly might and oppression will be brought to naught. This will be done not by the meek Lamb of God, but by the wrath of the Lamb, the Lion roaring out of Zion."

And the disciples went and did just as Jesus had directed them, and brought the donkey and the colt, and laid on them their garments, on which He sat. And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road.

And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying,

“Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!” [Ps. 118:26]

And when He had entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, “Who is this?” And the multitudes were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

After Jesus had cleansed His own Temple and had engaged in various mostly hostile interactions with various religious groups in Matthew 21–22, Jesus began a series of “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” denunciations of the religious leaders (Matt. 23:1–38). At the end of this section of Scripture, in the last public teaching by Jesus before the events leading to His crucifixion, Jesus bemoaned most of national Israel’s and Jerusalem’s grievous sin of not having believed Him—and received Him—as God’s true Messiah. But Jesus also made unbreakable promises to this same Jewish people, as are clearly shown in Matthew 23:37–39:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.

“Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!

“For I say to you, from now on you shall not see Me until you say,

“BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD!”” [Ps. 118:26]

Jesus made multiple and eternally important declarations that day. First, He told the Jewish people “Behold, your house is being left to you desolate.” If Jesus had stopped at that point, the Jewish people would have been in eternal trouble and would not have obtained any hope for their future. Second, Jesus did not tell the Jewish people they (collectively) were finished with Him, because He had not rejected them (collectively) because God’s Messiah spoke of His future dealings with this same Jewish people. In fact, instead of totally rejecting the Jews, Jesus told them just the opposite: “You will not see Me *until*,” noting the base requirement for them nationally to see Him again, “until you”—Jerusalem and the collective Jewish people, at some undisclosed, God-ordained time in the future—say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD”—and this is important—citing from this *same* Psalm 118:26. Jesus did not declare “if you say;” this *must* happen in the future, exactly as Jesus has prophesied. This probably would have been extremely confusing to the original hearers of Jesus’ promises. Many who heard Him make this statement had already cried out or had already sung Psalm 118:26 a few days earlier in Matthew 21. Third, the way by which Jesus responded shows that during His earlier entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1–11), He did *not* accept the Jewish people’s usage of the Messianic Psalm 118 in reference to Him that day but that He will accept it from the

descendants of this same Jewish people at His real Triumphant Entry that occurs only when He returns in glory to reign (Zechariah 14; Matt. 16:27–28; Revelation 19–20). Simply stated, the text clearly shows that Jesus did not totally reject and abandon the Jewish nation. Fourth, we should remember and include God's promise earlier in Ezekiel 20:33: “As I live, declares the Lord God, ‘surely with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with wrath poured out, I shall be king over you.’” The context of Ezekiel 20:33 proves that the “you” referred to are the Jewish people at some time in the future, with Jesus being their King—not just their Savior—at His return to earth and His genuine Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem.

New Testament Premillennial Doctrinal Truth #3: Scripture repeatedly shows that the Godhead will maintain and save a remnant of the Jewish people, beginning in the Tribulation and leading into the Millennial reign of Jesus.

This New Testament premillennial truth was presented as part of the Faculty Lecture Series on “Premillennialism,” at The Master's Seminary on February 8, 2018, but time did not permit then—nor in this article—the full treatment that this vital component of biblical doctrine could have and should have received. However, even this one simple truth is eternally binding: if all we had from Scripture were Jesus' words and actions in Matthew 21:1–9 and 23:37–39, this would still *require* that a remnant of some generation of Jewish people in the future will be saved by Him as part of the events associated with His return, including the promise of Psalm 118:26 and other such verses given in praise to Jesus by the saved Jewish remnant—and Jesus' acceptance this time of both the people and their praise. There is a much longer biblical trail with many more verses that could support this critically important doctrinal truth that occurs so frequently in Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Brief Examination of Two Totally Different Approaches to Revelation 20**

Before going to the final two (of five) premillennial doctrinal truths from the New Testament for this article, Revelation 20:1–3 must be considered because this passage is so important to both interpretative sides:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.

In writing about Revelation 20:1–3, Walvoord does not exaggerate the massive theological divide that emerges from these verses: “The dramatic prophecy contained in

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<sup>3</sup> See Greg Harris, *The Bible Expositor's Handbook—New Testament Digital Edition* (B & H Academic, 2018), the chapter entitled “And How Shall They Hear Without a Preacher?” for the biblical trail of God's repeated promises to save a Jewish remnant as part of His future Messianic work.

these three verses has been the subject of endless dispute because to some extent the whole controversy between premillenarians and amillenarians hangs upon it.”<sup>4</sup> Powell considers “Revelation 20:1–6 is perhaps the most controversial passage in the Book of Revelation.”<sup>5</sup> Obviously, Revelation 20:1–6, and subsequent verses, are not verses that should be interpreted in a vacuum, isolated and removed from the rest of the Scripture. Consequently, the way one approaches the events from Revelation 19:11–20:10 greatly factors into its interpretation—but even more important—one’s approach to this section of the Bible has already been determined in (or by) one’s theology and interpretation long before ever coming to the specifics of Revelation 20.

For those who hold to Scripture as being God’s Word, Powell presents two distinct groups of interpretation of this prophecy, and the first he calls the “preconsummationist perspective:” “In this view the events of [Revelation 20:] 1–6 will occur *before* the return of Christ to the earth. Most preconsummationists have adopted a recapitulation view of the passage, an approach usually associated with amillennialism including both the amillennial and postmillennial views of Revelation.”<sup>6</sup>

This preconsummationist-recapitulation-amillennial view includes the following tenets. (1) The binding of Satan represents Christ’s victory over the powers of darkness accomplished at the cross. (2) The one thousand years are symbolic of a long, indeterminate period corresponding to the church age. (3) Satan will be loosed briefly to wreak havoc and persecute the church. (4) The fire coming down from heaven to consume the wicked is symbolic of Christ’s second coming. (5) A general resurrection and judgment of the wicked and the righteous will occur at Christ’s coming, followed by the creation of the new heavens and a new earth.<sup>7</sup>

Sam Storms, in his book *Kingdom Come*, is a representative of this position and presents what he sees as a serious problem against any premillennial interpretation:

If we were to take the events of 20:1–3 as historically subsequent to the events of 19:11–21, a serious problem arises in that 20:1–3 would describe an action designed to prevent Satanic deception of the nations who had already been *deceived* (16:13–16) and consequently *destroyed* in 19:19–21. In other words, it makes little sense to speak of protecting the nations from deception by Satan in

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<sup>4</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 290.

<sup>5</sup> Charles E. Powell, “Progression Versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1–6,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163: no. 649 (January-March 2006): 94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*,” 94–95. See R. Fowler White, “Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1–10,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (Fall 1989): 319–44 for a more detailed argumentation for this view.

20:1–3 *after* they have just been both deceived by Satan (16:16; cf 19:19–20) and destroyed by Christ at his return (19:11–21; cf. 19:19–20).<sup>8</sup>

Storms explains Satan's binding in Revelation 20:1–3 thusly: "The Gentiles ('nations') are portrayed as being in darkness with respect to the gospel, having been blinded ('deceived') while under the dominion of Satan. However, as a result of Christ's first coming, such deception no longer obtains. The nations or Gentiles may now receive the forgiveness of sins and the divine inheritance."<sup>9</sup> Waymeyer summarizes how most amillennialists view Revelation 20:1–3:

According to amillennialism, the binding of Satan in Revelation 20:1–3 took place at the first coming of Christ, and his imprisonment in the abyss extends throughout the present age, concurrent with the millennial reign of Jesus. Rather than describing a future event that will occur at the Second Coming, then, Satan's binding was accomplished by Christ when He conquered the devil through His death and resurrection during His earthly ministry. In this way, amillennialism asserts that the thousand-year binding of Satan extends from the time of the first coming of Christ to the time of His second coming and is therefore a present reality.<sup>10</sup>

The alternate position to the preconsummationist view Powell calls postconsummationism:

In this view the events in verses [Rev 20:] 1–6 *follow* the second coming of Christ depicted in 19:11–21. Thus it involves chronological progression between the two passages. This view is essentially premillennial. The postconsummationist-progressive-premillennial viewpoint holds these four tenets. (1) The binding of Satan is yet future; it will take place when Christ returns. (2)

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<sup>8</sup> Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-shire, Scotland, Mentor Imprint, 2013), 431 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 441. An argument against this view would be the massive conversion of the Gentiles of Nineveh during Jonah's ministry. A large number of Gentiles received the forgiveness of sins and a divine inheritance, and yet this was done before Satan is bound—according to Storms—occurring during the first coming of Jesus. No "binding of Satan" was necessary for God to do this great grace work among these Gentiles, nor was He hindered any by Satan not yet being bound in the abyss.

<sup>10</sup> Matt Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come: A Premillennial Critique of the Two Age Model* (Kress Biblical Resources: 2016) 179. See also Samuel E. Waldron, *The End Times Made Simple: How Could Everyone Be So Wrong about Biblical Prophecy?* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press, 2003), 94–95; William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 187–88. Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come*, 179, footnote #10 adds: "Although most amillennialists emphasize that the binding of Satan was accomplished specifically through the death and resurrection of Christ, others believe this binding began earlier when Jesus triumphed over Satan by resisting his temptations in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13) (Donald Garlington, "Reigning with Christ: Revelation 20:1–6 and the Question of the Millennium," *R&R* 6, no. 2 [Spring 1997]: 91; Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979], 229; Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1955], 130–31; Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 187)."

The one thousand years are a literal period in which Christ will reign on earth from Jerusalem and with His people. (3) Satan will be loosed for a brief period at the end of the millennium, and this will be followed by the resurrection and judgment of the wicked at the Great White Throne judgment. (4) The new heavens and the new earth will be created after the millennium, that is a thousand years after Christ's second coming.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not Satan is already imprisoned in the abyss or that this awaits Jesus' return to earth is not a minor theological issue or just a hotly debated topic among debaters. So much importance is attached to these promises from God, which leads to our next biblical truth:

New Testament Premillennial Doctrinal Truth #4: Scripture repeatedly shows that Satan is not currently bound in the abyss but will be when Jesus Christ returns to earth to reign in the thousand-year Millennial Kingdom (Rev. 20:1–3), at which conclusion Satan “must be released from the abyss for a short while.”

### **Initial Considerations of What Being in the Abyss Requires**

Whether Satan currently resides in the abyss or not in Revelation 20:1–3 strongly factors into the argumentation from both the amillennial and premillennial side; there is simply no way to avoid this, other than to totally ignore it, as do Gentry and Wellum in *Kingdom Through Covenant*.<sup>12</sup> It is staggering that in an almost 850-page book the Scripture index (848) lists *not even one reference* from Revelation 19–20, the two chapters that reveal the most biblical truths about the return and reign of the Lord Jesus Christ. What makes this even more egregious is the subtitle of their book: *A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. This would be similar to writing an 850-page biblical theology on the Genesis flood account, and yet going to the Scripture index and finding *not even one* reference cited from Genesis 6–9. Obviously, whether or not Satan is currently bound plays no more importance in Gentry and Wellum's eschatology than does anything else in these chapters; or to word this differently, it is evident that Revelation 19–20 plays no role whatsoever in the supposed biblical theology presented in *Kingdom Through Covenant*. For those who actually deal with whether or not Satan is presently bound, what often is omitted—sometimes by both sides—but that should be a key beginning point of such a

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<sup>11</sup> Powell, “Progression Versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1–6,” 95 (emphasis in the original). Powell adds in support of this position, “The current article presents three arguments in defense of premillennialism that have often been overlooked. These concern (a) the imprisonment of Satan compared with imprisonment and binding imagery mentioned elsewhere in Revelation and the New Testament, (b) the reign of the saints in 20:4–6 compared with the saints' reign mentioned elsewhere in Revelation, and (c) the significance of the accusative case for the extent of time in reference to the thousand years” (ibid., 97–98). Michael J. Vlach, “The Kingdom of God and the Millennium,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 23/2 (Fall 2012): 244, is a representative of such a position: “The events of Rev. 20:1–10 follow the second coming of Jesus described in Rev 19:11. There is sequential progression, not recapitulation in this section.”

<sup>12</sup> See Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).



study is this: What does the Bible reveal that are the requirements for being in the abyss?

One of Storms'—and other amillennialists'—main attacks against the premillennial position is what folly they consider it to be for the abyss to be a real, actual, spatial place, and defining it thusly imposes “a rigidly wooden and artificial structure on symbolism that it simply isn't designed to sustain,”<sup>13</sup> and in viewing the abyss as actually a place one must interpret it “in an overly literalistic manner.”<sup>14</sup> Storms asserts that “if the premillennialist insists on saying that Satan's being cast into the abyss in Revelation 20 must be interpreted in a literal, spatial way,” he must also believe, among other such items listed, the following in order to be consistent in their woefully mistaken theology: (1) the angel was physically holding a literal key that could literally lock and unlock the pit; (2) the angel was holding a literal chain with material links that could be measured; (3) the angel literally grabbed the devil and wrestled him into submission and threw him into this pit; and (4) then questions as to whether Satan was a literal, physical serpent as he is called in verse 2.<sup>15</sup> In a similar way, amillennialist Jonathan Menn thinks he has the premillennialist also boxed in as one who must interpret the abyss in Revelation 20:1–3 as “an actual pit in the earth which has a physical lock and physical ‘seal.’”<sup>16</sup>

Waymeyer shows the clear distinction in the two interpretive positions:

In contrast to the literal interpretation of premillennialism, Beale says the abyss should be understood as representing a spiritual dimension which exists alongside—and in the midst of—the earthly dimension. In this way, Beale sees the abyss in Rev 20:1–3 as “one of the various metaphors representing the spiritual sphere in which the devil and his accomplices operate.” For this reason, he rejects the idea that the abyss is spatially removed from the earth and that Satan's confinement in the abyss requires a complete abolition of his activity on earth. This view of the abyss enables the amillennialist to affirm that Satan prowls about like a roaring lion, engaged in the various activities ascribed to him in the New Testament, while simultaneously being confined to the abyss as described in Revelation 20.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 445.

<sup>14</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 987. Cited from Matt Waymeyer, “The Binding of Satan in Revelation 20,” *MSJ* 26/1 (Spring 2015) 24, in the section entitled “The Significance of the Abyss” (24–30), who further writes: “Storms also rejects the idea of ‘a localized geo-spatial place called the abyss (*Kingdom Come*, 442), and according to Menn, the abyss in Rev 20 is ‘not spatial’ but rather functions as a metaphor (*Biblical Eschatology*, 18).”

<sup>15</sup> Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 442–43.

<sup>16</sup> Menn, *Biblical Eschatology*, 18, 357.

<sup>17</sup> Matt Waymeyer, “The Binding of Satan in Revelation 20,” 24–25, footnote #28, cites Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 987: “According to Beale, ‘the abyss and the physical world are two different dimensions interpenetrating each other or existing alongside one another’ (990), and elsewhere he refers to the abyss as ‘the realm of demons over which Satan rules’ (493). In a similar way, Venema refers to the abyss as ‘the dwelling place of the demons’ (Cornelis P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000], 316), and Storms refers to it as ‘the abode of demons’ (*Kingdom Come*, 429) and ‘the source or abode of those demonic powers that are opposed to God’ (478). But none of them emphasize

However, Waymeyer counters with this response to the amillennial attack against the way premillennialists understand the abyss:

The immediate problem with this argument concerns the false alternative it establishes between a literal and figurative interpretation of the abyss. According to the amillennialist, the abyss must be understood as either (a) a literal reference to a physical, bottomless pit which extends endlessly into the depths of the earth, or (b) a symbolic metaphor signifying “the spiritual sphere in which the devil and his accomplices operate.” But this ignores the possibility that the abyss in Revelation 20 is a spirit prison for demonic beings, an actual location which imprisons them and prevents them from functioning outside of its confines. According to this third view, the abyss is neither a physical hole in the ground (the woodenly literal view) nor the spiritual sphere of demonic activity in general (the amillennial view), but rather *an actual location in the spiritual realm where evil spirits are confined and prevented from roaming free on earth*. A careful examination of ἄβυσσος indicates that this is indeed the meaning of this word in Revelation 20.<sup>18</sup>

As we will repeatedly see, the Bible offers many ways to prove that the above *italized* conclusion is the proper way to understand the abyss. Also, it must be emphasized: Revelation 20:1–3 is part of *the overall visions* that God gave specifically to show and explain certain events (e.g. Rev. 1:1–2; 4:1). Such a vision that *God* used to communicate the imprisonment of Satan (Rev. 20:1–3) does not require that earthly, physical material be used to accomplish such a task, something Storms wrongly asserts must be present and the only means by which such a binding of Satan could occur, in his erroneous depiction of what the premillennialists’ interpretation must entail.

Using Scripture is often presumed or sometimes stated by various authors as the basis of their theology, yet, upon closer examination, often this biblical requirement is not always the case. For instance, Sam Storms, in *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*, in the subject index for “the meaning of the abyss,” lists three page numbers (429, 478, 495).<sup>19</sup> For the first reference (429), Storms writes “The first interpretative task before us is the account of [Rev 20:] 1–3 of Satan’s imprisonment in the abyss. . .” He then uses footnote #7 to offer part of his understanding of what Satan’s being currently bound in the abyss consists of:

The word translated “abyss” occurs nine times in the New Testament, eight of which refer to the abode of demons. . . According to Robert Mounce, the abyss

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the fact that the abyss is a ‘prison’ (Rev 20:7). Other amillennialists are even less precise in their explanation of the abyss. For example, Hoekema says the abyss should “be thought of as a figurative description of the way in which Satan’s activities will be curbed during the thousand-year period” (*The Bible and the Future*, 228), but this explanation communicates the effect of confinement in the abyss without defining what the abyss actually is.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 25 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>19</sup> Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 573.

was thought of as “a vast subterranean cavern which served as a place of confinement for disobedient spirits awaiting judgment” (*The Book of Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 352). In Revelation 9:11 Satan is referred to as “the angel of the bottomless pit (or abyss), most likely because he is *in* the abyss, the place from which he dispatches his demonic hordes (9:1–3) and commissions the beast (11:7; 17:8). Although this point should not be pressed, it may be that Satan is “in” the abyss precisely because he was consigned there and sealed therein at the inception of the present age, only to be released at its close. In other words, it may be that Satan is described as being “of the abyss” in 9:11 because that is the place of his current incarceration.<sup>20</sup>

In using biblical references in rebuttal to Storms’ interpretation: First, Storms brings an interpretational judgment to Revelation 9:11 because Scripture does not require this to refer to Satan because the text does not designate him by name, and strong arguments exist that “Abaddon/Apollyon” most likely is a strong demon already imprisoned there by God—but not Satan himself.<sup>21</sup> Second, Storms holds that Satan and his angels are using the abyss as their functional home base to go and come as they please, because the abyss is “the place from which he [Satan] dispatches his demonic hordes (9:1–3) . . .” Also, it would be difficult to explain that the abyss is “the place from which he dispatches his demonic hordes (9:1–3),” but yet deem it that Satan himself “is ‘in’ the abyss precisely because he was consigned there and sealed therein at the inception of the present age, only to be released at its close.” Storms further concludes that Satan is described as being “‘of the abyss’ in 9:11 because that is the place of his current incarceration.” From Storms’ description arises substantial questions: If the abyss is a place from which Satan currently sends out his demonic hordes, and if so, why would Satan not go out from there himself (since he is sending others), since the abyss is also currently the place of Satan’s incarceration? And we must ask—and will address this soon in this article—What then are the *biblical* requirements for such an incarceration?

For the second page under the subject index for “the meaning of the abyss” (478), Storms writes, “It may be that John’s reference to the ‘sea’ is synonymous with ‘the abyss,’ the source and abode of those demonic powers that are opposed to God.” That Storms considers the abyss to be “the *source* and *abode* of those demonic powers that are opposed to God” (emphasis added), is in keeping with his previous points, the abyss here consists of the home base of abiding and deploying of demonic powers by Satan. It should be regarded that nothing was noted about whether “the source and abode of those demonic powers that are opposed to God” refer to all of the demons or to only a subset of them. In the final page number for “the meaning of the abyss” (495), Storms writes, “This beast is later called ‘the false prophet’ (16:13;

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 429, fn. 7 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>21</sup> See Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 37–39, for argumentation against Satan being the king over all the abyss, since nowhere in Scripture does Satan have any connection with the abyss until he is cast into it later. Thomas makes a significant case for identifying the leader of the abyss as some previously unnamed strong-ranking demon who is imprisoned by God and is unable to release himself from the abyss, until Jesus summons him and the other demons already in the abyss for their temporary release (Rev. 9:1–11).

19:20; 20:10) and together with the dragon and the sea-beast forms the unholy trinity of the abyss.”

The summary of Storms’ references explaining the meaning of the abyss include: (1) Satan is the angel of the abyss, and presently is consigned and sealed there; (2) yet it is from the abyss that Satan sends out his demonic hordes; (3) the abyss is also the source and abode of the demonic powers who are opposed to God, but not necessarily their confinement there; and (4) finally, there will eventually be some form of the unholy trinity of the abyss that will play some role in some of the final eschatological events.

To show the vast difference between the approach espoused by Storms in *Kingdom Come* versus searching for and accepting the Bible definitions will be strikingly obvious, because in the Scripture index in *Kingdom Come*, not one of the necessary, pertinent Bible verses appear about the abyss—and remember, his subject index for his book already contains a subject called “the meaning of the abyss”—and yet his definition does not include *any* of the information from the Scriptural accounts that follow below.

To begin with, two other important matters must be considered: first, the only way we would know that hell, Hades or the abyss—or heaven—exist is because God chooses to reveal them and some of their descriptions, and if these Scriptural descriptions are not used and accepted, then it is *not God’s definitions* being used. Second, as will be repeatedly shown scripturally, the Godhead alone has the authority over both Hades and the abyss—with Satan having absolutely no authority over it in even the slightest way.

Initially, the Bible reveals much about the eventual and ultimate punishment of evil spiritual beings, including in Matthew 25:41, when Jesus will tell the lost humans who are alive at His return to earth, “Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, *into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels*’” (emphasis added). Many humans will certainly spend eternity in hell, but God’s original design for hell was for “the devil and his angels,” usually referred to by their more common designation as “demons,” and, as will be shown later in this article, *all* demons will eventually be confined in the abyss first, and then all of the demons will ultimately be cast into hell. We should also note that the Bible clearly depicts hell to be an actual place with spatial boundaries—not a spiritual condition. Although through the centuries there has been the erroneous belief in many people’s understanding of what hell is, it should be emphasized that the Bible never presents Satan as reigning over hell as his abode. Once Jesus casts Satan into hell, the devil will be excruciatingly tormented there “forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

Concerning the abyss, we will begin with an important doctrine of what the abyss is not: the abyss is not the same as Hades, and this truth will connect with a future item in this article.<sup>22</sup> Hades is the place where the souls of the dead, unsaved humans reside at the present time, as Jesus revealed in Luke 16:19–29:

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<sup>22</sup> Powell writes: “In Revelation only the demonic are related to the abyss; death and Hades are usually related to humanity. In 6:8 death and Hades are personalized and represent the judgment of death

“Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

“Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.

“And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. “And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.’”

“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.’”

“And he said, ‘Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’” “But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’”

Among other things, we learn from the previous and following passages: (1) Hades is not the abyss; nothing about the abyss is mentioned here; (2) Hades is a real place (“this place of torment”), and not some sort of spiritual condition of anguish during one’s life on earth that no longer existed at that time (“that during your life”), (Lk. 16:25, 29); (3) Hades is not hell; rather Hades is the temporary holding place of fallen human souls awaiting the Great White Throne Judgment, as seen in Revelation 20:13: “And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.” (4) While Hades is not hell, it is nonetheless a place of torment (“being in torment”/ “for I am in agony in this flame”/ “lest they [the rich man’s five brothers] come to this place of torment”). (5) Luke 16:26 reveals that those in Hades are separated and far removed from the wonderful abode of the redeemed: “And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.” Finally, (6) those in Hades are either 100% in Hades or they are not there at all; there is no middle ground of “sort of being” in Hades or sort of being on earth, such as being 50% in Hades/50% on earth. If one is in Hades, one is no longer on the earth; if one is still on the earth—no matter how horrific whatever pains befall them—that person is not in Hades. Those who believe the Bible as God’s Word and their

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on [unsaved] humanity; death is the experience and hades is the destination. Death and hades are again used figuratively in 20:13–14 of those who dwell in hades and have experienced death as judgment. In the New Testament, hades is always the place of the unbelieving dead (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; 10:15; Luke 16:23; 2:27; Acts 2:31; Rev. 1:18; Rev. 6:8; 20:13–14), and is a realm from which they cannot escape” (Powell, “Progression versus Recapitulation in Revelation 20:1–6,” 98–99).

source of truth would receive these teachings from Jesus because no living human being has seen Hades or would even know from only a human perspective that it exists, nor know any of its characteristics. For the most part, Hades is not a point of contention between the amillennialists and premillennialists.

### **The Biblical Definition and Requirements for Being in the Abyss**

Just as with seeking the God-given definition of Hades and of hell, seeking to find the God-given definition and requirements should be done also for the abyss, and God’s Word has much to say about the abyss. One’s correct biblical definition of the abyss *must* include the following verses, or it will not match the revelation given by God. For instance, Luke 8:26–31 reveals several truths about the abyss, as seen by the resulting terror, questions, and pleas that one particular subset of demons had when they encountered the incarnate Jesus:

And they sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. And when He had come out onto the land, He was met by a certain man from the city who was possessed with demons; and who had not put on any clothing for a long time, and was not living in a house, but in the tombs. And seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him, and said in a loud voice, “What do I have to do with You, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me.” For He had been commanding the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had seized him many times; and he was bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard; and yet he would burst his fetters and be driven by the demon into the desert.

And Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

And he said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. And they were entreating Him not to command them to depart into the abyss.

Waymeyer also states this quite striking result of his studies an essential core truth: “In discussing the incarceration of Satan in Revelation 20, most amillennialists do not even mention—much less comment on—the implications of Luke 8:31 for an accurate understanding of the abyss,”<sup>23</sup> yet they most certainly should examine any pertinent passages on the abyss—as is required for any other biblical doctrine, because to omit any of the characteristics about the abyss as revealed by God in Scripture certainly weakens their interpretation elsewhere of what the abyss consists of as well as its purpose. And this is important and noteworthy: *not even one* of the following Bible verses describing the abyss made it into Storms’ *Kingdom Come* Scripture index—nor do any of the truths revealed there. As we will see, it is not only Luke 8 verses that amillennialists such as Storms omits; there are more Scripture verses that God gave to describe the abyss that are not included in the Scripture index of *Kingdom Come*, nor that he used to define the abyss.

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<sup>23</sup> Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come*, 185, footnote #39, lists four popular amillennial works (Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*; Venema, *The Promise of the Future*; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*; Storms, *Kingdom Come*).

From the Luke 8:26–31 passage we learn, among other things, about the abyss: (1) Demons are fully cognizant that the abyss exists, and that it is an actual place, and that if they departed into the abyss, it would be a place of horrible torment for them (Luke 8:28); (2) The demons knew that Jesus—even in His incarnation—possessed the authority to “command them to depart into the abyss” (Luke 8:31); (3) It is evident that the demons knew that as long as they were on earth, they had not yet “depart[ed] into the abyss.” (4) As with hell and Hades, the abyss belongs to God alone—not to Satan—and the only way into either Hades or the abyss is if the Godhead or one of its members puts them there, and the only way out of Hades or the abyss is if God Himself, or one of God’s holy angels commanded to do so, such as is seen in the opening verses of Revelation 9. (5) Demons cannot be in two places at the same time; as with human and Hades, this is also an “either/or” category: demons are either 100% operative with access to earth in the demonic realm, or they are 100% imprisoned in the abyss, completely removed from earth. (6) The parallel account in Matthew 8:29 explains the demons rightful fear that they have: “And behold, they cried out, saying, ‘What do we have to do with You, Son of God? Have You come here *to torment us before the time?*’” (emphasis added). Although the particulars are not explained at this point of what or when “the time” will be, demons know that they all await a judgment from Jesus, which helps explain James 2:19: “Demons believe and shudder/tremble” (present tense)—and they have good reason to shudder/tremble on an on-going basis. Waymeyer summarizes the importance of Luke 8 thusly:

[T]he narrative in Luke 8 indicates that confinement in the abyss involves the complete removal of demonic activity and influence upon the earth. This can be seen in the request of the demons in verse 31. The reason for the demons’ request was not because they were so determined to kill the swine. The reason for their request was because imprisonment in the abyss would have cut them off from having any influence in this world—at least as long as they were *in the abyss*—whereas a departure into the swine would allow them to continue to roam free and wreak havoc on the earth. This indicates that these evil spirits could either be imprisoned in the abyss or they could be prowling about the earth—engaged in demonic activities—but they could not be both.<sup>24</sup>

In order to find out other characteristics about the abyss, we must look to other verses that describe the abyss without actually using the word “abyss,” and remembering that, along with the Luke 8 and Matthew 8 passages, none of the following verses factor into Storms’ definition of what the abyss entails, because none of the following verses are in the Scripture Index in *Kingdom Come*. Initially, Scripture reveals that some subset(s) of demons are currently in the abyss, while others are free (presently) to do their evil activity, as seen in 1 Peter 3:18–20:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 185 (emphasis his).

prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.

We see from this passage (1) First Peter 3:19–20 reveals that there are some demonic spirits “now in prison;” (2) this particular subset of demons are already “now in prison” because their particular acts of disobedience occurred during the days of Noah, but before the Flood; (3) the Godhead may have other demons already imprisoned in the abyss for other heinous sins that they committed, but the Bible is silent as to whether other demons likewise are currently in the abyss; (4) obviously, not every demon is in the abyss yet. Other demons, besides the ones as the (Legion) in Luke 8, are not in the abyss but are currently actively sinning on earth, helping to achieve some of “the schemes of the devil,” as Paul warned and exhorted in regard to spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10–12:

Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

(5) The demons described in Ephesians 6 are allowed—under God’s sovereignty and authority—to currently carry out demonic activities that those demons already in the prison of the abyss are no longer permitted to do.

Next, Second Peter 2:4–5 describes the abyss thusly: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly . . .” From these verses, we see two vital truths: (1) All demons sin, but some demons have sinned to such a heinous degree that God has already removed them from the world, “cast them into hell [*tartarus*] and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment;”<sup>25</sup> (2) “reserved for judgment” means that the demons who are already imprisoned and are tortured in the abyss have not yet received their ultimate judgment, which clearly indicates that a future and final judgment past this initial incarceration remains for them and ultimately the entire demonic world, at some undisclosed time in the future.

Jude 6 adds this in reference to the abyss: “And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day.” Jude 6 reveals that *God Himself*—not Satan—“has kept” [these demons in the abyss] “in eternal bonds under darkness,”

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<sup>25</sup> See John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 845–46, who explain that *tartarus*, used only here in the NT, is not the lake of fire hell of Revelation 20, but rather became the terms the Jews used to explain where some of the fallen angels were sent to endure their preliminary torment, which, from its usage, thus equates it with the abyss.



and thus refutes Storms' derisive and erroneous appraisal of what the premillennial understanding of what the binding of Satan in a chain must entail in Revelation 20:1–3, as well as what he considers the sheer folly of such a concept as a spiritual being—such as Satan—could possibly be bound in the abyss.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen before, the Godhead is in charge of the abyss—not Satan. The perfect tense used for “has kept” [τετήρηκεν] depicts this strong judgment of God done to this particular set of demons as having occurred in the past and is still continuing to the present day, without any interruption of their confinement in God's prison of the abyss.<sup>27</sup>

So, from the biblical record concerning demons and the abyss, God reveals and defines the abyss thusly: (1) some demons are already in prison in the abyss and are currently being tormented by God (1 Pet. 3:19); (2) other demons who are not presently in the abyss are organized into a hierarchy, strong, powerful, and active and are part of the present spiritual warfare against the redeemed (Eph. 6:10–12); The demons who are already imprisoned in the abyss play no part in any capacity against the redeemed; (3) demons currently in the abyss are “cast into [temporary] hell” [tartarus] and God Himself “committed them to pits of darkness,” where they are reserved for judgment until their ultimate and final judgment that is repeatedly promised in Scripture; (4) demons currently in the abyss, “He [God/the Godhead] has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day”—and they are removed from and no longer have access to or are operative on earth. (5) Storms cites no biblical references that indicate or depict that the demons, who if currently confined in the abyss, can exist or function in the world, or that they are now working in the world in some weakened form than what they were previously able to do, after the crucifixion of Jesus. (6) As with humans in Hades, so it is true with the demons and the abyss: demons are either 100% in the abyss, or they are not in the abyss at all; no other options are available to them. (7) Finally, all the verses used to describe the abyss have God alone as master and sovereign over all who enter into or ever depart from the abyss—which is important—because not one singular verse cited depicts Satan as master of the abyss, and “the place from which he dispatches his demonic hordes.”<sup>28</sup>

One final thought on this section must be emphasized: it must be remembered that although God, through His sovereignty and allowance, has currently granted Satan enormous power (Jude 9), Satan, at his base essence is nonetheless still and only a demon, and is the leader of “his angels,” the remaining demons (Matt. 25:41)—but that is the complete limits of his power. So whatever is true about demons being imprisoned in the abyss must be true for Satan when he is imprisoned in the abyss in Revelation 20:1–3, and when this is done, the same characteristics and horrors of the abyss will be true for him as well—with no exception.

So, succinctly summarized from the verses of Scripture, here are the necessary biblical requirements and characteristics for the demons to be in abyss:

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<sup>26</sup> Contra Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 442–43.

<sup>27</sup> D. Edmund Hiebert, *Second Peter and Jude: An Expository Commentary* (Greenville, SC: Unusual Publications, 1989) 234–35.

<sup>28</sup> Contra Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 429, fn. 7.

- (1) Removed by God from “the playing field” of earth and instead are confined in prison (1 Pet. 3:19)
- (2) Currently under torment (Luke 8:28)
- (3) In a temporary hell [*tartarus*] (2 Pet. 2:4)
- (4) Committed to pits of darkness (2 Pet. 2:4)
- (5) Kept by God in eternal bonds under darkness from which they cannot escape (Jude 6)
- (6) God specifically keeping them in this abyss of torment for the judgment of the great day (Matt. 8:29; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6)
- (7) Also, nothing from these verses indicates anything about those demons who are cast into the abyss as merely having a reduction of their spiritual strength while still remaining on earth and committing the same sins that other demons do.

Storms’ understanding of what the abyss is, in *Kingdom Come*: (1) has none of the following verses in his Scripture index; (2) consequently, he does not have a true biblical definition of what the abyss consists of; (3) nothing in Scripture gives any evidence that the abyss belongs to Satan, that he is there now, or that he uses the abyss to send out his demonic hordes; (4) and without a proper understanding of what the abyss is, one cannot hope to have a proper biblical understanding of what Satan’s being bound in the abyss means (Rev. 20:1–3), or the correct interpretation of Satan’s later release from the abyss 1,000 years later (Rev. 20:7). Simply stated, Storms’ presentation of the meaning of what being imprisoned in the abyss entails absolutely does not align with the biblical definition and requirements as given by God in His Word.

### **When Did or When Will the Binding of Satan in the Abyss Occur?**

Multiple verses exist about the future judgment of Satan and his angels, and as we previously determined, we need to examine (1) whether the judgment occurred in the past at Jesus’ crucifixion and death—the most popular amillennial view—and thus has already occurred historically, or (2) whether the judgment will happen at the Second Coming of Jesus, since this is the dividing line of interpretation for Bible-believing scholars, and/or Christians, as we saw earlier in this article. Sadly, here is a novel idea for some: we should begin with what *the Bible* indicates about whether or not this prophesied judgment has already occurred, such as at the death of Jesus, or if this judgment still awaits a future fulfillment. Also, it must be answered: if one believes what the Bible reveals as the characteristics of Hades—which is the only way we would know anything about Hades, then it *must* be explained why others would not receive/believe/accept what this same Bible teaches regarding the abyss—of which the existence and characteristics are also revealed. Therefore, it must be explained why if one accepts what the Bible teaches regarding Hades, one does not also accept what the same Bible teaches about the abyss, including as a very essential part of this, the time of the occurrence of the promised imprisonment in the abyss.

Other than having a predetermined conclusion and hermeneutic already and repeatedly forced upon the text, the Bible is explicit about when the final judgment will

occur. Isaiah 24–27, the section often referred to as “The Apocalypse of Isaiah,” with multiple references to the earth and its judgment and the Lord’s return and reign, contains this biblical revelation from God by means of Isaiah 24:21–23:

So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth. And they will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit], and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished.

Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders.

As noted earlier, it must be remembered that Satan, although he is currently massively strong (Jude 9), is nonetheless in his base essence a fallen angel, and thus part of the “heavenly host” that is referred to four times in the Bible, with two times being referred to as the evil part of the heavenly host, namely Satan and his demons: In Deuteronomy 17:3, God rebuked the wilderness generation for their sins that they “have gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or *any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded . . .*” Centuries later, Jeremiah 19:13 reveals, as the Babylonian exile was at hand, part of the sins of the kings and the people: “And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah will be defiled like the place Topheth, because of all the houses on whose rooftops *they burned sacrifices to all the heavenly host* and poured out libations to other gods.”

The usage for the good heavenly host is seen in passages such as Nehemiah 9:6:

“You alone are the LORD. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You do give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You.

Luke 2:13 provides an incredibly worship-evoking and proper response to some of the shepherds of Bethlehem in announcing the birth of the Messiah: “And a suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying . . .”

So when God proclaims in Isaiah 24:21, “So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high,” this clearly refers to the evil part of the host on high or heavenly hosts, namely “the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). There never is any need for God to judge the holy part of the hosts of heaven because they never sin, while the wicked part of the heavenly host—who can function only within whatever boundaries that God allows—never stop sinning. Isaiah 24:21–23 is one of the God-given descriptions from the Bible as to when the day of judgment that the demons of Matthew 8/Luke 8/James 2 fear, and it connects with and will occur at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to earth—not as having occurred during His incarnation or after at His eternally important work accomplished by Jesus on the cross.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Contra Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 441.

In order for one's understanding of this future judgment to be biblically accurate, one's eschatology must include: (1) the initial defeat, imprisonment, and punishment of the wicked host of heaven on high and the kings of the earth on earth occurring at the same time; (2) these will be gathered together in a prison, (3) after many days they will be judged with a second, eternal judgment that begins with them being cast into hell, and (4) the Messiah must return in/with the glory of God. If your eschatological system does not contain these items, it does not match the biblical account:

An Old Testament backdrop for an intermediate kingdom is also found in Isaiah 24. The first twenty verses of Isaiah 24 describe global judgments on the earth for transgressing God's laws (Isa. 24:5). Then a two-stage judgment of God's enemies is mentioned in 24:21–23: “On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be confounded.” Both evil spiritual forces (“the host of heaven”) and evil human forces (“kings of the earth”) will be judged. There will also be an incarceration. They will be “gathered together as prisoners in a pit,” and “shut up in prison.” But then we are told, “After many days they will be punished.” The order of the events here is imprisonment for many days and the punishment. The “after many days” phrase coincides well with the concept of an intermediate kingdom of a thousand years in Revelation 20, which says that Satan will be bound in the Abyss for a thousand years, then released for a short time, and finally sentenced to the lake of fire (Rev. 20:1–3, 7).<sup>30</sup>

One other very important point is that Isaiah 24:21–22 reveals, “So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth. And they will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit], and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished.” At this unique judgment of those aligned against Jesus at His return, Scripture verses given later reveal that the kings of the earth and those human beings with them by this time already (1) having worshiped Satan and the Antichrist (Rev. 13:4), (2) having received “the 666 mark of the beast” (Rev. 13:16–18; 14:9–11), (3) having thoroughly rejected the love of the truth offered to them that would have led to their salvation (2 Thess. 2:10), and (4) some having played various parts in the deaths of the martyrs of Revelation 6:9–11. It seems from the Isaiah 24 passage, instead of departing to the normal abode of the dead human spirits, namely Hades, the kings of the earth and their human followers will all be slain, and then they all will be gathered together with the entire fallen host of heaven for additional punishment in the abyss. If one argued that this is not the method that God uses in the Bible, God can do as He pleases; it should be remembered that God can put His defeated enemies wherever He wants them and whenever He wants to put them there. Also, to be considered are Jesus' statements of the uniqueness of the Tribulation, as seen Matthew 24:21–22:

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<sup>30</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 890.

“for then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall. And unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be cut short.” Further, in a section of Scripture where Jesus first tells of His death (Matt. 16:21), He concludes this same chapter with His promised return, in harmony with the glory of God from the Isaiah 24:23, as revealed in Matthew 16:27: “For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and WILL THEN RECOMPENSE EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.”

None of these doctrinal truths taken from Scripture about what the abyss entails apply to Satan at the present time, nor were they received—nor prophesied to occur—at the death of Jesus, because not even one of these events occurred at that time, as revealed in Isaiah 24:21–23:

- (1) In that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth, imprisoning them in great torment
- (2) They will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit]
- (3) They will be confined in prison
- (4) After many days they will be punished
- (5) Then the moon will be abashed and the sun ashamed, for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and His glory will be before His elders.

Further, in harmony with previous references, all of the following items will apply specifically to Jesus at His Second Coming to earth, as disclosed in Matthew 24:29–31:

But immediately after the tribulation of those days THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken, and then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

In Matthew 24:29 “and the powers of the heavens will be shaken” cannot be referring to the sun, moon, or stars, because they are already mentioned in this text; rather these powers of the heavens are those designated in Isaiah 24:21, which is another reference to the evil part of the heavenly host who will receive their temporary confinement at the return of Jesus—per Isaiah 24:21–22: “So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth. And they will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit], and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished.” The “many days” of Isaiah 24:22 is not found in the Matthew 24:29–31 passage, but Scripture does not need to be repeated each time to make it true; God’s declaration in Isaiah 24:22 is totally sufficient. But we must remember also, God’s revelatory eschatology has an initial time of imprisonment of the kings of the earth and their followers on earth

imprisoned together with the fallen and now conquered heavenly host—which will include Satan as one of the detainees, before their final and ultimate judgment before Jesus, “after many days.”

### **Two of the Different Accounts of the Actual Triumphal Entry and Their Significance**

Zechariah 14:1–9 and Revelation 19:11–20:3 are two of other Scripture accounts that describe the true Triumphal Entry of Jesus. Zechariah 14:1–8 prophesies and reveals:

Behold, a day is coming for the LORD when the spoil taken from you will be divided among you. For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished, and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city. Then the LORD will go forth and fight against those nations, as when He fights on a day of battle. And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which is in front of Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west by a very large valley, so that half of the mountain will move toward the north and the other half toward the south. And you will flee by the valley of My mountains, for the valley of the mountains will reach to Azel; yes, you will flee just as you fled before the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah.

Then the LORD, my God, will come, and all the holy ones with Him! And it will come about in that day that there will be no light; the luminaries will dwindle. For it will be a unique day which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but it will come about that at evening time there will be light. [Harmonizes with Isa. 24:23; Matt. 25:29] And it will come about in that day that living waters will flow out of Jerusalem, half of them toward the eastern sea and the other half toward the western sea; it will be in summer as well as in winter.

When the Lord Messiah Jesus returns to earth with the glory of God, Zechariah 14:9 contains this very crucial explanatory doctrine: “And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one.” Not one of the enemies of God—neither human nor demonic—will ever be ruling at that time because Jesus Himself, at the time of His promised return, will have defeated and imprisoned all His enemies, as we have seen already in Isaiah 24:21–23 and shall see in other accounts. Thus, any of the titles that Satan currently has will be eternally removed from him as “in that day” begins with his initial judgment and confinement in the torment of the abyss for many days, and then, eventually, with his being thrown into hell forever. So “in that day” will eventually/ultimately continue into eternity. Yet the Bible repeatedly indicates that Satan *currently* holds titles and capacities that were attributed to him *after* the death of Jesus but *before* His Second Coming to earth, because once Jesus returns to earth to reign, Satan’s titles and capabilities will be permanently removed, and *never* can Satan retrieve even one of them, and this is one

of the strongest biblical supports for Satan currently *not* being imprisoned in the abyss.

The disclosure of the real Triumphant Entry in Revelation 19:11–20:3 can be rightly connected with what God reveals in this passage, with first the unveiling of Christ Jesus with the attributes of God, beginning in Revelation 19:11–16:

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes are a flame of fire, and upon His head are many diadems; and He has a name written upon Him which no one knows except Himself. And He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies which are in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, were following Him on white horses. And from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may smite the nations; and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

Revelation 19:17–21 continues the account:

And I saw an angel standing in the sun; and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God; in order that you may eat the flesh of kings and the flesh of commanders and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them and the flesh of all men, both free men and slaves, and small and great."

And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies, assembled to make war against Him who sat upon the horse, and against His army. And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone. And the rest were killed with the sword which came from the mouth of Him who sat upon the horse, and all the birds were filled with their flesh.

Although God purposely chose not to include every event, we know from Isaiah 24:21–22 that when kings of the earth are being defeated by Jesus, so too occurs the defeat of the totality of the evil part of the host of heaven that will transpire at Jesus' return in Isaiah 24:21–22:

So it will happen in that day, that the LORD will punish the host of heaven, on high, and the kings of the earth, on earth. And they will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit], and will be confined in prison; and after many days they will be punished.

Then, in keeping with Satan being head of the evil part of the host of heaven,

he too is included in this prophesied judgment or Isaiah 24:22; Satan also “will be gathered together like prisoners in the dungeon [pit] and will be confined in prison”—including Satan—as Revelation 20:1–3 reveals *and* requires:

And I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.

The biblical story is far from over at this point, but in keeping with all the other verses we have seen regarding the return of the Lord, when Jesus reigns, as seen earlier in Zechariah 14:9, He will be the only One and His name the only one. Consequently, this would mean that, among other things: (1) Satan will no longer ever again hold the title “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4); that age will have ended, when Jesus begins His reign on earth during the Millennial Kingdom. (2) First John 5:19 clearly sets forth this for the present time, under the authoritative sovereignty of God: “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one”—but never again will even the tiniest part of the world be under the power of the evil once Jesus reigns. (3) Add to this 1 John 4:4: “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world”—not greater than he who is already in the abyss. As was true for the demons of Luke 8, so it is true for Satan, as a member of the evil part of the heavenly host, that Satan cannot be in two places at once: if Satan is in the world, he is not in the abyss; if Satan is in the abyss, he is not in the world. (4) When Jesus returns, Satan will no longer be considered “your adversary, the devil,” who “prowls about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8)—which the Godhead presently permits him to do—again under God’s protective sovereignty (see Job 1–2). First Peter 5:9 denotes the playing field of such a spiritual battle for believers: “But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world”—but never again will resisting him be necessary once Satan is imprisoned in the abyss. (5) Remembering the summary promise of Zechariah 14:9, at the true Triumphant Entry: “And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one,” yet before this, for the present time, Ephesians 2:2 describes Satan as “the prince of the power of the air,” a depiction true of Satan now, but one that cannot be true when Jesus reigns, because if this verse still were to be true for Satan *after* Jesus returns to earth, Jesus would not be truly the only king over all the earth, and His name the only one. One should not confuse that Jesus’ reigning alone means that He will not fulfill the promises to the redeemed by apportioning the rewards to reign with Him (e.g., Rev. 2:26–27; 3:21), which He will fulfill into eternity. So if even *only one evil prince* were allowed to do his demonic work after Jesus’ return to earth, contrary to the commands of Jesus, then the doctrine of Zechariah 14:9 would be nullified. Satan’s hierarchy of the demonic assemblage whereby he presently operates some of his “schemes of the devil,” as we saw earlier in Ephesians



6:10–12, *cannot* function as they did before/do now because “in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one.” Currently there exists another prince with his demonic hoards that he uses, but he will never again be “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2), once he is imprisoned in the abyss.

One final connective truth with this, from what Jesus revealed in Mark 4:13–15:

And He said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? And how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones who are beside the road where the word is sown; and when they hear, immediately Satan comes and takes away the word which has been sown in them.

This parable reveals that whenever the Word of God is sown, Satan—at the present time—immediately comes and attempts to take away the Word which has been sown—but this will not be true for him once he will be imprisoned in the abyss. In fact, one of the main reasons that Satan will be in the abyss—as it relates to earth—is that he will no longer deceive the nations as long as he is in the abyss, nor will he have the capacity to take away the word which has been sown in them (Rev. 20:3, 7–8). Neither will Satan—when imprisoned in the abyss—be allowed to “blind the minds of the unbelieving” (2 Cor. 4:3–4). Clearly these present truths about Satan and the titles attributed to him are applicable only under God’s sovereignty, and as the Bible reveals, these titles and capabilities certainly occur even *after* the death and ascension of Jesus, but *before* His return in the glory of the Father (Matt. 16:27), after which God renders Satan’s power inactive. At the return of the Lord Jesus, for truly at that time and into eternity: “And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one (Zech. 14:9).

Further emphasis should be placed on exactly where Satan will be when the Lord Jesus Christ returns and what that means as far as restricting him:

The location of the devil’s imprisonment makes it especially clear that the confinement of Revelation 20:1–3 will prevent any satanic activity and influence on earth during the thousand years. The “abyss” (ἄβυσσος) is a prison for evil spirits (Rev. 20:7), and the New Testament indicates that when evil spirits are confined in this prison, they are prevented from participating in their normal demonic activities on earth (Luke 8:31; Rev. 9:1–3). For this reason, Satan can either be locked away in the abyss or he can be engaging in the various activities ascribed to him in the present age, but he cannot be both. The description of Satan’s imprisonment in Revelation 20 is incompatible with the New Testament’s portrayal of his influence during the church age, and therefore the binding of Satan cannot be understood as a present reality.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come*, 178. As Townsend summarizes: “During the millennium (Rev. 20) Satan will be completely cut off from the earth but during the present age he is vigorously active on the earth. Therefore the millennium cannot be the present age” (Jeffrey L. Townsend, “Is the Present Age the Millennium?,” *BSac* 140, no. 559 [July 1983]: 216).

Thus, this same will also be true for Satan when he is imprisoned in the abyss for one thousand years:

The primary reason that Satan’s imprisonment cannot be considered a present reality is because Revelation 20:1–3 is incompatible with the New Testament’s portrayal of his influence during the present age. According to this passage, Satan will be cut off from all earthly activity during the thousand-year reign of Christ. The imagery of Satan being bound with a great chain and cast into the abyss—which is then shut and sealed over him—provides a vivid picture of the total removal of his influence on earth. In fact, if a vision were intended to teach that Satan is rendered completely inactive during the thousand years, it is difficult to imagine how this could have been portrayed more clearly.<sup>32</sup>

Vlach adds:

Much attention often is given to whether the activities of Satan are curtailed or ceased, but before one even considers the activities of Satan, one must recognize what is happening to Satan himself, as a personal being. Satan himself is incarcerated and confined in a real place, a place called “the abyss.” *Our point here is that not just a specific function of Satan (i.e. deceiving the nations) is hindered; Satan himself is absolutely confined to a place that results in a complete cessation of all that he does.*<sup>33</sup>

When Satan is imprisoned in the abyss, for the first time since Genesis 3, the whole world will no longer “lie in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Further, during Satan’s one-thousand-year imprisonment, no longer will Satan have the power—nor the access—to blind the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the Gospel of the Glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4)—who will be reigning on earth during that time. As Waymeyer summarizes:

In contrast, the New Testament makes it abundantly clear that Satan . . . is extremely active on earth during the present age . . . It is impossible to reconcile this portrayal of Satan’s activities in the present age with the view that he is currently sealed in the abyss.<sup>34</sup>

One final connective thought with what we have already seen: First Peter 3:19, as we saw earlier, is one of the places in the Bible that refers to the abyss as a prison: “in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in *prison*.” God does so again, as Revelation 20:3 shows: “and threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he should not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time.” Revelation 20:7 tells of Satan’s release from the abyss, only this time describes

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<sup>32</sup> Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come*, 177.

<sup>33</sup> Vlach, “The Kingdom of God and the Millennium,” 246 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>34</sup> Waymeyer, *Amillennialism and the Age to Come*, 178.

it by using the exact word that God's Word did in the 1 Peter 3:19 passage, but by not calling the place where Satan will be bound the abyss: "And when the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his *prison*." As before, so is true again: what is true for the abyss for the other demons when they are thrown into the prison of the abyss is true for Satan and the abyss, which will indeed be his prison for 1,000 years. The only way a demon can enter into or depart out of the prison of God's abyss—including Satan—is if the Godhead has a reason to let them out. Other than that, they do not go into the abyss by themselves, and they most certainly do not leave it by their strength or initiative.

New Testament Premillennial, Biblical, Doctrinal Truth #5: Satan must be released for a short while after the thousand-year Millennial Kingdom (Rev 20:7–10), in order for the Trinity to minutely fulfill Their faithfulness for all Their covenant promises and any other remaining promises and prophecies in Scripture, before the arrival of the new heavens and earth—and New Jerusalem.

Though time did not permit further examination of the subject, both in the Faculty Lecture Series on "Premillennialism," nor in this journal article, this fifth New Testament premillennial biblical truth is also an incredibly important biblical doctrine. The journal article cited deals with its biblical explanation and significance in much more detail and should be investigated for those who desire to follow this important biblical trail.<sup>35</sup>

### Summary and Significance

Although many people base their millennial views exclusively on or beginning with Revelation 20, we began elsewhere and limited ourselves to five essential premillennial truths from the New Testament. First, the real Triumphal Entry has not yet occurred (Matt. 21:1–11), because very specific promises and prophecies from the Davidic and Abrahamic Covenants—that must come true—await their fulfillment at Jesus' return. In Matthew 25:1–5, Jesus fulfilled with precision Zechariah 9:9, and was presented to Israel as her King. Yet Jesus did not fulfill in any way the next part—Zechariah 9:10—which contains two Davidic Covenant components, as well as establishes the Euphrates River as the northern boundary of the Abrahamic land promises. These Scriptures *must* be fulfilled at Jesus' next entry into Jerusalem and during His reign on earth.

Second, Christ Jesus did not accept the praise of the collective Jewish people at what most people call "the Triumphal Entry" (Matt. 21:1–11), but He vows to accept these exact praises—and many more—at some undisclosed time in the future from the descendants of these same Jewish people (Matt. 23:37–39), thus making Jesus' next entry into Jerusalem His real Triumphal Entry at the beginning of His Millennial Kingdom reign. In Matthew 21:8–11 the crowd shouted/sang Psalm 118:25–26 to Jesus, but He did not accept it from them at that time. We know this because later, at some of the last (if not the last) words of Jesus to the Jewish people before the events

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<sup>35</sup> Gregory H. Harris, "Must Satan Be Released? Indeed He Must Be: Toward a Biblical Understanding of Revelation 20:3," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 25/1 (Spring 2014) 11–27.

of the crucifixion were to begin, in Matthew 23:37–39, Jesus told the collective Jewish people (1) that their house was being left to them desolate—but not desolate forever, (2) that the collective Jewish people would not see Him again *until* they said, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD,” using the same Psalm 118:26 that the masses had previously used a few days earlier, and (3) that the requirement was mandatory that a remnant of those Jewish people’s descendants must be maintained by God so that some subset of the Jewish people will fulfill the messianic Psalm 118:26 prophecy in reference to Jesus at His return. After all, paraphrasing Ezekiel 20:33: “As I live, I shall be King over you”—not just their Savior.

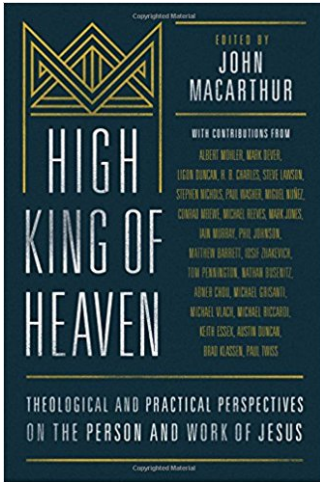
Third, Scripture repeatedly presents a God who will maintain and save a remnant of the Jewish people, beginning in the Tribulation and leading into the Millennial reign of Jesus. We were not able to cover this truth in detail, but a source was given for following the biblical trail that gives much biblical support for this premillennial doctrine. But even if we had only Matthew 21:1–11 and 23:37–39, these verses alone would *require* God to maintain the Jewish people, so that He can save a remnant of them at some undisclosed time in the future, who will indeed say to Him in praise and prophetic fulfillment: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD” (Ps. 118:26)—and Jesus will this time receive such praise due to Him, from these saved Jewish people.

Fourth: Satan is not currently bound in the abyss but will be bound there when Jesus Christ returns to earth to reign in the thousand-year Millennial Kingdom (Rev. 20:1–3), at whose conclusion Satan “must be released from the abyss for a short while.” This no small matter as to whether or not Satan is presently bound in the abyss or if that event awaits the return of Jesus. Biblical passages give a very descriptive list of the characteristics of the abyss and its inhabitants, such as Luke 8:28, Matthew 8:29; 1 Peter 3:19–20; 2 Peter 2:4, and Jude 6, and none of these verses show Satan sending forth demons or using the abyss for his own purposes (contra Storms, *Kingdom Come*), and these verses always present the abyss as a real and actual place of torment for demons over which God alone is the master. Not only is Satan not presently in the abyss, but the Bible definitively presents him with many current titles/attributes/activities that will no longer apply to him once Christ Jesus reigns on earth. Other than Satan’s existence once he is confined in the abyss for a thousand years, *all* of the other titles/attributes/activities will be stripped from him—never to be returned, except for one completely limited exception, where Satan is allowed to function only to a degree as he has functioned before, in his temporary release from the abyss and his final rebellion, before being cast into eternal hell (Rev. 20:7–10).

In Revelation 20:1–3 (or elsewhere) Satan, although immensely powerful at this present time (Jude 6), is never referred to as the “king of the Abyss.” As was true for hell and Hades, the abyss is for God’s use alone—and never for Satan’s. When Satan is captured as part of “the host on high” and thrown into the abyss in Revelation 20, he will be imprisoned in torment, at the very least, and he will suffer worse torment than other demons because of the unparalleled magnitude of his own sin; no one in all eternity has ever sinned against more light than Satan has. We also marked that Satan—in his basest form—is nonetheless only a demon. So when Satan and the remainder of the other demons, who comprise the evil part of the heavenly host, will

be cast into the torment of the abyss, they will remain there until after many days, when they will be judged (Isa. 24:21–22). This initial confinement and torment will not be their final judgment nor their final destination; eventually all the demons who are in the abyss will be thrown into hell/the lake of fire, as disclosed in Revelation 20.

Fifth, while not able to develop this part in this article, Satan must be released for a short while after the thousand-year millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:7–10) in order for the Trinity to minutely fulfill their utter faithfulness for all of their covenant promises and any other remaining promises and prophecies in Scripture, thus summing up all things in Christ, which the Godhead has been doing so faithfully from Genesis 1 onward into the ushering in of the eternal state in Revelation 21–22.



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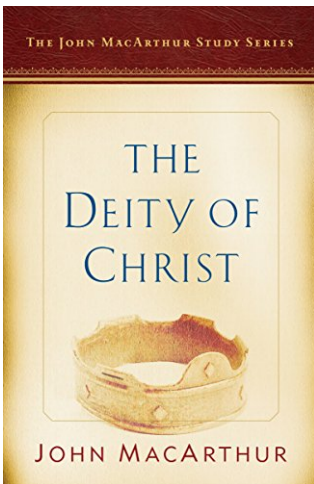
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## **PREMILLENNIALISM AND THE KINGDOM: A RATIONALE FOR A FUTURE EARTHLY KINGDOM**

Michael J. Vlach  
Professor of Theology  
The Master's Seminary

*Premillennialism is a biblical doctrine based on Old Testament passages and the Book of Revelation. But are there reasons why premillennialism is true? The following explains that there is a rationale for premillennialism and reasons why premillennialism must be true. This is rooted in Jesus, the last and better Adam, who fulfills God's kingdom mandate for mankind.*

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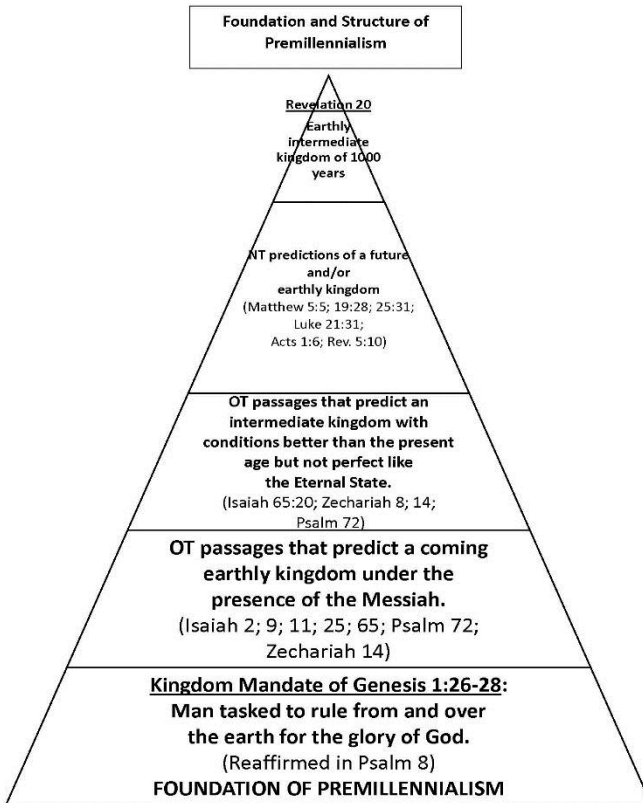
Many are aware of the debates concerning which view of the millennium is taught in the Bible. Both amillennialism and postmillennialism assert that the millennial kingdom of Jesus the Messiah is occurring spiritually in this present age before the return of Jesus. Premillennialism, on the other hand, argues that Jesus' millennial kingdom is a future earthly kingdom from our current standpoint in history. The goal of this article is to offer a rationale for premillennialism and explain not just that premillennialism is true, but that premillennialism must be true. Thus, this paper goes beyond explaining the "what" of premillennialism to offering an explanation concerning "why" premillennialism is the biblical position. It does so mainly by looking at biblical evidence beyond Revelation 20, where most discussions of premillennialism are usually focused.

Contrary to what some critics have claimed, premillennialism is not a one-text doctrine. The case for premillennialism is not solely reliant on Revelation 20. Premillennialism has deep roots in the Old Testament and New Testament texts outside of Revelation 20. Overall, the case for premillennialism involves:

1. The kingdom mandate of Genesis 1:26–28.
2. Old Testament passages that predict a coming earthly kingdom under the presence of the Messiah.
3. Old Testament passages that predict an intermediate kingdom with conditions better than the present age but not perfect like the Eternal State.

4. New Testament predictions of a future earthly kingdom.
5. An earthly, intermediate kingdom of a thousand years found in Revelation 20:1–6.

The following chart shows these connections:



### **Kingdom Mandate of Genesis 1:26–28**

The roots of an earthly kingdom begin in Genesis 1. This passage reveals the importance of man’s mediatorial rule over the earth. God created a beautiful and wonderful world in six days. With Genesis 1:26–28, God made man in His image and gave him an earthly kingdom task:

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over



the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:26–28; emphases added).

This reveals a strong connection between man and earth. God made man in His image and instructed him to rule over the earth and its creatures. This connection is further explained in the detailed account of man’s creation in Genesis 2 where God formed man from the dust of the ground (see Gen. 2:7). The Hebrew word for “man” is *adam* and the term for “ground” is *adamah*. The close connection between *adam* and *adamah* emphasizes the relationship between man and the ground he is to rule over.

God told man to “rule” over the creation. The Hebrew term for “rule,” which is used twice in Genesis 1:26–28, is *rādāh* and means “have dominion,” “rule,” or “dominate.”<sup>1</sup> The term is used later of the Messiah’s future reign in Psalm 110:2: “The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, *saying*, “Rule [*rādāh*] in the midst of Your enemies.”

The word for “subdue” is the Hebrew term *kābaš*, which means “dominate” or “bring into bondage.”<sup>2</sup> The term “especially speaks of the work of a king (e.g., 2 Sam. 8:11).”<sup>3</sup> Both verbs “rule” and “subdue” are linked to dominion and show, as Merrill observes, that “man is created to reign in a manner that demonstrates his lordship, his domination (by force if necessary) over all creation.”<sup>4</sup> This is evident with man’s naming of the animals, which was a demonstration of dominion (see Gen. 2:19–20). Thus, there is a royal and kingly aspect to the language of Genesis 1:26–28.

The *realm* of this kingdom rule for man is the earth, not heaven. As Psalm 115:16 declares, “The heavens are the LORD’s, but the earth He has given to the human race.” So the kingdom is an earthly kingdom, with Adam established as its king. God did not create Adam and mankind to rule heaven or to rule earth from heaven. Man is to rule *from* and *over* the earth with “an earthly vocation.”<sup>5</sup> In addition to his relationship with God, Adam possessed physical and social/political authority. This

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<sup>1</sup> See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 921.

<sup>2</sup> The term is used for subduing the land of Canaan so it could provide for the people of Israel. See Num 32:22, 29 and Josh 18:1.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 196.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 15.

<sup>5</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 39.

was to manifest itself in every area—agriculture, architecture, domestication of animals, harnessing of energy and natural resources, and other areas.<sup>6</sup> As Middleton notes, “the human creature is made to worship God in a distinctive way: by interacting with the earth, using our God-given power to transform our earthly environment into a complex world (a sociocultural world) that glorifies our creator.”<sup>7</sup>

Psalm 8, which functions like a restatement or commentary on Genesis 1:26–28, also reveals man’s relationship to the creation:

What is man that You take thought of him,  
 And the son of man that You care for him?  
 Yet You have made him a little lower than God,  
 And You crown him with glory and majesty!  
 You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;  
 You have put all things under his feet,  
 All sheep and oxen,  
 And also the beasts of the field,  
 The birds of the heavens and the fish of the sea,  
 Whatever passes through the paths of the seas (Ps. 8:4–8).

The connection with Genesis 1:26–28 in Psalm 8:4–8 is clear.<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 1 Adam was created in God’s image so that he could serve God by ruling and subduing the creation on God’s behalf for God’s glory. Psalm 8 shows that man still possesses the right to rule the creation. David writes thousands of years later in a fallen world still under the devastating effects of the curse. Yet a marred world has not removed man’s right to rule. It is not the case that with the Fall God changes his plans and makes man’s ultimate destiny heaven as opposed to earth.

The truths of Psalm 8:6 concerning all things being placed under man’s feet will be picked up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:25–28 and Ephesians 1:22 and with the writer of Hebrews in Hebrews 2:5–8. With Ephesians 1:22 Jesus’ resurrection and ascension are the reasons for God’s putting “all things in subjection under His feet.” So the authority to rule the earth is granted to Jesus by the Father and will be exercised by Jesus when He comes again (see Ps. 110:1–2).<sup>9</sup>

With 1 Corinthians 15:25–27 Paul quotes Psalm 8:6 regarding Jesus’ coming earthly reign. The writer of Hebrews also quotes Psalm 8:6 to reaffirm that man still

<sup>6</sup> See Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 325. Grudem says, “God expected Adam and Eve and their descendants to explore and develop the earth’s resources in such a way that they would bring benefit to themselves and other human beings.”

<sup>7</sup> Middleton, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 8 could be viewed as a commentary on Genesis 1:26–28. “. . . vv. 5–8 parallel the Gen. 1 story of God’s making men and women godlike and giving them power over the rest of the animate world.” John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1: Psalms 1–41*, in Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 159.

<sup>9</sup> This could be similar to the parable of the nobleman in Luke 19:11–27 where Jesus likened Himself to a nobleman who needed to travel to a distant country to receive the rights to a kingdom and then return. Once the rights are given he then returns to rule, rewarding his servants and destroying his enemies.

has the right to rule the earth although all things are not subjected to man in this age (Heb. 2:5–8). These passages indicate that the fulfillment of Psalm 8, which is drawing upon Genesis 1:26–28, will occur in a world to come in connection with the ultimate Man, Jesus, the Last Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:24–28; 45).

So how do these passages relate to Genesis 1? Genesis 1 teaches that man was created to rule from and over the earth on God's behalf. Although he is fallen and unable to accomplish this task on his own, ruling the earth is still man's destiny, as Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2:5–8 reveal. So man's kingly right is earthly since he is a creature placed on earth to rule from and over the earth. The millennial kingdom will highlight the successful reign of the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) in the realm where the first Adam failed. When Jesus comes again He will share this reign with those who identify with Him (see Rev. 2:26–27; 3:21; 20:4). While Jesus is the ultimate King (Rev. 11:15), His followers are also a "kingdom" and "they will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10).

In this way, the mediatorial reign of man on earth is fulfilled. Adam failed but success will occur with the ultimate Man, Jesus, who will not only successfully reign, He will share His reign with His people. This is corporate representation at its best. As Jesus succeeds, His people will succeed. This kingdom reign then transitions into the Eternal State. There, both the Father and Jesus are on the throne in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:3), and the saints reign forever over the New Earth (Rev. 22:5). A successful mediatorial reign leads to an eternal reign in the eternal kingdom. As shown below:

### **Mediatorial Kingdom Connections**

#### **Genesis 1:26–28 (unfallen creation)**

Man tasked to rule  
from and over the earth



#### **Psalm 8 (fallen world) (explains Genesis 1:26–28)**

Even in a fallen world, man still  
possesses right to rule over the earth



#### **Hebrews 2:5–8 (fallen world) (quotes Psalm 8:6)**

Man still possesses the right  
to rule the earth but this is not  
occurring in this age



#### **Ephesians 1:22 (Heaven) (quotes Psalm 8:6)**

With ascension Jesus possesses  
right to rule the earth



**1 Corinthians 15:26 (Millennial Kingdom)**

**(quotes Psalm 8:6)**

Jesus as ultimate Man (“Last Adam”) will fulfill man’s mandate to rule the earth after His return



**Revelation 2:26–27; 3:21; 5:10 (Millennial Kingdom)**

Jesus will share His rule over the earth with those who identify with Him in the millennial kingdom



**Revelation 22:3, 5 (Eternal State)**

God and Jesus are on the throne and the saints reign forever in the Eternal State

**Predictions of a Future Earthly Kingdom in the Old Testament Prophets**

The demise of Israel’s kingdom in history did not mean an end to God’s plans to establish an earthly kingdom. While the monarchy deteriorated and then ended in Israel, the prophets arose with a message of a coming, glorious earthly kingdom under the Messiah. With Isaiah 2:2–4 the prophet Isaiah predicted a coming kingdom with Jerusalem as the capital city and nations streaming to this city to know the ways of God. The Lord will judge between the nations and make righteous decisions on behalf of them. This is a time of international harmony as weapons for warfare are no longer needed. Such conditions of an earthly kingdom with international harmony have never occurred in history yet, but they await the coming kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. Isaiah 9:6–7 revealed that a “child” and “son” (Jesus) will be born and “the government shall be upon his shoulder” and of His kingdom “there will be no end.”

Isaiah 11 foretold of a time when a righteous descendant of Jesse (i.e. Jesus) (Isa. 11:1) will “decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth” (11:4). Isaiah 65:17–25 predicts a future time when houses will be built and agriculture will blossom, and those who labor well will reap the benefits of their hard work. The animal kingdom will exist in harmony. With Psalm 2, David told of a coming day when God will establish His King upon Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where He will rule the nations in the realm where they once rebelled against God. Psalm 72 predicts a time when a righteous Davidic King will “rule from sea to sea . . . from the River to the ends of the earth” (Ps. 72:8). “All nations will serve him” (72:11). This King will “deliver the needy” and the “afflicted” (72:12). He will also “have compassion on the poor and the needy” (72:13). During this time there will be “abundance of grain in the earth on top of the mountains” (72:16). These depictions cannot be spiritualized or allegorized to purely spiritual blessings, nor can these be fulfilled with the church. These anticipate conditions in a coming earthly kingdom. Psalm 110 is an explicitly messianic text which describes the coming earthly reign of David’s Lord, the Messiah, from Jerusalem after a session at the Father’s right hand in heaven.

Daniel 2 declares that a divine “stone” from heaven will dramatically shatter the Gentile kingdoms of the world and grow to fill the whole earth, which means an earthly kingdom (Dan. 2:31–45). Zechariah 14 also tells of a time when the Lord will return to the Mount of Olives and be King over all the earth, including its nations.

These passages reveal a coming earthly kingdom of God under the Messiah. No indication exists that these promises of an earthly kingdom won't be literally fulfilled, or that these promises will eventually give way to spiritual realities. Nor is there any indication that these passages should be spiritualized to this present age with the church.

### **Intermediate Kingdom Conditions Predicted in the Old Testament**

Revelation 19:11–21:8 tells of an intermediate era between the present age and the Eternal State. But in addition to Revelation 20, *several Old Testament passages predict an era on this earth that is far better than the current age we live in but not yet as perfect as the coming Eternal State*. Thus, there is a necessity of an intermediate kingdom after the second coming of Jesus but before the Eternal State. As Wayne Grudem puts it:

Several Old Testament passages seem to fit neither in the present age nor in the Eternal State. These passages indicate some future stage in the history of redemption which is far greater than the present church age but which still does not see the removal of all sin and rebellion and death from the earth.<sup>10</sup>

#### Isaiah 65:20

One passage that points to an intermediate period is Isaiah 65:20. In discussing new earth conditions (65:17) this verse states:

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

When this prophecy is fulfilled people will live so long that if they die at age 100 something must be wrong since people will live much longer than that. In fact, it will be assumed that a person dying at age 100 must be “accursed.” So notice two important things here with Isaiah 65:20—an increased longevity of life and the presence of sin which brings curses and death.

Now we must ask the question, “When in history have these conditions described in Isaiah 65:20 occurred? Can it be during our present age?” The answer is clearly, no. We live in a day where people live between 70–80 years on average (see Ps. 90:10). If a person dies today at age 100 we say he or she lived an exceptionally

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<sup>10</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1127.

long life, not a short one. So, will Isaiah 65:20 be fulfilled in the coming Eternal State? The answer again must be, no. In the Eternal State there is no longer any sin, death, or curse (Rev. 21:4; 22:3), so no one will die. Therefore, Isaiah 65:20 must be fulfilled in an era that is different from our current period yet distinct from the Eternal State. This means there must be an intermediate kingdom, or what we call a millennium. Compare the three eras:

Present Age: Life spans of 70–80 years

Millennial Kingdom: Life spans well beyond 70–80 years but death still occurs.

Eternal State: People live forever with no presence of sin, death, or curse.

This idea that Isaiah 65 is a reference to a future millennium is not recent. Christians of the second century viewed this passage as support for premillennialism. Martin Erdmann points out that Isaiah 65:20–25 formed “the scriptural basis, besides Revelation 20:1–10, on which Asiatic millennialism built its chiliastic doctrine.”<sup>11</sup> This was also true for Justin Martyr. In reference to Isaiah 65 Justin said, “For Isaiah spoke thus concerning this period of a thousand years.”<sup>12</sup> Erdmann points out that Justin’s reference to Old Testament prophets “indicates his reliance on the Old Testament as the primary source of his chiliasm. He did not shy away from utilizing different passages from the Hebrew Bible to strengthen his argument in favor of a literal millennium.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* was a premillennialist, and according to Erdmann, “his chiliastic views are partially based on verses from the Old Testament.”<sup>14</sup>

## Zechariah 8

Zechariah 8 offers some descriptions of God’s coming kingdom when Jesus returns. The chapter begins with God restoring Jerusalem. With “great wrath” and “jealousy” (8:2) the Lord returns to Zion and dwells in Jerusalem (8:3). The great city will have another name—“City of Truth” (8:3). This capital city of God’s kingdom will be characterized by sweet peace and fellowship, as the Lord himself says:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Old men and old women will again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each man with his staff in his hand because of age. And the streets of the city will be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets” (Zech. 8:4–5).

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Erdmann, *The Millennial Controversy in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 118.

<sup>12</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 80, 1:239.

<sup>13</sup> Erdmann, 138.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

When the Lord comes and reigns from Jerusalem, the elderly and young people will be talking and playing in the streets. It appears that age and age discrepancies still exist when the Lord's kingdom is established. Old men and women at this time will need the aid of a staff "because of age." They possess some weakness because of advanced years. This suggests the concept of an intermediate kingdom (or millennium), an era that is different from the present evil age but different also from the Eternal State in which all negative aspects of aging and death are removed. From Zechariah's time until now there has never been a time where the conditions of Zechariah 8 have happened. On the other hand, there will be no elderly who are weak in the final Eternal State, for all remnants of the curse have been removed (see Revelation 21 and 22). What Zechariah describes must take place in an initial phase of God's kingdom before the Eternal State begins. Such an intermediate state between the present age and the Eternal State is described in Revelation 20 where a thousand-year reign of Christ is emphasized.

#### Zechariah 14

Zechariah 14 also supports premillennialism. It describes kingdom conditions after the return of Jesus to earth. After a siege of Jerusalem verse 9 states that the "LORD will be King over all the earth" after His feet stand on the Mount of Olives (v. 4), but there will still be occasional disobedience and rebellion on the part of some nations. It is predicted that Egypt and other nations will be punished with drought when they do not obey the Lord as they should:

Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths. And it will be that whichever of the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, there will be no rain on them. If the family of Egypt does not go up or enter, then no rain will fall on them; it will be the plague with which the LORD smites the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Booths. This will be the punishment of Egypt, and the punishment of all the nations who do not go up to celebrate the Feast of Booths (Zech. 14:16–19).

Grudem states the issue well when he points out that the sin and punishment of the nations after Jesus returns does not fit the present age or the Eternal State:

Here again the description does not fit the present age, for the Lord is King over all the earth in this situation. But it does not fit the Eternal State either, because of the disobedience and rebellion against the Lord that is clearly present.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the events of Zechariah 14 best fit with a premillennial understanding of the kingdom. While people from all nations are being saved in the present age, the nations themselves do not obey our Lord (see Psalm 2). In fact, they persecute those

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<sup>15</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1129.

who belong to God. In the millennial kingdom Jesus will rule the nations while He is physically present on earth. The nations will obey and submit to His rule, but as Zechariah 14 points out, whenever a nation does not act as they should there is punishment. On the other hand, in the Eternal State there will be absolutely no disobedience from the nations. The picture of the nations in the Eternal State is only positive. The kings of the nations bring their contributions to the New Jerusalem (see Rev. 21:24) and the leaves of the tree of life are said to be for the healing of the nations (see Rev. 22:2). To compare:

Present Age: Jesus is in heaven and the nations do not yet submit to Jesus as King.

Millennial Kingdom: Jesus rules the nations on earth and punishes those nations that do not act as they should.

Eternal State: The nations act exactly as they should with no need of punishment.

The idea of an earthly kingdom that comes after Jesus' return but before the Eternal State is consistent with several Old Testament passages. In the course of progressive revelation, Revelation 20 will reveal how long this intermediate kingdom will be ("a thousand years"), but it is not the first and only reference to such an era. When someone says, "You have only one passage, Revelation 20, which allegedly teaches a millennium," the answer is, "That's not true. Revelation 20 tells us how long Christ's intermediate earthly kingdom will be—one thousand years—but other passages teach the idea of an intermediate kingdom." Premillennialism, therefore, is a doctrine found in both testaments.

### **New Testament Predictions of a Coming Earthly Kingdom**

A key component of premillennialism is that Jesus' millennial kingdom is both future and earthly. Several passages in the New Testament affirm this understanding. This contrasts with other millennial views which see the millennial kingdom as present and spiritual in nature.

#### **Revelation 5:10 and the Coming Reign**

About sixty years into the church age (ca. A.D. 90), the apostle John received visions concerning events to come. According to Revelation 5, he was allowed to see a scene in heaven where twenty-four elders sang a new song:

"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Rev. 5:10).

The ones Jesus purchased with His blood (5:9) are "a kingdom." They are positionally related to the kingdom because they know King Jesus. Yet this positional



status will lead to an actual kingdom reign—“and they will reign upon the earth.” Being positionally related to the kingdom results eventually in a coming kingdom reign.

Three points are significant for understanding Messiah's kingdom from Revelation 5:10. First, the saints of God are destined to reign with Christ. There is a close connection between the reign of the Messiah and the reign of the saints. When Jesus reigns, the saints will also reign. Other passages present the reign of the saints as future. In 1 Corinthians 4:8 Paul made a brief statement to the Corinthians who were acting as if they were already reigning. He said, “You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” The Corinthians were acting like they had arrived, that they were reigning in God's kingdom already. But Paul sarcastically mocks their attitude. He plays along and says that they have become “filled” and “rich.” “You have become kings without us,” he declared. Paul then switches back to reality by telling them, “I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” Contrary to the way the Corinthians were acting, Paul says that they were not reigning. It would be nice if they were reigning because Paul would like to be reigning too. But that was not reality yet.

Second, Revelation 5:10 indicates that this reign is future—“they *will* reign.” The present age is an era of persecution and trial from Satan and his servants. That is why Jesus offers future rewards to the seven churches of Asia Minor (see Revelation 2–3). But a day is coming when the tables will be turned and those who are persecuted by the world will reign.

Third, this coming reign of the saints is “upon the earth.” This shows that the kingdom of Christ is an earthly reign. This is not a reign that only exists in heaven or in the church or in the hearts of men. It is an earthly kingdom. The promise that the saints will reign upon the earth finds its culmination with Revelation 20:4 when the saints will sit on thrones and judgment is given to them. A close connection exists between Revelation 5:10 and 20:4. The former is the promise of a coming reign, the latter describes the inauguration of that reign.

### The Future Rule of Messiah and the Saints

Several other passages place the reign of Jesus and the saints in the future. Note the future tense in the following:

- 1 Cor. 6:2: Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?
- 1 Cor. 6:3: Do you not know that we will judge angels?
- 2 Tim. 2:12a: If we endure, we will also reign with Him.
- Rev. 2:26–27: He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father;

- Rev. 12:5: And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.
- Rev. 19:15: From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty.

First Corinthians 6:2–3 states the Christians “will” judge the world and angels. This truth should influence their judgment in the present. Second Timothy 2:12 indicates that enduring for Jesus now will lead to a “reign” with Jesus. Reigning is not occurring now but will be the case later. The three passages in Revelation refer back to Psalm 2, where it is revealed that God’s King and Son will rule the nations with a rod of iron. Revelation 12:5 and 19:15 reiterate this truth that Jesus the Messiah will rule the nations with a rod of iron. Revelation 2:26–27 says Jesus will share His rule with those who know Him and overcome the world in this age.

What is significant about these references is they place Jesus’ rule and the reign of the saints over the nations in the future. With Revelation 2:26–27 the promise of ruling the nations is offered as a future reward to overcomers in the church. Ruling the nations is not their current experience. Also, Jesus tells the church of Thyatira, “hold fast until I come” (2:25). If they “hold fast” until the coming of Jesus, they will be rewarded with ruling functions in the kingdom of Christ. In sum, ruling the nations is a reward that Jesus brings to His own when He comes.

The Revelation 19:15 passage is also important because the statement that Jesus will “strike down the nations” and “rule them with a rod of iron” comes within the context of Jesus’ second coming, which is the subject of Revelation 19:11–21. It is Jesus’ second coming that leads to the ruling of the nations with a rod of iron. Revelation 1:5 tells us that Jesus is “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Yet it is with His second coming that He actually rules the nations.

### The Coming Reign of Messiah from David’s Throne at the Second Coming

Another evidence for premillennialism is found with Matthew 19:28 and 25:31, where Jesus says He will assume His glorious Davidic throne at the time of His second coming. This is very significant. Jesus explicitly ties His Davidic throne reign with His second coming to earth and not before. This shows that Jesus’ kingdom is future from our standpoint. *The kingdom comes when Jesus comes again.* This truth makes amillennialism and postmillennialism impossible since these positions assert that Jesus is now reigning from the Davidic throne in His millennial kingdom in this age.

The throne of David, which finds its roots in the Davidic Covenant promises of 2 Samuel 7, is linked with Jesus who is the ultimate Son of David. When the angel, Gabriel, appeared to Mary, he stated the following concerning her coming Son:

“He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

Gabriel made clear that Jesus was coming so He could be given the throne of David and reign over Israel. With Matthew 25:31 Jesus addresses when He will assume that throne:

“But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.”

The word for “then” (*tote*) is an adverb of time and means “at that time.” The term for “will sit” is *kathisei* and is in the future tense. The Davidic throne, therefore, is linked with two things: (1) the Son of Man coming in glory and (2) all the angels coming with Him. When those two events occur the Son of Man will then “sit upon His glorious throne.” *Therefore, sitting upon the glorious Davidic throne by Jesus occurs at the time of His coming in glory with His angels.*

This is the strongest possible evidence concerning the timing of Jesus’ kingdom. Jesus explicitly states, in a prophetic context, when He will assume the Davidic throne. It is when He comes in glory with the angels. This event is future from our standpoint. Since Jesus has not returned in glory yet with all of His angels, we can know that He has not yet assumed the Davidic throne. A similar statement by Jesus is found in Matthew 19:28 which also links Jesus’ throne with other future events:

And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Again we see Jesus referring to sitting upon “His glorious throne” in a future context. Here, Jesus is talking about future rewards for His disciples. Importantly, He ties it with an event called “the regeneration.” Most scholars believe Jesus is speaking of the renewal of the cosmos, the glorification for creation (see Rom. 8:19–23). The word “regeneration” is the Greek term *palingenesia* which means “regeneration,” “renewal,” or “genesis again.” J. I. Packer says, “it denotes the eschatological ‘restoration of all things’ (Acts 3:21) under the Messiah for which Israel was waiting.”<sup>16</sup> This renewal must be future since we have not seen a glorification of the creation yet. When this cosmic renewal occurs, two other things come with it: (1) the Son of Man sitting on His glorious throne; and (2) the apostles judging/ruling the twelve tribes of Israel. Both refer to kingdom and ruling functions. Jesus’ sitting on the glorious throne of David has not occurred yet, but it will occur in the future at the time of the renewal of the world and the apostles ruling over a restored national Israel. So with Matthew 19:28 Jesus tells us His Davidic kingdom throne reign will occur with other

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<sup>16</sup> J. I. Packer, “Regeneration,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 925.

glorious future events. He does not say that His second coming brings an end or culmination of His kingdom reign. This strongly supports premillennialism while making amillennialism and postmillennialism impossible. If Jesus' Davidic and mediatorial reign begins with the second coming this means Jesus' kingdom must be future and is not in operation in this age. As 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 reveals, Jesus must reign over His enemies successfully before He hands the kingdom over to the Father. According to Jesus in Matthew 19:28 and 25:31, this Davidic reign begins at His second coming.

### **Why Premillennialism Must Be True**

As the previous sections showed, the main reason to affirm premillennialism is because the Bible explicitly teaches it. In one sense that's the main issue. But are there reasons for such a kingdom? Is there a rationale for premillennialism? Can we understand why a premillennial kingdom is necessary and so important to God's purposes? I think we can. Premillennialism fits well with the overall storyline of the Bible and explains what the restoration of all things (Acts 3:21) means and looks like. There are at least four reasons *why* there must be a premillennial kingdom of Jesus upon the earth:

1. There must be a successful reign of man and the Last Adam (Jesus) from and over the realm—earth—where God tasked the first Adam to rule.

Eschatology (i.e. last things) fits perfectly with protology (i.e. first things). Premillennialism best coincides with what God first tasked man to do—successfully rule the earth. In Genesis 1:26–28 God told man to “rule” and “subdue” the “very good” (v. 31) creation that God entrusted to him. Adam, who was made in God's image, was called to exercise authority over the earth and function as God's mediatorial and representative king over it. But Adam failed this task when he disobeyed God. When this happened mankind as a whole failed since Adam acted as our representative (see Rom. 5:12d). But Paul speaks of Jesus as another representative of mankind, a “Last Adam” (see 1 Cor. 15:45) who succeeds where the first Adam failed (see Rom. 5:17).

Important patterns exist between Jesus and Adam. Jesus, at times, repeats the pattern of Adam, succeeding where Adam failed. For example, Adam and Eve failed the temptation from Satan in Genesis 3, but Christ withstood and triumphed over the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4). With Romans 5, Adam's act of disobedience brought condemnation to all men (5:12) while Jesus' “one act of righteousness” (the cross) brought righteousness. As two federal heads of humanity, Adam brought death but Jesus brought life.

There is another important parallel between Adam and Jesus. Just as Adam was appointed as king to rule successfully from and over the earth, so too Jesus will successfully reign from and over the earth as King. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus said that in the “regeneration” or “renewal” of the planet He “will sit on His glorious throne” and the twelve apostles will be there with Him “judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” This is kingdom-over-the-earth language (see also Rev. 5:10).

The main point here is that Jesus as the Last Adam is destined to rule from and over the realm where the first Adam failed. With His first coming, Jesus exhibited His kingdom authority in the earthly realm many times with His nature miracles. When He walked on water, multiplied bread, healed diseases, and raised the dead, He showed His power in the realm of nature. These were tastes and glimpses of the kingdom conditions to come, a restored Eden and earth. But Romans 8:19–23 reveals that the full restoration of nature awaits the return of Jesus and the glorification of the saints. Today we still see decay, illness, death, natural disasters, famines, earthquakes, and many other calamities that let us know that nature is not yet subject to man (Heb. 2:5–8), that the consequences of Adam's failure are still with us. But Jesus is coming again with His kingdom to fulfill the Adamic mandate over the earth. The earth will be restored (see Isaiah 11). Sung Wook Chung accurately connects the kingdom role of Jesus as the Last Adam with a rule over the earth:

Therefore by establishing the millennial kingdom, Jesus Christ, as the last Adam, will restore and fulfill not only the spiritual/priestly dimension but also the physical/institutional dimension of the first Adam's kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

A great strength of premillennialism is that it is the only millennial view that places Jesus' messianic and millennial reign *from and over the earth*, and in doing so sees Jesus completing what was expected of Adam. Other millennial perspectives place the center of Jesus' reign from heaven, but heaven is not where God placed Adam to rule. Psalm 115:16 declares, "The heavens are the LORD's, but the earth He has given to the human race" (HCSB).

Also, the reign of the Last Adam is not just a spiritual rule. Amillennialism makes Jesus' messianic and millennial reign a spiritual kingdom now, either with the church or with deceased saints in heaven. But God did not create man to rule from heaven over a spiritual kingdom. He put him on earth to reign from earth. If premillennialism is not true, then there is no successful mediatorial reign of man and the Last Adam (Jesus) in the realm where the first Adam failed. The kingdom of the Last Adam is in a different sphere (heaven) over a different realm (spiritual). But this does not do justice to what the Bible says about the destiny of the Last Adam.

So then, premillennialism is the only millennial view that has Jesus succeeding in the realm where the first Adam failed. Chung puts it well:

The first Adam's priest-kingly activity, which was thwarted by the fall, will be fulfilled in the millennial kingdom. Therefore the millennial kingdom will be a restoration and fulfillment of the Edenic kingdom on the earth.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sung Wook Chung, "Toward the Reformed and Covenantal Theology of Premillennialism," in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism: An Alternative to 'Left Behind' Eschatology*, eds. Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 142.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

Adam → tasked to rule from and over the earth → FAILURE

Jesus (Last Adam) → tasked to rule from and over the earth → SUCCESS

2. Jesus must have a sustained and visible reign in the realm where He was rejected.

Since the fall of man in Genesis 3, God has enacted a plan to bring this rebel planet back into conformity with His will (see Gen. 3:15). Central to this plan is God's Son, Jesus the Messiah, whom the Father wants to establish as King over the nations (see Psalm 2; 110). Through the prophecies of the Old and New Testaments the Bible presents Jesus as the One who will bring salvation to God's people and the One who will reign as King over this world.

Yet while millions in history have bowed the knee to Jesus as Lord, Savior, and King, the vast majority of the world has not. Survey a world map and ask which countries are bowing the knee to Jesus the Messiah. There are none. The nations with their leaders are still in active rebellion against God's "Anointed One" (see Ps. 2:2). We see this in the myriads of false religions and philosophies along with overt acts of rebellion that characterize what Paul called "this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4).

While the church has accomplished much during its two-thousand-year history, its existence has not led to global recognition of Jesus. Even geographical areas once permeated with Gospel awareness, such as Europe during the Reformation, and the American Northeast with the Great Awakening, are far removed from worship of the true God. Northern Africa, once a center for Christianity, is now essentially barren of Christian witness. Some of the most anti-Christian areas today are those that once had much exposure to the Gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to the claims of postmillennialists, there is no evidence from Scripture or experience that the appropriate honor due Jesus will occur before His second coming to earth. All Christians agree that such honor will be given with Jesus' return to earth. When Jesus returns to earth in glory, every eye will see Him. He will slay His enemies and there will be no doubt as to His power. On the other hand, it is also true, as 1 Corinthians 15:24–28 indicates, that when the "end" occurs, Jesus "hands over the kingdom to the God and Father" (v. 24). Verse 28 states, "When all things are subjected to Him [Jesus], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all." So a time is coming when Jesus will hand His kingdom over to the Father. This does not mean Jesus ceases to reign, but His messianic kingdom will transition to the universal kingdom of the Father.

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<sup>19</sup> This point alone should be a concern for those considering the validity of postmillennialism, which affirms societal renewal by the Gospel before the return of Jesus.

This leads to an issue that must be addressed. It is the Father's will that His Son rule the nations and that all be subjected to Him. But in this "present evil age" not all things are subject to Jesus. Also, the Bible tells us that Jesus will one day hand His kingdom over to God the Father. This appears to be the time period of the Eternal State. So the question is this—*When does Jesus the Messiah rule in His kingdom and receive the glory and honor in this world that He richly deserves and the Scripture promises?* Is it simply at His second coming to earth? Saucy asks this relevant question:

To be sure, the world will recognize Christ when he returns in glory. But does a short period of destruction and judgment before he turns the kingdom over to the Father for the Eternal State provide an adequate explanation of the centrality of Christ and a sufficient manifestation of his glory *within history*?<sup>20</sup>

The correct answer to this question is, no. Jesus' second coming with its destruction and judgments is not all there is to His manifestation. The day of His coming is a magnificent display of glory, but more is to come. As Saucy notes, "So far in history, the experience of Christ and his people has been one of oppression and non-recognition (cf. 1 Jn 3:1). If history comes to its end with the coming of Christ, there will be no significant time within history when his centrality is manifest."<sup>21</sup> So where does the needed recognition come from?

An intermediate or millennial kingdom before the Eternal State "provides just such a time when Christ's glory will pervade human history and His significance will be rightly recognized."<sup>22</sup> *Thus, a millennial reign of Jesus after His second coming but before the "end" when Jesus hands His kingdom over to the Father is the ideal time for the Son to be manifested in His glory to the world.* Therefore, the millennial kingdom of Jesus after His return will be the time period when the Son reigns over this world, rewarding His servants and punishing His enemies. When He has completed this reign from His glorious throne He will then hand His kingdom over to God the Father and the Eternal State will commence.

Perhaps one objection to this claim is that Jesus' current session in heaven fulfills the idea of a sustained reign that the Bible predicted. This position, though, is not satisfactory and does not give justice to Jesus' kingdom reign for several reasons. First, although Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of the Father is a powerful display of glory to the courts of heaven and evil spiritual forces (see Eph. 1:21–23), heaven is not the realm where God tasked Adam and mankind to rule from. God placed Adam on earth and it is from earth that the Last Adam needs to reign.

Also, the world continues to escalate its rebellion and non-recognition of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. To be blunt, we cannot conceive of this present age as the full manifestation of Christ's kingdom. We cannot hold to a messianic reign of Christ where the vast majority of the world is not aware of it and is openly defiant to God.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 289–90.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet this must be the case if the millennium is currently present. On the other hand, when Christ's kingdom is established at His coming it will be recognized by all. As Zechariah 14:9 indicates: "And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one." When Jesus the Messiah rules on the earth, there will be no other religions or false worship systems, unlike today. To put it in simpler terms, when Jesus is ruling, all will know it. Everyone will recognize it. His rule with a rod of iron will be respected (Ps. 2:9; Rev. 19:15).

Second, Hebrews 10:12–13 states that Jesus is at the right hand of God "waiting" for His enemies to be subjected to Him:

but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET (emphasis mine).

The wording here relies on Psalm 110 in which David's Lord, the Messiah, is said to have a session at the right hand of God "until" His enemies are defeated and the rule from Zion (Jerusalem) occurs (Ps. 110:2). Thus, a session at the right hand of the Father by the Messiah precedes a kingdom reign upon the earth.

Next, the reign of the Messiah includes more than personal salvation, as important as that is. It also involves societal/political transformation for the nations of the earth (see Isa. 2:2–4). International harmony under the ruling Messiah will occur as the government rests on His shoulders (Isa. 9:6). While messianic salvation has been inaugurated in this present church age, the promised transformation of societies in all their dimensions has not happened yet. Passages like Isaiah 19:24–25 and Zechariah 14 predict that nations as national entities will worship God. But such societal and international harmony has not happened yet. How can there be a messianic or millennial reign in which the nations continue in open rebellion against God and His Messiah? The best answer is that this societal transformation will occur with the second coming of Jesus. As Saucy points out:

The prophets pictured the saving work of the Messiah as both personal and societal renewal. The kingdom work of Christ has entered this age to bring personal salvation, but the transformation of society in terms of peace among peoples and the expression of God's righteousness in the structures of human society are never promised for this age. They await the return of the messianic King, who will destroy the evil structures of this age and institute a righteous rule over the earth for the first time in human history.<sup>23</sup>

To summarize, Jesus must be honored with a kingdom reign that is visible to all. God's intent is for His Son, Jesus the Messiah, to rule the nations, including His enemies, from Jerusalem and a restored Israel (see Ps. 110:2). Before the perfect Eternal State comes, Jesus must rule over this planet that has rejected God since the Fall and over the world that rejected Him at His first coming. He will rule with righteousness but also with a rod of iron over His enemies (see Pss. 2; 110; Rev. 2:26–

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<sup>23</sup> Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 290.



27). While Jesus is currently at the right hand of God in heaven possessing all authority, the nations are still currently in rebellion against God. There is no national entity today that acknowledges and worships God as they should. But that will change when Jesus comes again. At His second coming Jesus will then sit on His glorious throne (see Matt. 19:28 and 25:31), and He will rule over this world to the glory of God. This He does in the millennial kingdom after He returns to earth. When this phase of the kingdom program is over, the Son will hand the kingdom over to God the Father and the millennial kingdom will merge into the universal kingdom (see 1 Cor. 15:24–28; Rev. 22:1).

Look at this issue from another direction. If the premillennial view is *not* correct and the millennium is spiritual and now as amillennialism claims, what would this mean? It would mean that there will be no significant period in human history where Jesus is recognized as King by this world before the Eternal State. The present age is characterized by wickedness and persecution of God's people by the world and Satan. Also, Jesus' messianic reign would be characterized by non-recognition and continual widespread rebellion by the nations. In addition, while a present millennium would include personal salvation of some, it would not involve societal transformation and international harmony that the Bible predicted (see Isa. 2:2–4). If the premillennial view is not correct there is no significant period in history where Jesus is given the honor and glory that He deserves. Premillennialism is Christ-honoring in that it sees, as necessary, a sustained and recognized reign of Jesus in His glory in the realm where He was rejected.

Jesus' first coming → Rejection of Jesus on earth

Jesus' second coming → Vindication and reign of Jesus on earth

3. There must be a vindication and reign of the saints in the realm where they were persecuted

The Bible reveals that the period before the Messiah's kingdom is one of persecution and opposition for the saints from both the world and Satan. The blood of the martyrs throughout history and the abuse of God's people in many lands confirms this fact.

The millennial kingdom of the Messiah, though, is presented as a reversal of these difficult conditions on earth. So in addition to looking at how the millennium relates to Jesus, it is also important to examine what the millennium means for Jesus' servants. The millennium is a time of vindication and reigning for God's saints in the realm where they were persecuted. With the millennium there will be an ironic reversal of roles. God turns the tables on His enemies who persecute His people and flips the experience of believers. God's people who now are persecuted by Satan and

the nations, will be rewarded, vindicated, and given authority over the nations on earth. They go from persecution to reigning. *Thus, a future millennial kingdom is necessary for the reward and vindication of God's people in the realm where there were persecuted.*

### Daniel 7

Such a reversal of circumstances for the saints is found in Daniel 7. This chapter tells of the messianic figure called “the Son of Man” (Jesus) who is presented before the “Ancient of Days” (the Father) and granted “dominion, glory, and a kingdom” (Dan. 7:13–14). We are then told of the evil ministry of a “horn” who is a world leader rising from the midst of ten other leaders (“horns”) (Dan. 7:8, 20). This “horn” offers great boasts and persecutes the saints of God. But this persecution is only for a time until God intervenes:

I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them until the Ancient of Days came and judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom (Dan. 7:21–22).

This enemy of God's people prevails for a while. He was “overpowering them,” but God intervenes on the saints' behalf. When God does this “judgment was passed in favor of the saints,” and they “took possession of the kingdom.” This is a dramatic reversal of circumstances. Persecution leads to vindication. To use a boxing analogy, just when the people of God seemed on the ropes and then out for the count, a knock-out of the enemy occurs and God's people are the victors with hands raised in victory.

Notice that the saints were not reigning when the “horn” was waging war against them on earth. But when God intervenes with judgment and His kingdom comes, the roles are reversed and the enemy is defeated, and God's people are the ones in charge. This is an ironic reversal of power. This scenario is further amplified in Daniel 7:25–27:

He [the horn] will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time. But the court will sit for judgment, and his dominion will be taken away, annihilated and destroyed forever. Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One; His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all the dominions will serve and obey Him.

When the Son of Man (Jesus) begins His kingdom given to Him by the Ancient of Days (see Dan. 7:13–14), the saints of God will have an active role in this kingdom. God and Jesus are the kings, but they share their kingdom with those who serve them. *The major point is that God's people are persecuted for a time, but when Mes-*

*siah's kingdom comes, reward and vindication come with it and the enemy is destroyed.* This is not occurring now in this age but it will in the coming kingdom. Also, there is no indication that this reign of the saints is in heaven. The saints were persecuted on earth and their reign will be upon the earth as well (Rev. 5:10).

### Revelation 2–3

The pattern of tribulation followed by vindication and reward is affirmed in Revelation 2–3. As Jesus addressed His churches, each is evaluated for its performance. Then they are left with promises of future blessings for persevering during present trials. Faithfulness now leads to future blessings:

- Ephesus: right to eat of the tree of life in the Paradise of God (2:7)
- Smyrna: will not be hurt by the second death (2:11)
- Pergamum: given hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name written on the stone (2:17)
- Thyatira: granted authority and rule over the nations (2:26–27)
- Sardis: clothed in white garments, name in book of life, and name confessed before the Father and the angels (3:5–6)
- Philadelphia: given pillar in the temple of God; the name of God and the New Jerusalem (3:12)
- Laodicea: sit with Jesus on His throne (3:21)

There is a noticeable pattern here. Jesus' churches are facing difficult times. These are not days of reigning but of holding fast during Satanic persecution. Some churches are doing better than others, but all of them need encouragement. So Jesus offers rewards as motivation for faithful service. These rewards are not the current experience of these churches. But they will be received with Jesus' return to earth and the establishment of His kingdom. Jesus does not tell the churches that His kingdom is currently in operation or that the kingdom is their present experience. Instead, His message is about remaining faithful so that they can reap the blessings of the coming kingdom reign. Jesus' message to Thyatira highlights this point:

He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father (Rev. 2:26–27).

Jesus uses Psalm 2, which describes the announcement that God's King, who is also His Son, will rule over the rebellious nations. The message of Psalm 2 is that the nations who scorn God now will one day have to submit to Him through His Messiah. With Revelation 2:26–27 Jesus states that when His kingdom reign begins He will share and delegate His authority with those who are part of His church. In an ironic reversal of circumstances, the persecuted ones will one day become those who rule. So when the Messiah rules, those who belong to Him also participate in this rule. The

kingdom is future and the saints' participation in this kingdom reign is also future. Jesus also promises a future kingdom rule as a reward in Revelation 3:21:

He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

The overcomer is one who “will” (future tense) sit down with Jesus on His throne. Again, present faithfulness leads to future kingdom reward. So then, Revelation 2:26–27 and 3:21 point the churches to a future time when they will reign with Jesus for faithful service now.

Another significant matter is how intense and pervasive Satan's opposition is to the churches of Revelation 2–3. Satan is mentioned five times (2:9, 13 [twice], 24; 3:9). The church at Smyrna was not only facing “tribulation” and “poverty,” they had to deal with a “synagogue of Satan” (2:9). The church at Pergamum was holding firm in the area where “Satan's throne is” (2:13).<sup>24</sup> The church at Thyatira had withstood “the deep things of Satan” (2:24). The church at Philadelphia also had to face a “synagogue of Satan” (3:9).

The churches of Revelation are characterized by persecution and opposition from Satan. The churches are not reigning or experiencing the kingdom of Christ yet. Positionally they are the nucleus for that coming kingdom (see Rev. 1:6), but the promises of reward and vindication are future. Also, Satan is not bound since he is very active in opposing the people of God. This point alone casts doubt on the positions of amillennialism and postmillennialism that assert that Satan is bound in this age. This is not the case according to Revelation 2–3.

Revelation 11:15 announces the coming of the seventh trumpet judgment. It is at this time that loud voices in heaven declare, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (11:15b). Verses 17–18 indicate how this kingdom reign relates to judgment and the rewarding of God's people. The twenty-four elders declare:

“We give You thanks, O Lord God, the Almighty, who are and who were, because You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign. And the nations were enraged, and Your wrath came, and the time came for the dead to be judged, and the time to reward Your bond-servants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name, the small and the great, and to destroy those who destroy the earth.”

Again, as with Revelation 2:26–27 and 3:21, this passage points to the rewarding of God's people. This “was the time to reward your bondservants the prophets and the saints and those who fear Your name.” The coming of the kingdom brings reward.

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<sup>24</sup> The reference to “Satan's throne” seems problematic for the amillennial and postmillennial views that claim a current binding of Satan in this age. How can Satan have a throne and be bound at the same time? Did Satan take his throne to the abyss?

Revelation 20:4

With Revelation 20:1–6 the promised resurrection, reward, and vindication of the saints occurs. Satan is imprisoned and swept away from the world to the abyss (Rev. 20:1–3). And then in verse 4 we are told:

Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.

The words “I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them,” appear to have a connection with Daniel 7:22 and its statement that “judgment was passed in favor of the saints of the Highest One, and the time arrived when the saints took possession of the kingdom.” It also connects with Daniel 7:27: “Then the sovereignty, the dominion and the greatness of all the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be given to the people of the saints of the Highest One.” The promised vindication of the saints with the kingdom of the Son of Man discussed in Daniel 7 is fulfilled with the reign of the saints in the millennial kingdom of Revelation 20:1–6.

Revelation 20:4 is a beautiful depiction of the coming reversal of circumstances for the saints of God. They are resurrected and on thrones with the authority to rule in the kingdom. Such circumstances have not occurred yet but they will when Jesus comes again to earth.

To summarize, a millennial kingdom after the return of Jesus is necessary for there to be a true reward and vindication of the saints of God. Such reward and vindication awaits a future fulfillment. As Dave Mathewson states:

The period of the church age is one in which the kingdom of God and the saints is contested by Satan and his kingdom . . . The authority of the beast is acknowledged worldwide (13:3–4) and God's people appear defeated (chaps. 11, 13). Moreover, the beast has apparently survived a fatal blow (13:3–4). *However, the millennium reverses this situation by providing a counterpart to the beast's earthly sovereignty and ostensible invincibility.* The dragon, Satan, is bound and the dragon and beast are thrown into the lake of fire (19:20; 20:1–3, 7–11). Now the saints triumph and they reign and rule, and for a comparably much longer period of time, one thousand years.<sup>25</sup>

The thousand-year kingdom, therefore, “portrays the complete victory and vindication of the saints at the Parousia of Christ.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dave Mathewson, “A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1–6: Consummation and Recapitulation” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 2 (June 2001): 248. Emphases mine.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

Consider this point from the opposite direction. If premillennialism is not true and the millennium is today, then the reward and vindication of the saints is taking place in this present evil age, which is difficult to believe and goes against our experiences. For example, Paul chided the Corinthians for thinking they were reigning already (see 1 Cor. 4:8) and instead described his situation: “To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless. . . . we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now” (1 Cor. 4:11, 13).

Also, note that the souls of the martyrs who appear in heaven in Revelation 6:9–11 are not vindicated or reigning yet in the world but are told to “rest for a little while longer” until God’s vengeance takes care of their enemies. The vindication of these martyrs occurs in the millennium of Revelation 20:4, where we are told “they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.” The martyred saints persecuted on earth later become the resurrected and rewarded saints reigning on earth. The reward and vindication of the saints fits better with the second coming of Jesus and the kingdom He brings.

Present age: Saints are persecuted on earth as they serve Jesus.

Millennial kingdom: Saints are rewarded on earth for faithful service.

4. There needs to be a time in history when all aspects of the covenants and promises are fulfilled

The Christian church has affirmed two comings of Jesus. The first occurred in the first century A.D., and the second will occur on a future day. There are certain things we should expect in regard to the fact that there are two comings of Jesus. One is that certain prophecies and promises were fulfilled with Jesus’ first coming, while others await fulfillment at His second coming. If Jesus’ coming has two parts to it, then it makes sense that the fulfillment of matters related to Him would come in stages as well.

The first coming of Jesus brought the ultimate Son of David (Jesus) and His sacrificial death. The first coming also brought messianic salvation to believing Jews and Gentiles and the New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Bible also indicates that there are major aspects of prophecy that still need to be fulfilled. For example, in Acts 1:6, the apostles asked Jesus, “Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” The apostles did not view Israel’s promised restoration as occurring yet. That’s why they asked the Lord when it would occur (see also Deut. 30:1–6; Ezekiel 36; Rom. 11:26–27). In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul explains why the Day of the Lord had not started yet. The dimensions of Israel’s land boundaries described in Genesis 15:18–21 still need to be fulfilled. The restoration of the city of Jerusalem has not happened yet (see Jer. 31:38–40; Luke 21:24). Harmony among nations needs

to occur (see Isa. 2:2–4). Restoration of the animal kingdom in Messiah's kingdom needs to be realized (see Isaiah 11). In sum, many of the national and physical promises of the Bible are unfulfilled currently.

So then, unfulfilled prophecy is a major reason why there must be a millennium. The millennium is the ideal time period when unfulfilled prophecies and promises will be fulfilled. If God is true and cannot lie, we know that all aspects of His promises will come to fruition with the coming kingdom.

A couple of objections could be offered against this point. One may be that Jesus has already fulfilled all the prophecies, covenants, and promises of the Old Testament. After all, doesn't Paul say that all the promises are "Yes" in Jesus (see 2 Cor. 1:20). Doesn't Jesus say that He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? (see Matt. 5:17).

The correct answer is that Jesus does fulfill all that was promised. But the real issue is "how" and "when" He fulfills these matters. Does He fulfill them by having them spiritually absorbed into Himself or by fulfilling physical promises in a spiritual way? Or does He fulfill them by being the One through whom the literal fulfillment of God's promises come true? The latter is the better option. Jesus is the center of God's kingdom plans. Jesus is at the center of God's promise plan (see Gen. 3:15). Without Him God's kingdom and salvation plan would never happen. But these fulfillments take place as a result of two comings of Jesus. To date we have never experienced harmony among nations, the restoration of the animal kingdom, the restoration of Israel to her land, etc. Can we simply spiritualize these and say they are already fulfilled in Jesus?

Second, the New Testament reaffirms many Old Testament prophecies that still need to occur, such as the Day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10) and the appearance of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:3–4). If Jesus fulfilled everything with His first coming, why do the New Testament writers view so many prophecies as still needing to be fulfilled?

Third, Jesus himself referred to many prophecies that still needed to be fulfilled, even after His first earthly ministry was near completion. In His Olivet Discourse (cf. Matthew 24–25; Luke 21), Jesus predicted many things that still needed to happen, such as the abomination of desolation, cosmic signs, the gathering of His people, and the judgment of the nations. Nowhere does He say that the details of these prophecies do not matter because they are absorbed into Him.

Another objection could be that unfulfilled prophecies and promises could be fulfilled in the Eternal State and not the millennium. However, there is a major problem with this objection. If the Eternal State is the fulfillment of yet unfulfilled promises, this means that these matters would come to fruition outside the mediatorial kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. Yet the Bible links fulfillment of many of these matters with Messiah's kingdom. For example, the restoration of the animal kingdom described in Isaiah 11:6–9 is linked with the coming Davidic ruler in 11:1 ("stem of Jesse").

If premillennialism is not true, then the unfulfilled prophecies of the Bible do not find fulfillment just as God promised. What the Old Testament writers intended and what their hearers understood were wrong. The prophecies have to be spiritual-

ized, or absorbed into Jesus, or fulfilled in the Eternal State outside the realm of Messiah's kingdom. Whichever option is chosen, the fulfillment would not be like the literal fulfillments of the prophecies that occurred at Jesus' first coming. There would be an inconsistency in how God fulfills His promises. The better position is that God fulfills all of His promises just as He said and that unfulfilled prophecies will be fulfilled with Jesus' return and the millennial kingdom that the Messiah brings.

Jesus' first coming → many prophecies were literally fulfilled.

Jesus' second coming → prophecies not fulfilled at the first coming will be literally fulfilled.

### **Conclusion**

Those who hold to premillennialism should understand that this view is explicitly taught in Scripture and there is a strong rationale for this view. This position is not only taught in Revelation 20, it is supported by many other passages and reasons. Thus, we can both know *that* premillennialism is true and *why* it is true.



## ROMANS 4:11 AND THE CASE FOR INFANT BAPTISM

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*The paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 asserts that because circumcision once signified the divine promise of justification by faith like baptism does now, the latter has replaced the former and should be administered to infants just as its predecessor was. An exegetical evaluation of this argument, however, demonstrates that Romans 4:11 does not establish the parallel between the two rites that is central to the case for infant baptism. In addition, a theological evaluation shows that a biblical understanding of the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant highlights specific points of discontinuity that argue against a correspondence between circumcision and baptism and therefore against the practice of infant baptism.*

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### Introduction

The birth of a baby brings indescribable joy and excitement, as well as a delightful anticipation of what the future holds for the little one. But for some Christian parents, it also brings a measure of apprehension, for it raises the unsettling question of infant baptism. *Should we have our baby baptized? Or is baptism only for those who profess faith in Christ?* The question is a significant one, and with godly theologians on both sides of the debate, how can the average believer possibly decide?

On one side of the debate is the view that the ordinance should be administered only to those who make a profession of faith in Christ. Commonly known as “believer’s baptism,” this view asserts that baptism should be restricted to believers alone.<sup>1</sup> On the other side is the position of infant baptism—commonly known as

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<sup>1</sup> Because the church baptizes an individual on the basis of his profession of faith and not on the basis of an infallible knowledge that he is indeed a genuine believer, it is often referred to as “credobaptism” (from the Latin *credo*, “I believe”).

“paedobaptism”—which affirms that infant children of believers should also be baptized.<sup>2</sup> In the words of the Westminster Confession: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” (28.4).

Because paedobaptists can point to neither a clear biblical command to baptize infants nor a clear example of an infant being baptized in the New Testament,<sup>3</sup> they often use theological inferences to support their view.<sup>4</sup> The primary inferential argument in favor of infant baptism involves the continuity of God’s relationship with His covenant people throughout redemptive history.<sup>5</sup> As paedobaptist Mark Ross explains, the key to this argument is the connection between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism:

Those who subscribe to covenantal infant baptism maintain that baptism has now replaced circumcision as the mark of covenant membership, and that baptism’s meaning and application are essentially the same as circumcision’s in the Old Testament period. Included with this is the idea that the children of covenant members today are members of the covenant, as in the Old Testament period.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The specific type of infant baptism being addressed in this article is the covenantal infant baptism practiced by those in the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition, in contrast to the infant baptism of Anglicans, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics.

<sup>3</sup> This point is generally acknowledged by advocates of infant baptism, e.g., Bryan Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 15; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise: The Case for Baptizing Infants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 107, 109; John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 66, 69; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 634; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:541; B.B. Warfield, “The Polemics of Infant Baptism,” in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 389–408 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 399. As B.B. Warfield concedes, “It is true that there is no express command to baptize infants in the New Testament, no express record of the baptism of infants, and no passages so stringently implying it that we must infer from them that infants were baptized” (ibid.). Similarly, according to John Murray, “It is only too apparent that if we had an express command or even a proven case with apostolic sanction, then the controversy would not have arisen; or at least it would be of a very different sort” (*Christian Baptism*, 69).

<sup>4</sup> In the words of paedobaptist John Murray, “The evidence for infant baptism falls into the category of good and necessary inference” (*Christian Baptism*, 69).

<sup>5</sup> More specifically, it flows out of a belief in Covenant Theology, which sees a fundamental continuity between OT Israel and the NT church in which the latter is viewed as the replacement, the continuation, or the fulfillment of the former. The centerpiece of Covenant Theology is the Covenant of Grace—a single, overarching covenant that is said to extend throughout redemptive history and provide a basis for the continuity between the covenant signs of circumcision and baptism. However, even though the Covenant of Grace provides the foundation for the doctrine of infant baptism, a belief in the former does not necessitate a belief in the latter, as evidenced by Reformed Baptists who affirm Covenant Theology and yet reject paedobaptism in favor of believer’s baptism.

<sup>6</sup> Mark E. Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 97.

In this way, the covenantal view of infant baptism can be summarized very simply—baptism *is* what circumcision *was*.<sup>7</sup> In other words, baptism has precisely the same meaning and function in the New Testament church as circumcision did in Old Testament Israel. As paedobaptist O. Palmer Robertson writes, “In the fullest possible sense, baptism under the new covenant accomplishes all that was represented in circumcision under the old.”<sup>8</sup>

This belief that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the covenant is foundational to the case for infant baptism. According to this argument, if the covenant sign of circumcision was given to infants in Israel, how can the covenant sign of baptism be denied them in the church? Baptism is what circumcision was and should therefore be applied to infant children of believers.<sup>9</sup>

Paedobaptists seek to establish this connection between circumcision and baptism in several ways. One of the most common is by appealing to Romans 4:11, where the apostle Paul describes Abraham’s circumcision as a sign and a seal: “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11a).<sup>10</sup> According to the paedobaptist, Paul’s description in Romans 4:11 provides clear evidence for the parallel between circumci-

<sup>7</sup> In the words of John Calvin, “baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.11). Quotations are from John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), and citations list the book, chapter, and section in that order (e.g., 4.16.11 = Book IV, Chapter 16, Section 11).

<sup>8</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1980), 166. According to paedobaptist Pierre Marcel, “There is . . . a difference between the sacraments as regards outward appearance, but they are identical as regards their internal and spiritual significance” (Pierre Ch. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes [London: James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1953], 90). Later Marcel writes, “The New Testament establishes no *essential* difference between circumcision and baptism; such differences as there are are only formal. Baptism has taken the place of circumcision” (210; emphasis original). The formal differences commonly acknowledged by paedobaptists include the gender of those baptized (male and female in contrast to only males being circumcised); the timing of the baptism (any time shortly after birth in contrast to being circumcised specifically on the eighth day); and the outward form of baptism itself (which obviously differs from the outward form of circumcision). These differences aside, paedobaptists believe that Scripture equates the essential meaning of the two physical rites (Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 72; Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995], 107; Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Infant Baptism View,” in *Baptism: Three Views*, ed. David F. Wright [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 87; Bryan Holstrom, *Infant Baptism and the Silence of the New Testament* [Greenville, SC: Ambassador International, 2009], 114). As Marcel writes, circumcision and baptism “are identical as regards the promise and the thing represented, and as regards content, reason, motive, usage, and efficacy” (*The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, 211).

<sup>9</sup> According to paedobaptist Robert Booth, “This clear connection between the two covenant signs of circumcision and baptism creates a difficult problem for opponents of infant baptism, for *any argument against infant baptism is necessarily an argument against infant circumcision*” (Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 109; emphasis original). This same argument was made previously by Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.20 and Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, 211.

<sup>10</sup> In Romans 4:11a, “circumcision” (περιτομῆς) is in apposition to “sign” (σημεῖον), and “seal” (σφραγίδα) is in apposition to “circumcision” (περιτομῆς), and in this way circumcision is identified as both a sign and a seal.

sion and baptism that is so foundational to the practice of baptizing babies. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 and to address how it relates to the overall case for infant baptism.<sup>11</sup>

### The Paedobaptist Argument from Romans 4:11

In Romans 4:11, Paul describes circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith.” According to the paedobaptist, this means that circumcision in the Old Testament signified the divine promise of justification by faith, the very promise that is now represented by baptism in the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, because baptism now functions in the same way that its Old Testament counterpart did—signifying the very same promise—it should be administered to infants just as circumcision was.<sup>13</sup>

To clarify, when paedobaptists say that circumcision represented justification by faith according to Romans 4:11, they do not mean that all who were circumcised had already believed and been justified at the time of their circumcision. As Ross writes, “If we understand Abraham’s circumcision to certify that he had faith, or that God had given him righteousness, then we are at a loss to explain what Ishmael’s circumcision meant, or Esau’s, or Saul’s, or any other candidate Jew who is an unbeliever and cut off from the blessings of God’s covenant.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, because so many circumcised Jews in Old Testament Israel never believed, paedobaptists deny that circumcision should be understood as “a sign and seal of faith, or of imputed righteousness, or of an inward spiritual transformation.”<sup>15</sup>

How then *does* the paedobaptist understand the meaning of circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith,” and what relationship is it said to have to the promise of justification? According to paedobaptists, Romans 4:11 teaches that the seal of circumcision was the visible pledge of God that when the conditions of the covenant were met, the blessings promised in the covenant would apply.<sup>16</sup> As Ross explains:

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<sup>11</sup> For an evaluation of infant baptism in general, see Matt Weymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, 37; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99, 102, 181; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 619; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.23, 4.16.11, and 4.16.16. According to paedobaptist Robert Booth, Romans 4:11 indicates that “in circumcision God signified and sealed the fact that he justifies believers by faith and considers us righteous through faith; baptism does likewise” (*Children of the Promise*, 102).

<sup>13</sup> Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, 155–56; Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.20.

<sup>14</sup> Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 92; also see Holstrom, *Infant Baptism*, 113–14.

<sup>15</sup> Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 91.

<sup>16</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 12, 15; Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” 15.

Circumcision is not a guarantee that Abraham has faith, nor even that Abraham has righteousness. What circumcision guarantees is the word of God's promise: *that righteousness will be given on the basis of faith*. In other words, circumcision is the authenticating mark that certifies the truth of God's promise, that he will give righteousness to the one who has faith. What is certified is not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person, but a truth about God. In particular, circumcision certifies the truth of God's word in the gospel, namely, that all who believe will be accounted righteous.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, paedobaptists believe that Romans 4:11 presents circumcision as a symbolic representation of the conditional promise of justification—a seal of the certainty that God will justify those who believe—without reference to whether or not the recipients of circumcision presently stood justified or would some day be justified in the future. God's promise in circumcision, then, was not that all who were circumcised had been (or would be) given righteousness, but rather that *all who believe* would be given righteousness.<sup>18</sup> As paedobaptist David Gibson writes, "Circumcision is sign and seal that God justifies the wicked (Rom. 4:5)."<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, according to the paedobaptist, the validity of the covenant seal—whether circumcision or baptism—is not dependent on the timing of when the conditions of the covenant are met, for it is perfectly valid to apply the seal long before the recipient of the signified blessings meets those conditions.<sup>20</sup> In fact, because the seal actually says nothing at all about the present or future salvific status of the infant being circumcised/baptized, it is also perfectly valid to apply the seal to an infant who *never* meets those conditions. As Ross elaborates:

On this understanding of circumcision as a sign and seal, there are no problems of meaning in giving circumcision to those not known to have faith, nor to those who later show themselves to have no faith. Since the sign and seal of circumcision is not a guarantee of either the faith or the righteousness of the one circumcised, the discovery that a circumcised person is an unbeliever does not invalidate the circumcision as an authenticating mark. God's promise is not invalidated by the unbelief of his covenant children. His word stands: those who believe will be accounted righteous.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94; emphasis original; also see Holstrom, *Infant Baptism*, 114. Therefore, says Ross, according to Romans 4:11 if Abraham possessed faith he could conclude that he also had righteousness from God "because God has promised to give righteousness to all who have faith, and he has given circumcision to attest to this promise, guaranteeing its truth" ("Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94).

<sup>18</sup> Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94. Also see Cornelius P. Venema, "Covenant Theology and Baptism," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 221.

<sup>19</sup> David Gibson, "Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited: A Response to Martin Salter on the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism," *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 196.

<sup>20</sup> Chapell, "A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism," 15; Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94–95; also see Holstrom, *Infant Baptism*, 45–46.

According to the paedobaptist, this is why “God did not require that covenant parents wait until the child could express faith before commanding them to administer the covenant sign and seal of circumcision.”<sup>22</sup> This is also why God does not require covenant parents today to wait until their infant children express faith before baptizing them. After all, if circumcision—as a sign and seal of the promise of justification—was applied to infants prior to their faith rather than subsequent to it, why shouldn’t the same be done with baptism? Because baptism signifies the same spiritual reality previously signified by circumcision—justification by faith—and because circumcision was given to infants regardless of whether they had been (or would ever be) justified, infant children of believers today should be baptized in the church. This is the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11.<sup>23</sup>

### An Exegetical Evaluation of the Paedobaptist Argument

The initial point of difficulty for this argument concerns the very meaning of baptism as a seal of the promise of justification. According to the paedobaptist, the baptism of an infant guarantees that the child will be forgiven and justified if and when he meets the conditions of the covenant, which are repentance and faith. One problem with this view is that the infant born into a pagan home has exactly the same conditional promise of justification extended to him: If he repents and believes in Christ, he too will be forgiven and justified. Therefore, regardless of whether a given infant is (a) a baptized child of believers, (b) an unbaptized child of believers, or (c) an unbaptized child of unbelievers, the same promise applies—he will be justified if and when he meets the conditions of repentance and faith.

As a seal of the conditional promise of justification, then, what exactly does baptism communicate about the “covenant child” which is not true of the “non-covenant child”? In other words, how does baptism—*specifically as a seal of the covenant promise of justification via Romans 4:11*—serve to distinguish the infant who is baptized from the infant who is not, since both have the same conditional promise? Baptizing an infant as a seal of God’s conditional promise of justification does not communicate anything that is objectively true about the “covenant child” which is not also true of every other child born into this world.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Chapell, “A Pastoral View of Infant Baptism,” 15.

<sup>23</sup> Many have found this argument quite compelling. For example, paedobaptist Dennis Johnson recounts the story of his interaction with a man who changed his view from believer’s baptism to infant baptism while a student at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary: “I asked him what had changed his mind,” Johnson writes, “and he mentioned especially coming to see that circumcision in the Old Testament was a sign of ‘the righteousness of faith’ (Romans 4:11), and yet Abraham was commanded to circumcise infants who were too young to demonstrate faith. If that was so in the Old Testament, he concluded, it could also be true of baptism in the New” (Dennis E. Johnson, “Infant Baptism: How My Mind Has Changed,” [http://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http://thirdmill.org/articles^den\\_johnson^TH.Johnson.Baptism.pdf/at/Infant%20Baptism:%20How%20My%20Mind%20Has%20Changed](http://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp/link/http://thirdmill.org/articles^den_johnson^TH.Johnson.Baptism.pdf/at/Infant%20Baptism:%20How%20My%20Mind%20Has%20Changed) [accessed 4/12/2015]).

<sup>24</sup> In response to this objection, paedobaptist Mark Ross suggests the illustration of two young ladies who are being pursued by two young men for the purpose of marriage, but only one of them has received a ring and is officially engaged. According to Ross, even though the women are treated equally in every

Even more to the point, however, the paedobaptist use of Romans 4:11 as an argument for infant baptism reflects a failure to understand what the apostle Paul actually said about circumcision in this verse. What paedobaptists fail to recognize is that Romans 4:11 does not define the significance of circumcision in general, but rather the circumcision of Abraham in particular, as an individual who stood in a unique place in the flow of redemptive history.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, Romans 4:11 simply does not make the connection between circumcision and baptism that is so crucial to the argument for infant baptism. This can be seen by considering both the *description* of Abraham's circumcision in Romans 4:11a and the *purpose* of his circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12.

### The Description of Abraham's Circumcision

In the paedobaptist paradigm, circumcision/baptism is viewed as the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace. Because this definition is repeated so often, some may find it surprising that nowhere in Scripture is baptism actually referred to as a *seal*, and circumcision is described this way only once.<sup>26</sup> That lone description is found in

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respect apart from the proposal and the ring—and even though the visible token of the ring does not alter the promises made—the ring makes those promises more firm in the mind of the recipient: “For the engaged lady, receiving the ring has brought home to her both the promises and the duties in a much more tangible way” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 109). In precisely this way, says Ross, the baptized child has something that the unbaptized child does not: “As a visible token of God’s promise, it gives tangible expression to the certainty of God’s promise to us, and that is something more than just the promise itself. God could have left things simply as a promise. That would have been enough. But he didn’t. He gave us more, choosing to give us a tangible reminder to assure us of his promises and to mark us out as his own. The child who grows up with that (and whose parents and church rightly apply it through instruction and training) has something that the unbaptized child does not have, and it is ‘great in every respect’ (Rom. 3:2)” (ibid., 109–10). Aside from the premature breakdown of this illustration (i.e., one young lady is engaged, having received a formal promise from her fiancé, whereas the other couple has only talked about marriage and no actual engagement promise has been made), the problem with Ross’ argument is that it fails to address the essence of the objection. Baptizing an infant may indeed be a tangible reminder of God’s promises and therefore personally meaningful to those who witness the baptism. But none of this changes the fact that every unbaptized infant has the same conditional promise extended to him, and therefore baptism—specifically as a seal of the covenant promise of justification (Rom. 4:11)—fails to distinguish in any objective way the infant who is baptized from the one who is not. Put another way, the subjective experience of witnessing an infant baptism does not alter the absence of any objective distinction between baptized and unbaptized children, for all have been promised the same justification if only they will believe in Christ. Thus, the baptism of an infant may make a tremendous subjective difference to those who witness it, but administering this rite as a seal of the conditional promise of justification fails to identify any objective difference between the “covenant child” and the “non-covenant child,” and therefore the objection remains.

<sup>25</sup> Greg Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 4–7, <http://v7.swbts.edu/tasks/render/file/?fileID=81CB3C88-CA44-AB66-35342FEC39E269DE> (accessed 6/25/18). The failure to recognize this is reflected in the words of paedobaptist Mark Ross, who asserts that circumcision in Romans 4:11 certifies “not so much a truth about Abraham, or any other circumcised person, but a truth about God” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 94; also see Holstrom, *Infant Baptism*, 114). This explanation is very appealing because of how theocentric it sounds, but as explained below, it simply fails to do justice to the language of the passage itself.

<sup>26</sup> In addition, even though circumcision is clearly identified as the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:11), baptism is never explicitly called a “sign” in Scripture.

Romans 4:11–12, where the apostle Paul identifies Abraham as the spiritual father of everyone who believes in Christ:

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised (Rom. 4:11–12).

In verse 11, Paul refers to Abraham’s circumcision as “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised.” In this description, “of the righteousness” (τῆς δικαιοσύνης) is an objective genitive (i.e., Abraham’s righteousness was sealed by circumcision),<sup>27</sup> and “of the faith” (τῆς πίστεως) is a genitive of means<sup>28</sup> (i.e., his faith was the means by which this righteousness was imputed to Abraham).<sup>29</sup> Therefore, to say that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised” is to say that Abraham’s circumcision sealed the presence of the righteousness he had received by means of his faith, a faith he exercised prior to his circumcision. In other words, at the time of Abraham’s circumcision, righteousness was not his *potential* possession—it was his *actual* possession, and circumcision served to confirm this reality.

The role of circumcision in confirming Abraham’s right standing before God is clear not only from the syntax of Romans 4:11a, but also from the terminology Paul uses. The noun “seal” (σφραγίς) refers to “that which confirms or authenticates” and can be translated “attestation,” “confirmation,” or “certification.”<sup>30</sup> This same word is used in 1 Corinthians 9:2 where Paul defends his claim to be an apostle, referring to the Corinthians as “the seal [σφραγίς] of my apostleship.” Paul’s point in this verse is that the very existence of the Corinthians’ faith in Christ authenticated the fact that he was a true apostle, and in this way they themselves were the confirmation of his apostleship. Likewise, the word “seal” (σφραγίς) is used in Romans 4:11 to state that Abraham’s circumcision confirmed or authenticated his righteous status, a status that was his by virtue of his faith.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to *BDAG*, the noun “seal” (σφραγίς) is used with the genitive of that which is confirmed or authenticated (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:2; Rom. 4:11), in this case the objective genitive “righteousness” (τῆς δικαιοσύνης) (*BDAG*, 980).

<sup>28</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), 125. Others see it as a genitive of source (e.g., Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F. F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 268), but the difference between the two does not affect the overall interpretation of Romans 4:11 in any substantial way.

<sup>29</sup> The reception of divine righteousness by means of faith is very much the dominant theme in the book of Romans leading up to this passage (see 1:16–17; 3:21–30; 4:1–10).

<sup>30</sup> *BDAG*, 980.

<sup>31</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 269.



According to Romans 4:11, then, Abraham's circumcision did not seal his *need* for righteousness; it confirmed *the presence of a righteousness he already possessed*.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, Romans 4:11 does not say (as many paedobaptists do) that circumcision sealed a conditional promise that the recipient will be justified if and when he believes. Instead, it says that Abraham's circumcision testified that God had already accepted him and counted him righteous because of his faith.<sup>33</sup> It actually sealed the righteousness he received through faith by confirming his right standing before God. In this way, Romans 4:11 "does not speak of a general 'promise' at all, but of the present justified status of a particular person,"<sup>34</sup> that person being Abraham.<sup>35</sup>

When Abraham was circumcised, then, the rite functioned as a divine testimony that God had forgiven his sins and declared him to be righteous in His sight. No longer were Abraham's transgressions a source of condemnation against him, for Yahweh had accepted and justified him by means of his faith apart from works. In fact, because Abraham was justified at least fourteen years before he was circumcised (Gen. 15:6; 17:24), it is obvious that he was not justified because he was circumcised, but rather that he was circumcised because he had been justified.<sup>36</sup> Put another way, circumcision was not the *cause* of his justification, it was the *seal* of his justification.

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<sup>32</sup> Greg Welty, *A Critical Evaluation of Infant Baptism* (Fullerton, CA: Reformed Baptist Publications, n.d.), 14. As Welty explains elsewhere, a seal confirms that what it signifies is indeed a reality: "Seals guarantee things; they do not just picture something while we sit back and wistfully hope that what is pictured is actually the case, or actually comes to pass" ("From Circumcision to Baptism," 5).

<sup>33</sup> Welty, "From Circumcision to Baptism," 5. For this reason, the paedobaptist denial that Abraham's circumcision certified that he had faith or that God had given him righteousness (Ross, "Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 94) is the exact opposite of what Romans 4:11 actually says.

<sup>34</sup> Welty, "From Circumcision to Baptism," 6.

<sup>35</sup> According to paedobaptist Sinclair Ferguson, Romans 4:11 describes circumcision as the seal not of Abraham's response of faith, but of the covenant righteousness he received through his faith. Therefore, Ferguson argues, because circumcision signified an objective reality rather than the faith that corresponded to that reality, circumcision should be understood "as a seal of the promise of God's grace to be received by faith, not of the faith that received the promise of grace" ("Infant Baptism View," 93). Paedobaptist Bryan Holstrom argues in a similar way: "The critical point of distinction is this: it is not Abraham's faith which is sealed in his circumcision, but the *righteousness* of that faith. That is what Paul says in Romans 4:11. God seals his promise to Abraham (and us through him) that all of those who have faith in Christ [will be justified]" (*Infant Baptism*, 114; emphasis original). Ferguson and Holstrom are correct in one sense, for Abraham's circumcision did indeed seal righteousness rather than faith. But in making their case, they gloss over two critical details in Romans 4:11 that undermine their argument. First, as previously discussed, circumcision did not seal the divine promise of righteousness in general but rather Abraham's possession of righteousness in particular. To argue from Romans 4:11 that Abraham's circumcision was no more than a guarantee of the promise that all who believe will be justified is to transform the seal of an actual possession into the seal of a conditional promise. But that is simply not what Romans 4:11 teaches. Second, the righteousness that was sealed by Abraham's circumcision was specifically a righteousness he received through faith. Because the objective standing of Abraham's righteousness was subjectively appropriated by means of his faith, the two cannot be separated and therefore his circumcision ultimately confirmed the existence not only of his righteousness, but also of his faith. Abraham believed and was justified, and his circumcision sealed the righteousness he received through faith. As demonstrated above, that is the unambiguous meaning of Romans 4:11a.

<sup>36</sup> Welty, "From Circumcision to Baptism," 5–6.

Because circumcision was the seal of Abraham's righteousness, it is clear that his circumcision was unique and therefore distinct in its significance from the circumcision of other Jews.<sup>37</sup> For if the circumcision of Jewish males in Old Testament Israel carried the same significance as Abraham's (as defined in Rom. 4:11), then their circumcision should be understood as confirmation that God had already justified them through faith at the time of their circumcision. For this reason, unless one is willing to affirm the justification of every circumcised male throughout Israel's history, he must acknowledge a significant point of discontinuity between the two. This point of discontinuity is highlighted further in Romans 4:11b–12, where Paul explains the purpose of Abraham's circumcision.

### The Purpose of Abraham's Circumcision

To understand the purpose of Abraham's circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12, it is helpful to consider the larger context of these verses. In Romans 3:21–31, the apostle Paul establishes the fact that a man is justified by faith in Christ apart from the works of the Law. He supports this claim in Romans 4:1–8 by introducing Abraham as an example of one who was justified by faith (vv. 1–5) and by pointing to the words of David in Psalm 32:1–2 as teaching the very same truth (vv. 6–8). Then Paul raises the question of whether this blessing of justification by faith is available to Gentiles as well as Jews: "Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also?" (v. 9a)<sup>38</sup> To answer his own question, the apostle turns again to Abraham, quoting Genesis 15:6 and reminding his readers that the patriarch's faith was credited to him as righteousness (v. 9b). He follows this reminder with a question that points the discussion in a slightly new direction: "How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised" (v. 10a). In other words, Abraham—who stood justified in Genesis 15:6

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<sup>37</sup> The reluctance of many paedobaptists to recognize the uniqueness of Abraham's circumcision appears to flow out of an *a priori* assumption that circumcision must have had the same meaning for Abraham as it had for every other male circumcised in Israel. For example, paedobaptist Mark Ross writes, "Surely, whatever meaning circumcision had for Abraham, it had also for Ishmael and for every other male in Abraham's household circumcised on the same day as Abraham (Gen. 17:23). This must be the starting point in our understanding of circumcision, baptism, or any other sacrament: there is one meaning for all who rightly receive the sign" ("Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals," 92). But by insisting on this as the "starting point," Ross rules out any interpretation of Romans 4:11 that sees Abraham's circumcision as the authentication of his righteous status before God, which prevents him from embracing the clear meaning of the verse. According to Ross, "If we understand Abraham's circumcision to certify that he had faith, or that God had given him righteousness, then we are at a loss to explain what Ishmael's circumcision meant, or Esau's, or Saul's, or any other candidate Jew who is an unbeliever and cut off from the blessings of God's covenant" (ibid.). Therefore, says Ross, circumcision in Romans 4:11 cannot be understood as the certification that Abraham had been justified before God. But the problem is that Ross' assumption that circumcision had the same meaning for Abraham as it had for every other male is not only unwarranted, but also precluded by both (a) the description of Abraham's circumcision in Romans 4:11a (see above) and (b) the purpose of his circumcision in Romans 4:11b–12 (see below).

<sup>38</sup> Paul has already addressed this question earlier in Romans 3, where he explains that the righteousness of God is available to *all* who believe (v. 22), for God is the God of both Jews and Gentiles (v. 29) and will justify both of them by faith (v. 30). His reason for raising the question yet again is to provide the opportunity to expand on his previous discussion.

and was circumcised fourteen years later in Genesis 17:24—was justified by faith prior to his circumcision, and this, says Paul, is critical to understanding the purpose of his circumcision.

Put simply, the purpose of Abraham's circumcision is that he would be the spiritual father of both Gentile believers (v. 11b) and Jewish believers (v. 12). This two-fold purpose can be seen clearly in the purpose clause which is introduced by εἰς τὸ εἶναι ("that he might be") and followed by two predicate accusatives πατέρα / πατέρα ("father...father") connected by the conjunction καὶ ("and"). These predicate accusatives—both the anarthrous use of πατήρ—are used to designate the two distinct groups of individuals of which Abraham is father. Thus, in Romans 4:11–12, the apostle Paul writes, "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be:

- the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them" [i.e., Gentile believers] (v. 11b)<sup>39</sup>

and

- the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham, which he had while uncircumcised" [i.e., Jewish believers] (v. 12)

The point of Romans 4:11–12, then, is that the specific timing and circumstances of Abraham's circumcision uniquely qualified him to serve as the spiritual father of two different groups of people. On one hand, because Abraham's circumcision confirmed a righteousness he possessed through faith prior to (and therefore apart from) the rite of circumcision, he is the father of *Gentile* believers: "all who believe without being circumcised" (v. 11b). On the other hand, because Abraham was not only circumcised but also justified by faith, he is also the father of *Jewish* believers: "those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham" (v. 12).

In this way, circumcision signified in Abraham what it did not (and could not) signify in any other Jew who was circumcised. For not only was circumcision a divine seal which certified Abraham's present state of justification, but it also equipped him to serve in the unique role as spiritual father of both Jewish and Gentile believers. In contrast, the circumcision of male infants throughout the history of Israel was neither a seal of the righteousness of their faith (Rom. 4:11a) nor the means of enabling them to fulfill this unique purpose that could only be fulfilled by Abraham (Rom.

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<sup>39</sup> In addition, the first predicate nominative has a result clause (introduced by εἰς τὸ + the infinitive λογισθῆναι) contained within it: "that righteousness might be reckoned to them."

4:11b–12).<sup>40</sup> For this reason, there is “a crucial disanalogy”<sup>41</sup> between the circumcision of Abraham and the circumcision of his physical descendants, for circumcision served as a seal of righteousness by faith for Abraham *alone* and was never intended to have this meaning for the other members of the covenant.<sup>42</sup> Only by ignoring this distinction can the paedobaptist insist that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for all who were circumcised and therefore the Old Testament counterpart to water baptism.

### A Theological Evaluation of the Paedobaptist Argument

The paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11 raises the broader issue of the significance of circumcision and its implications for the baptism debate. For this reason, a theological evaluation of the argument involves clarifying the purpose of circumcision in its original context and revisiting the case for infant baptism in light of what Scripture teaches about the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant.

#### Clarifying the Purpose of Circumcision

As the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:10–14), circumcision served as a symbolic reminder of God’s promises in that covenant: (1) to bless Abraham; (2) to make Abraham’s name great; (3) to make Abraham a great nation; (4) to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession; (5) to establish a relationship with Abraham and his descendants; and (6) to bless the nations of the world through Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21; 22:16–18).<sup>43</sup> The nature of the covenant involved blessing not just Abraham as an

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<sup>40</sup> As Welty explains, because every descendant of Abraham was circumcised shortly after birth, such a ritual could not signify the future justification of the uncircumcised, for these descendants started their existence in the nation of Israel as circumcised individuals (“From Circumcision to Baptism,” 6). Welty writes, “There is a reason why as a matter of pedagogy Paul selects Abraham’s circumcision and not the circumcision of any other Jew in history: it is the unique circumstances of Abraham’s circumcision which make it . . . uniquely suited to teach the Gentiles the gospel of God’s grace. Thus, to assimilate the meaning of any and every circumcision in redemptive history to the meaning of Abraham’s circumcision (as a means of constructing some subtle argument for paedobaptism which is wholly extraneous to Paul’s context) is to, quite frankly, miss the point, and turn Paul on his head in the service of paedobaptism” (7).

<sup>41</sup> Welty, “From Circumcision to Baptism,” 7.

<sup>42</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 86–87, and Fred Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003), 119. As Stephen J. Wellum writes, “To Abraham and to him alone, circumcision was a covenantal sign attesting that he had already been justified by faith apart from circumcision. The text is not giving a general statement about the nature of circumcision for everyone who receives it” (Stephen J. Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, 154).

<sup>43</sup> As Robert Saucy explains, “God’s purpose through Abraham began with the gracious promises attached to a call for separation (Ge 12:1–3). It was subsequently ratified in formal covenant agreement (Ge 15:4–21) and later reiterated with more detail on three occasions during Abraham’s lifetime (Ge 13:14–17; 17:1–21; 22:15–18). It was finally confirmed to Isaac (Ge 26:3–5, 24) and Jacob (Ge 28:13–15; 35:9–12; cf. 46:1–4), making it possible for Israel subsequently to speak of God’s ‘covenant with

individual, but his physical descendants as well. For this reason, his descendants were to be marked off and identified in a tangible way, not only as recipients of the Abrahamic promises, but also as conduits of those promises to the next generation of Jews. In this way, the primary purpose of the rite was to mark out a physical seed in preparation for the coming of Messiah.<sup>44</sup> As Stephen Wellum notes, it did so in two complementary ways. First, it marked out Israel as a national entity and distinguished the individuals in that nation as a part of God's covenant people. Second, it marked out a male line of descent from Abraham to David to Christ so that every Jew who was born—particularly those in Judah's line—pointed forward and anticipated the day when the true/unique Seed of Abraham would come.<sup>45</sup>

One reason that circumcision and baptism cannot be considered interchangeable in meaning is because baptism does not signify the specific physical and national promises that were signified by circumcision.<sup>46</sup> As Greg Welty observes, the fact that circumcision was solely for males—whereas baptism is for both genders—is a notable reflection of this fundamental point of discontinuity:

[I]f these rites were interchangeable in meaning, then why was there a change in the recipients of these rites, from males only (circumcision) to males and females (baptism)? Does this not argue quite strongly for the notion that there was something signified in circumcision (namely, the promised Seed, and the promise of blessing to the nations through the seed of Abraham) which is not and cannot be signified in baptism?<sup>47</sup>

Circumcision was specifically administered to the male reproductive organ and was therefore a fitting symbol of the Abrahamic promises that were passed on from

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Abraham, Isaac and Jacob' (2Ki 13:23)" (Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1993], 41).

<sup>44</sup> This is reflected in the Hebrew syntax of Genesis 12:1–3, which indicates that the final clause in verse 3—"in you all the families of the earth will be blessed"—is most likely a result clause "indicating what will be the consummation of the promises that the preceding verses have announced. That is to say, the personal promises given to Abram have final world blessing as their aim" (William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* [Nashville: Nelson, 1984], 65).

<sup>45</sup> Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants," 155. For this reason, once the true/unique Seed of Abraham arrived, the primary role of circumcision was complete and it was abrogated as a covenantal sign (Acts 15:1–35; Gal. 1:6–9; 2:11–16; 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:18–19) (*ibid.*, 155–56). Welty also argues that circumcision had a prophetic significance in pointing to and signifying the promised Seed to come: "Every OT believer was well aware that the promised Messiah, the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15), was to come from their loins, from the seed of Abraham, through whom would come blessing for the nations. It is quite plausible to hold that circumcision was specifically applied to the seed of the OT people of God in virtue of this prophetic significance of the sign itself. Likewise, it is in virtue of circumcision's prophetic significance being fulfilled in Christ, that that sign was abolished" ("From Circumcision to Baptism," 8).

<sup>46</sup> Welty, "From Circumcision to Baptism," 3–4. For other reasons, see Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism*, 47–72.

<sup>47</sup> Welty, "From Circumcision to Baptism," 3–4.

generation to generation through the physical seed of the male.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the act of water baptism—and even more obviously the baptism of females—is not able to symbolize the “seed promises” that are so central to God’s covenant with Abraham. For example, baptism does not signify the promise to make Abraham “exceedingly fruitful” (Gen. 17:6) and “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2), with physical descendants like the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16; 22:17) and the stars of the sky (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). But as recipients of the promises of the covenant, Abraham and his male offspring through Isaac and Jacob received the sign of circumcision to symbolize that their seed would indeed constitute this very nation (Gen. 28:14).<sup>49</sup>

Even the promise of universal blessing to the nations—the very promise highlighted by paedobaptists to emphasize the purely spiritual nature of the Abrahamic Covenant<sup>50</sup>—is not symbolized by water baptism. In this promise, God declared to Abraham that He will bless the nations of the world “in you” (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gen. 18:18) and “in your seed” (Gen. 22:18), later reaffirming this promise to Isaac (Gen. 26:4: “by your descendants”) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14: “in you and in your descendants”). In these passages, God promised to make Abraham and his physical seed—specifically through the line of Isaac and Jacob—the means or channel through which He would bring blessing to the nations of the world.<sup>51</sup> This promise was fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ—the seed of the woman (Gen. 3:15)—the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:16) who brought salvation to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8, 14). As those who constituted the physical line of the promised Messiah (Gen. 5:1–32; Ruth 4:13–22; Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–37), Abraham and his male descendants were circumcised as a symbol of this covenant promise that they would serve as a channel of universal blessing.

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<sup>48</sup> According to Jewett, “the covenant sign was administered to the male organ of reproduction in the Old Testament for the very reason that covenant status was passed on from generation to generation by physical birth and natural descent” (Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers], 103).

<sup>49</sup> Also see Genesis 17:2; 18:18; 21:12; 26:24; 32:12; 46:3; and 48:4. It is significant to note that when Paul relates the Abrahamic Covenant to the salvation of Gentiles in the present age (Gal. 3:8), he cites only the Abrahamic promise that all the nations will be blessed through him (Gen. 12:3) (Michael Riccardi, “The Seed of Abraham: A Theological Analysis of Galatians 3 and Its Implications for Israel,” *MSJ* 25, no. 1 [Spring 2014]: 62; Robert L. Saucy, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988], 254). “Nowhere does he make reference to the ‘great nation,’ as if the Gentiles, as the seed of Abraham, were now that nation or part of it” (Robert L. Saucy, “The Progressive Dispensational View,” in *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views*, ed. Chad O. Brand [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015], 196). Failure to make this distinction results from the more foundational error of failing to distinguish between the different senses of the “seed of Abraham” throughout Scripture (see below for further discussion).

<sup>50</sup> E.g., Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 46; David Gibson, “Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited,” 199–200.

<sup>51</sup> In each of these key prepositional phrases—“in you” (Gen. 12:3), “in your seed” (Gen. 22:18), “by your descendants” (Gen. 26:4) and “in you and in your descendants” (Gen. 28:14)—the Hebrew preposition  $\text{ב}$  introduces Abraham and/or his physical seed as the instrument or channel through which Yahweh will bless the world. Similarly, when Paul quotes Genesis 12:3 in Galatians 3:8, his instrumental use of the Greek preposition  $\text{ἐν}$  (“All the nations will be blessed in [ἐν] you”) identifies Abraham (“you”) as the channel through whom this universal blessing has come.

Recognizing the role given to Israel in this promise highlights an important difference between (a) the *channel* of this blessing (Abraham and his physical seed, and ultimately the promised Seed) and (b) the *object* of this blessing (the nations of the world). In the Abrahamic Covenant, God promised the former that they would serve as a channel of universal blessing to the latter, and they were circumcised to signify that they were recipients of this promise and would serve in this role. But the latter—as *objects* of the blessing rather than the channel through which it came—were not recipients of this promise to be mediators, and therefore their baptism does not symbolize this promise like circumcision did.

This distinction between the physical seed of Abraham (who were circumcised between the time of Abraham and the coming of Messiah) and the spiritual seed of Abraham (who are baptized from the coming of Christ forward) can also be seen in Paul's reference to the Abrahamic Covenant in Galatians 3:8.<sup>52</sup> After stating that Abraham was justified through faith (Gal. 3:6) and identifying all who are of faith as "sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7), the apostle cites the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12:3: "The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations will be blessed in you'" (Gal. 3:8). According to Galatians 3:8, God's promise that He would bless the nations through Abraham and his physical seed is fulfilled when Gentiles believe in Christ and are saved through the true and ultimate Seed (cf. Gal. 3:14, 16, 29).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> As Gentry and Wellum observe, paedobaptists often fail to distinguish the different senses of the "seed of Abraham" both within the Abrahamic Covenant and throughout the rest of Scripture (Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2012], 696). The various senses of Abraham's seed can be divided into the following four categories: (1) *biological*, including all the physical descendants of Abraham, even Ishmael (Gen. 21:13; 25:12–18), the sons of Keturah (Gen. 25:1–4), and Esau (Gen. 36:9–19); (2) *biological/special*, consisting of the physical descendants of Abraham (17:7–10) through Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14), the covenant people of God—whether true believers or not—who were chosen to mediate the blessings of Yahweh to the nations of the world (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18); (3) *typological*, as a reference to Christ who is the true/unique and ultimate Seed of Abraham through whom this universal blessing has come (Gal. 3:16); and (4) *spiritual*, as a reference to all believers in Christ—both Jew and Gentile—who are sons of Abraham because they imitate his faith (Gal. 3:6–9, 26–29; Rom. 4:11–12; cf. Matt. 3:9; Luke 19:9) (ibid.; Riccardi, "The Seed of Abraham," 57–58; cf. John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988], 71–73; Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 49–50; Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*, Revised and Updated [Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2017], 48–50). As John Feinberg explains, it is important not only to recognize the various senses of the "seed of Abraham" in Scripture, but also to refuse to let any one sense cancel out the meaning and implications of the other senses ("Systems of Discontinuity," 72–73). In this context, recognizing the difference between (2) the *biological/special* seed of Abraham (who are circumcised as the channel of universal blessing) and (4) the *spiritual* seed of Abraham (who believe and are baptized as those who receive this blessing) is crucial to having a proper understanding of the relationship between circumcision and baptism.

<sup>53</sup> At the same time, as Michael Riccardi demonstrates, Paul's identification of believing Gentiles as "the seed of Abraham" in Galatians 3 does not mean that the church is now "spiritual Israel," and it does not revoke the physical, political, and territorial promises given to national Israel ("The Seed of Abraham," 51–64). Riccardi writes, "Rather than identifying the present Gentile church as spiritual Israel who receives a spiritualized version of the Abrahamic Covenant promises made to the nation, Paul is simply announcing that Yahweh's promise to Abraham of universal blessing to the nations has come in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The descendants of Abraham have mediated Yahweh's blessing to the nations,

Put simply, Gentiles who believe in Christ are “the nations” who are blessed, not the “you” through whom this blessing has come.<sup>54</sup> In other words, to be spiritual children of Abraham among the Gentiles who are blessed (“the nations”) is not the same as being physical children of Abraham who served as the channel of this blessing (“you”). Therefore, the baptism of Gentiles does not signify that the nations will be blessed through these Gentiles and their physical seed—as if they themselves were the *channel* of universal blessing like the Jews who were circumcised—and for this reason, circumcision and baptism cannot be considered identical in meaning.<sup>55</sup>

Rather than recognizing these points of discontinuity, however, the paedobaptist emphasizes the spiritual significance of circumcision to the virtual exclusion of its physical significance. For example, paedobaptist John Murray writes:

With reference to circumcision it must be fully appreciated that it was not essentially or primarily the sign of family, racial, or national identity. Any significance which circumcision possessed along the line of national identity or privilege was secondary and derived. Its primary and essential significance was that it was the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men.<sup>56</sup>

In a similar way, paedobaptist Robert Booth writes, “Circumcision carried primarily a spiritual significance (i.e., justification by faith), and therefore may not be regarded simply a physical sign of descent.”<sup>57</sup> According to Booth, “Circumcision, far from being a sign of ethnicity, was essentially a spiritual sign and seal that set God’s people apart.”<sup>58</sup>

The reason this emphasis on the spiritual significance of circumcision is so crucial to the paedobaptist argument is obvious: The case for infant baptism depends on its ability to show that circumcision and baptism symbolize the same realities, and the realities symbolized by baptism are exclusively spiritual. The problem is that, in seeking to show the similarity between circumcision and baptism, paedobaptists focus on the spiritual significance of circumcision in such a way that minimizes (if not

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for the true and ultimate Seed of Abraham has come from Israel, having atoned for sin and provided righteousness for sinners” (64).

<sup>54</sup> Note how the apostle Peter maintains this same Genesis 12:3 distinction between “you” (Israel) and “all the families of the earth” (the nations) even after the ascension of Christ (Acts 3:25–26).

<sup>55</sup> Nor does baptism symbolize the promise of the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, and yet circumcision signified that Abraham and his descendants had received the promise of this very land (Gen. 12:7; 15:7; 17:8; cf. Gen. 13:15, 17; 15:18; 24:7; 26:3–4; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 48:4; and 50:24). As Saucy explains, the land promise should be viewed as a necessary corollary to the promised seed because the concept of a “nation” carries a territorial aspect (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 44). In this way, the great nation that would serve as the channel of universal blessing to the nations of the world would dwell in the very land promised by the God of the Abrahamic Covenant. Each of these promises—nation, land, and the mediation of universal blessing—were signified by the sign of circumcision but are not presently symbolized by baptism.

<sup>56</sup> Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 45–46.

<sup>57</sup> Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.



eclipses altogether) its physical significance. This approach not only fails to recognize the diverse nature of the Abrahamic Covenant, but it also flattens out the covenant by reducing it merely to spiritual realities while neglecting its physical and national features.<sup>59</sup> As Wellum observes, this is “a classic example of reading new covenant realities into [the Abrahamic Covenant] without first unpacking the OT rite in its own covenantal context and then carefully thinking through the issues of continuity and discontinuity between the covenantal signs.”<sup>60</sup>

### Revisiting the Case for Infant Baptism

This “spiritualizing” of the Abrahamic Covenant can be seen in the broader paedobaptist argument for a correspondence between circumcision and baptism. According to this argument, circumcision signified three primary spiritual blessings: (1) covenant communion and fellowship with God (Gen. 17:11); (2) the need to remove the defilement of sin as an obstacle to favor with a holy God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4); and (3) the righteousness of faith whereby believers become acceptable to God (Rom. 4:11).<sup>61</sup> Because baptism now represents these same spiritual blessings, the argument says, it has now replaced circumcision and should therefore be administered to the infant children of believers just like its Old Testament counterpart was.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Wellum, “Relationship between the Covenants,” 127; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 633, 695.

<sup>60</sup> Wellum, “Relationship between the Covenants,” 120–21. The deeper issue here is the paedobaptist tendency to allow Covenant Theology to blur the lines of distinction between the various covenants in Scripture. As Wellum writes, “Generally speaking, covenant theology tends to equate the ‘covenant of grace’ (an overarching theological category) with the Abrahamic covenant (a specific historical covenant which includes within it national, typological, and spiritual aspects). Covenant theology does this by reducing the national (physical) and typological aspects of the Abrahamic covenant to the *spiritual* aspects, which then becomes the grid by which all other biblical covenants are viewed, specifically the new covenant. Thus, to speak of the ‘covenant of grace’ is really to speak in terms of the Abrahamic covenant reduced to its spiritual aspects alone” (“Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 109). This tendency to minimize the physical aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant is reflected in the words of paedobaptist Louis Berkhof, who saw the Abrahamic Covenant as being “essentially identical” to the New Covenant (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 633). According to Berkhof, “The covenant made with Abraham was *primarily a spiritual covenant*, though it also had a national aspect, and *of this spiritual covenant* circumcision was a sign and seal” (*ibid.*, 632; emphases added). This tendency is not true of all covenant theologians, however, e.g., Reformed Baptist Fred Malone, who affirms Covenant Theology and its Covenant of Grace and yet makes this same critique of infant baptism (*The Baptism of Disciples Alone*, 74).

<sup>61</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221. The same three arguments were previously made by John Murray to support his claim that circumcision was primarily a seal of spiritual blessings, and that any relationship it had to physical and national promises was only secondary and derived: (1) The spiritual blessing of union/communion with God is the deepest significance of the covenant (Gen. 17:7), and therefore any external or national privileges were merely the fruit of that spiritual blessing; (2) various Old Testament passages speak of circumcision as a symbol of the removal of defilement (e.g., Exod. 6:12, 30; Lev. 19:23; 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:25); and (3) the apostle Paul taught that circumcision is the seal of justification by faith (e.g., Rom. 4:11; Col. 2:11–12; Rom. 2:25–29; Phil. 3:3) (*Christian Baptism*, 46–48). According to Murray, these three complementary notions—union and communion with God, the removal of defilement, and the righteousness of faith—were signified and sealed by circumcision and are “identical with that signified by baptism” (48).

<sup>62</sup> Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222.

The logic of this argument appears to be sound, but a closer examination shows that each of these three assertions about the significance of circumcision is plagued with hermeneutical problems. First, in identifying the significance of circumcision in Genesis 17 as “covenant communion and fellowship with God,” the paedobaptist focuses on some of the Abrahamic promises to the exclusion of others. The Abrahamic Covenant clearly contains both physical and spiritual promises, but the paedobaptist insists that the spiritual promises are primary and therefore that these promises alone were signified by circumcision. For example, John Murray acknowledges that the Abrahamic Covenant contained external blessings and national privileges, but he argues from Genesis 17:7 that the covenant consisted of union/communion with God in “the highest reaches of its meaning,” and therefore that circumcision signified this one spiritual blessing rather than the physical promises as well.<sup>63</sup> In a similar way, David Gibson identifies the promise of “spiritual ownership” in Genesis 17:7–8 as “what the covenant promise actually is” and insists that this one promise is the head to which all the earthly covenant promises refer.<sup>64</sup>

But on what basis can the paedobaptist deny that circumcision equally signified the physical promises? On what basis, for example, can he deny that circumcision

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<sup>63</sup> Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 46–47.

<sup>64</sup> Gibson, “Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 198, citing Calvin, who writes, “In this way we ought to understand all the earthly promises given to the Jewish nation: that the spiritual promise, as the head to which they refer, should always hold the first place” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.11). Gibson also argues that the significance of circumcision “is much more than merely physical” because it symbolizes “complete devotion to God” (“Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 198). Gibson traces this understanding of circumcision back to the research of John Meade (see Meade, “Circumcision of the Heart in Leviticus and Deuteronomy: Divine Means for Resolving Curse and Bringing Blessing,” *SBJT* 18.3 [2014]: 59–85; “The Meaning of Circumcision in Israel: A Proposal for a Transfer of Rite from Egypt to Israel,” *SBJT* 20.1 [2016]: 35–54; and “Circumcision of Flesh to Circumcision of Heart: The Typology of the Sign of the Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker [Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2016], 127–58). According to Meade, the meaning of circumcision is not provided in Genesis 17 itself, and therefore its significance must be found in extra-biblical sources. The most likely religious-cultural milieu of Genesis 17, says Meade, is that of ancient Egypt, where circumcision was an initiation rite for those who would serve as priests in the court of Pharaoh. This leads to the conclusion that circumcision was intended to show devotion to the service of Yahweh and His kingdom (“Circumcision of the Heart,” 60–64; “Circumcision of Flesh,” 129–31; “The Meaning of Circumcision,” 35–54). As Meade summarizes, “According to the Egyptian background already ascertained, circumcision functions as a sign of remembrance to Abraham and his offspring that they are affiliated with Yahweh or devoted to him, just as the king-priest and his clergy in Egypt were specially devoted to the deity” (“The Meaning of Circumcision,” 48). The main problem with Meade’s argument is how quickly he dismisses the possibility that the meaning of circumcision can be found in Genesis 17 itself (“Circumcision of the Heart,” 60; “Circumcision of Flesh,” 129; “The Meaning of Circumcision,” 35). As “the sign of the covenant” that God made with Abraham (Gen. 17:11), circumcision symbolized the various promises that God made to Abraham and his descendants in that covenant. For this reason, circumcision did not function merely “as a sign of remembrance to Abraham and his offspring that they are affiliated with Yahweh or devoted to him,” as Meade asserts (“The Meaning of Circumcision,” 48). Instead, as previously discussed, it functioned as a sign of remembrance that God had promised: (1) to bless Abraham; (2) to make Abraham’s name great; (3) to make Abraham a great nation; (4) to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession; (5) to establish a relationship with Abraham and his descendants; and (6) to bless the nations of the world through Abraham’s seed (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21; 22:16–18).

signified the seed promises to make Abraham a great nation (Gen. 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:6; 22:17; 28:14) and to bless the nations of the world through his descendants (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14)? As previously discussed, the sign of circumcision marked out the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob as the physical seed who would constitute the nation of Israel and bring forth the true and ultimate Seed through whom God would bless the nations of the world. Only by denying that these physical promises were also symbolized by circumcision—or by relegating them to the category of “secondary and derived” and therefore not signified by the rite<sup>65</sup>—is the paedobaptist able to maintain the equivalence of circumcision and baptism. If circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:11), it must have symbolized all the promises of that covenant and not just some of them.<sup>66</sup>

Second, in claiming that circumcision signifies the need to remove the guilt of sin as an obstacle to favor with a holy God (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4), the paedobaptist misunderstands the biblical metaphor of the circumcised heart. In the Old Testament, this metaphor is used in three closely related ways—to describe those with uncircumcised hearts (Lev. 26:41; Jer. 9:25–26; Ezek. 44:7, 9); to call upon God’s people to circumcise their hearts (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4); and to promise that God Himself will one day circumcise their hearts (Deut. 30:6). According to many paedobaptists, circumcision of the heart refers to the forgiveness of sins, and therefore the physical rite of circumcision signified or pointed to the need for the cleansing of sin, the removal of guilt necessary for a relationship with God.<sup>67</sup> They argue that

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<sup>65</sup> Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> As Wellum writes, “What promises were signified by circumcision? All the promises tied to the Abrahamic covenant, which included not only salvific promises but also national ones, particularly the land promise (e.g., Gen 12:7; 15:12–21; 17:8). All these promises in different ways lead us to Christ, but we must not reduce all of them merely to their spiritual sense” (“Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 155; emphasis original). Paedobaptists often argue against the idea that the Abrahamic Covenant and its sign of circumcision were “merely physical” in their nature/significance (e.g., Jeffrey D. Niell, “The Newness of the New Covenant,” in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 136; Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 47; Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 153; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:554)—as if that were the baptist view—but that is simply not the case. The baptist view is that the Abrahamic Covenant contains both physical/national and spiritual promises and that the covenant sign of circumcision signified all of them, not just the spiritual ones.

<sup>67</sup> Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 99–100, 108, 118, 181; Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 47–48; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221–22; Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 87, 101–3; Chapell, “A Pastoral Overview of Infant Baptism,” 12; Chapell, *Why Do We Baptize Infants?*, 8–9; Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 153, 161; and Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:554–55. According to Booth, circumcision represented cleanliness and was “an outward sign of the fact that God required a ‘circumcised’ or cleansed heart” (*Children of the Promise*, 99–100), and later he argues that “both circumcision and baptism outwardly signify the necessary inward cleansing” according to passages such as Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Acts 2:38; and 22:16 (108, 118). Venema similarly describes circumcision as a visible reminder “of the need for the removal of sin, the guilt and corruption of which constituted an insuperable obstacle to fellowship with a holy God” (“Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221); and Ross concludes that “both circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament signify a cleansing from sin, a removal of the uncleanness of sin” (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 103). It should be noted that some of these same paedobaptists also describe circumcision of the heart as a reference to conversion or regeneration (e.g., Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 101–2; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222; Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 101; see discussion below).

because baptism symbolizes this same blessing of divine forgiveness (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:38; 22:16), the two rites have the same spiritual significance and therefore should be equated.<sup>68</sup>

The problem with this argument is that circumcision of the heart refers not to the forgiveness of sin but rather to the transformation of heart known as regeneration. In the metaphor itself, a hard outer core surrounds the uncircumcised heart and makes it unable and unwilling to respond to God. To remedy this spiritual hardness and rebellion, the “foreskin” that encases the heart and prevents it from following Yahweh needs to be removed in a radical surgical act called “circumcision.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, the “foreskin” of the circumcised heart is not the guilt of sin that is forgiven, but the hardness of heart that is cut away and removed when the Holy Spirit inwardly transforms and renews the believing sinner in New Covenant conversion (Deut. 30:6; cf. Rom. 2:28–29; Col. 2:11–12).<sup>70</sup> Because this metaphor does not signify forgiveness, the heart-circumcision passages give no support to the argument that both physical rites signify the cleansing of sin necessary for a relationship with God.

The stronger argument for infant baptism comes from those who recognize that circumcision of the heart refers to regeneration.<sup>71</sup> According to these paedobaptists, because Old Testament circumcision signified the need for regeneration (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4)—and because baptism now signifies that same spiritual circumcision of the heart (Col. 2:11–12)—the two are essentially identical in meaning. In

<sup>68</sup> Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 108, 181; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 221–22; Ross, “Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 101–3; and Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 47–48.

<sup>69</sup> Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 245; also see J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 215.

<sup>70</sup> This is indicated by the primary Old Testament passages that use the metaphor: the uncircumcised heart needs to be humbled (Lev. 26:41); spiritual circumcision remedies this hardness of heart (Jer. 4:3–4) and stiffness of neck (Deut. 10:16); and spiritual circumcision produces a love for God with all of one’s heart and soul (Deut. 30:6). It is also supported not only by parallel promises in the Old Testament that describe this New Covenant transformation of God’s people—He will write His law on their heart (Jer. 31:33), give them a new heart to fear Him always (Jer. 32:39–40; Ezek. 36:26a), and replace their heart of stone with a heart of flesh that will obey Him (Ezek. 11:19–20; 36:26–27)—but also by Paul’s description of spiritual circumcision as “the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ” (Col. 2:11), most likely a reference to “the stripping away of their sinful nature/old man, which has been performed by Christ at the time of conversion” (Martin Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? An Examination of the Relationship between Circumcision and Baptism in Colossians 2:11–12,” *Themelios* 35, no. 1 (2010): 22–24; also see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2008], 197–200). In a similar way, the Old Testament uses the metaphorical language of “uncircumcised ears” as a reference to ears that are rebelliously unresponsive to the Word of God (Jer. 6:10).

<sup>71</sup> Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations—Infant Baptism: Covenant Mercy for the People of God* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996), 42–43, 50–52; Gibson, “Sacramental Supercessionism Revisited,” 200–04. As noted above, some paedobaptists who view circumcision of the heart as signifying the forgiveness of sin also see it as a reference to conversion or regeneration and make this same argument (e.g., Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 101; Venema, “Covenant Theology and Baptism,” 222). For example, in explaining the significance of Leviticus 26:40–41, Deuteronomy 10:16, and Deuteronomy 30:6, Booth writes, “By implication, a regenerate and converted heart is a circumcised heart, in which there is sorrow over sin, repentance, and confession. This is the kind of heart that physical circumcision was to signify. Baptism, likewise, holds the same significance” (*Children of the Promise*, 101).

this way, paedobaptists cite the Old Testament metaphor of the circumcised heart as evidence for attaching a primarily spiritual significance to the physical rite of circumcision, which allows them to argue for a correspondence between the two covenant signs.<sup>72</sup>

But even here the case for infant baptism faces significant difficulties. Apart from the exegetical problems with their argument from Colossians 2:11–12,<sup>73</sup> paedobaptists have read the metaphor of the circumcised heart back into Genesis 17 in such a way that eclipses the meaning of the covenant sign in its original context. When circumcision was revealed to Abraham as the sign of the covenant in Genesis 17, it symbolized the specific promises that Yahweh made to the patriarch (Gen. 12:1–3, 7; 15:7–21; 17:1–21), and not until 700 years later was the metaphor of the circumcised heart first revealed through Moses (Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; 30:6). Once that metaphor was introduced as a prophetic motif, physical circumcision certainly took on the additional significance of anticipating the circumcision of the heart that God would some day provide through the New Covenant (Deut. 30:6),<sup>74</sup> but not in a way that cancelled, replaced, or reinterpreted its original meaning as a sign of the Abrahamic promises.<sup>75</sup> Circumcision signified all the promises made to Abraham when it was first given to him as the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:11)—including the physical and national promises—and it continued to do so even after the circumcision of the heart metaphor was introduced through Moses.

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<sup>72</sup> Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism*, 86–87. In explaining the Old Testament metaphor of the circumcised heart, Booth writes, “Since circumcision carried such spiritual significance, its reference to the national covenant was a very subordinate matter. Its main purpose was to signify and seal the promise of deliverance from sin” (Booth, *Children of the Promise*, 100).

<sup>73</sup> According to this argument from Colossians 2:11–12, because circumcision and baptism signify the same spiritual reality (circumcision of the heart), they are interchangeable in meaning—the latter having replaced the former—and therefore baptism should be applied to infants just as circumcision was. Although a detailed discussion of this passage goes beyond the scope of this article, circumcision and baptism do not actually signify the same spiritual reality in Colossians 2:11–12. In this passage, circumcision serves as a metaphor for the removal or cutting off of the sinful nature, whereas baptism serves as a metaphor for union with Christ in His burial and resurrection. Both spiritual realities occur through the redemptive work of Christ—His death (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ), burial (συνταφέντες), and resurrection (συνηγέρθητε)—and both are experienced through faith in Christ (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). Therefore, Colossians 2:11–12 does not teach that baptism has replaced circumcision, but rather that all believers have been both spiritually circumcised and spiritually baptized. For a helpful discussion of this passage and its implications for the baptism debate, see Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?,” 15–29. Also see the paedobaptist response to this article: Gibson, “Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited,” 191–208, as well as Salter’s brief rejoinder: “Response to David Gibson,” *Themelios* 37, no. 2 (2012): 209–10.

<sup>74</sup> See Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” 156; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 700–2; Salter, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision?,” 19–22.

<sup>75</sup> As G. R. Beasley-Murray explains, “The prophetic call for heart circumcision is a pictorial application of the rite, not an exposition of its meaning” (*Baptism in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], 158). In other words, the concept of the circumcised heart is not intrinsic to the original meaning of circumcision as revealed to Abraham in Genesis 17. Paedobaptist David Gibson disputes this, claiming that the promise of a circumcised heart (Deut. 30:6) was “there from the very start, attached to the rite’s inception” in Genesis 17 rather than appearing only later (“Sacramental Supersessionism Revisited,” 197). But the only evidence he provides from Genesis 17 is the promise in verses 7–8 that Yahweh will be God of Abraham and his descendants (see *ibid.*, 197–200).

Third, as previously discussed in the first half of this article, in claiming that circumcision signifies the divine promise of justification, the paedobaptist reads his misinterpretation of Romans 4:11 back into the meaning of circumcision in Genesis 17 to establish a correspondence between the two covenant signs.<sup>76</sup> As demonstrated above, however, a careful exegesis of this passage demonstrates that circumcision served as a seal of righteousness by faith for Abraham alone and was never intended to have this meaning for subsequent members of the covenant. The circumcision of male infants throughout Israel's history was neither a seal of the righteousness of their faith (Rom. 4:11a) nor the means of enabling them to fulfill the purpose of Abraham as the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11b–12). Only by ignoring this distinction can the paedobaptist insist that circumcision was “a seal of the righteousness of the faith” for all who were circumcised and therefore the Old Testament equivalent of water baptism.

### Conclusion

To make the case that “baptism is for the Christians what circumcision previously was for the Jews,”<sup>77</sup> paedobaptists use Romans 4:11 to argue that circumcision signified the promise of justification just like its New Testament counterpart. In doing so, they fail to understand not only the significance of Abraham's circumcision in sealing the righteousness he had received by faith (Rom. 4:11a), but also its unique purpose in enabling him to serve as the spiritual father of both Jewish and Gentile believers (Rom. 4:11b–12). Both of these highlight the discontinuity between the circumcision of Abraham and that of his descendants, effectively refuting the paedobaptist argument from Romans 4:11.

The weakness of this argument reflects a broader tendency of paedobaptists to reduce the Abrahamic Covenant to its spiritual aspects while neglecting its national and physical features. The result of this flattening of the covenant is that “[a]ny significance which circumcision had of an ethnic or national character is not only subordinated to its religious and spiritual meaning but, for all practical purposes, submerged by it.”<sup>78</sup> The fundamental error of this approach is its failure to “treat the Abrahamic covenant first in its own immediate context and then think through how it is picked up in later biblical covenants and then ultimately in the new covenant.”<sup>79</sup> The diverse nature of the Abrahamic Covenant—along with the reality that circumcision signified all the promises made to the patriarch—demonstrates that the two

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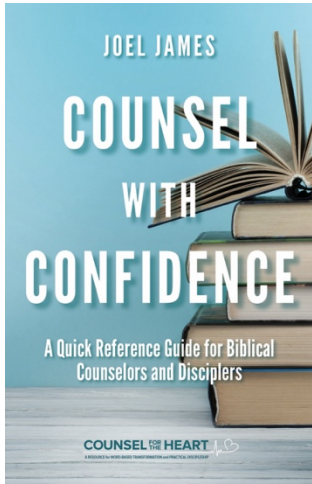
<sup>76</sup> For example, Murray cites Romans 4:11 as evidence that circumcision did not signify the physical or national features of the covenant but instead served as “the sign and seal of the highest and richest spiritual blessing which God bestows upon men” (*Christian Baptism*, 45–48); Booth argues from Romans 4:11 that far from being a physical sign of biological descent, circumcision signified the reality that God justifies those who believe (*Children of the Promise*, 99, 102); and Ross' lengthy explanation of the significance of circumcision is based almost entirely on his misinterpretation of Romans 4:11 (“Baptism and Circumcision as Signs and Seals,” 86–97).

<sup>77</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.16.11.

<sup>78</sup> Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace*, 95.

<sup>79</sup> Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 633.

rites cannot be considered identical in what they symbolize. Baptism is only for those who make a profession of faith in Christ.



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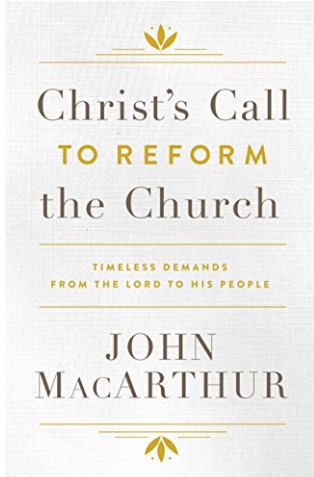
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## REVIEWS

John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton. *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$20.00 (paper).

Reviewed by Michael A. Grisanti, Professor of Old Testament, The Master's Seminary.

John H. Walton, an OT professor at Wheaton College and Graduate School, has authored numerous commentaries, reference works, essays, and articles on various biblically related topics. He has joined his son, J. Harvey Walton, and they write as a father-son team in the present volume. This book joins several recent volumes that are part of John Walton's "Lost World" series. Those books seek to provide a close reading of the Hebrew text in combination with insights from the ancient cultural world of the Old Testament (i.e., the ANE world). As stated in the preface (p. xi), "This process produces interpretations that help us to transcend the shackles of our modern worldview and traditional readings to recapture the text as it would have been understood by the original author and audience. Our hope is that through that process a world, indeed a text, that has been lost to us can be found."

The Walton team seeks to provide a better explanation for the genocide texts of Deuteronomy and Joshua. Here are some of the questions they want to answer in this volume: Were the Canaanites punished for sinning against the covenanting God? What happens when these texts are examined under their ancient context? What does the word *herem* mean if it doesn't mean "utterly destroy" as it traditionally is interpreted? Is God a moral monster, committing or condoning genocide as some have interpreted from this text? Without a doubt, this volume provides a tightly written and provocative perspective on this vexing question—Did Yahweh really command His chosen people to evict or exterminate all the Canaanites who had been living in that land?

The authors arrange their thoughts in twenty-one propositions divided into six sections (along with several excurses). Readers can access three appendices on the IVP website that provide more technical explanations of certain issues related to these conquest accounts (<https://www.ivpress.com/Media/Default/Downloads/Misc/5184-appendix.pdf>). As one reads through the volume, they quickly realize that several key assumptions or expectations guide the writers as they examine various aspects of this long-debated question.

The three propositions of section one focus on some basic interpretive foundations. The “cultural river” of ancient Israel (customs, thought processes, etc.) that is found in the Bible must be “translated” in order for us to understand what the Bible says. The authors present the idea that God commanded Joshua to wipe out the Canaanites as an example of a “bad cultural translation” (p. 11). They regard the Bible as the revelation of God’s plans and purposes to us, rather than rules for behavior, that allows us to participate with Him in those plans and purposes. They also affirm that the question, “What does the Bible say,” must be answered by asking “Why is this in here?, rather than “What does this verse mean?” A central belief for them is that the Bible does not define goodness or tell us how to produce goodness, but instead tells us about the goodness God is producing (p. 17). They state: “The conquest account is written in such a way that the ancient audience would have understood it as good according to the metric of establishing and sustaining order” (p. 28- linked to proposition 14). The biblical text does not affirm that killing the Canaanites is good, because killing the Canaanite is not the objective of the conquest; fulfilling the covenant is (p. 29).

In part two, the authors contend that the Bible does not depict the Canaanites as guilty of sin. They give careful consideration to several passages, esp. Genesis 15:16. In the end, they dismiss the idea that the affliction God brings is ever connected to wrongdoing and also reject the interpretation that affirms that Genesis 15:16 indicates that the Canaanites were committing sin. The authors also argue that neither the Israelites or the Canaanites were stealing land from the other. As with other conclusions they present, these interpretive decisions directly impact their answers for the larger question of genocide in Deuteronomy and Joshua.

Part three builds on those ideas by writing that the Pentateuch and Joshua never describe the Canaanites as guilty of breaking God’s Law. They stress that the Canaanites are not in any way under the covenant God established with Israel and cannot be regarded as disobedient to those laws. They also regard the Mosaic laws (and esp. Lev. 18–20) as more like biblical wisdom rather than lists of rules to be obeyed.

In Part four the authors draw on two key motifs from the ANE. First, various ANE texts refer to a group of invincible barbarians called the “Umman-Manda” who represent indecent and disordered living. Rather than regarding Leviticus 18–20 as genuine divine expectations for Israel, the authors of this volume view those levitical statements as a “literary trope” referring to these disorderly outsiders who live outside the covenant. The Leviticus passage does not, however, describe the actual conduct of the Canaanites. Any destruction language with reference to the Canaanites is just part of that literary trope. Second, the authors understand the language of conquest as God defeating *chaoskampf*, i.e., the removal of chaos in preparation for divine order. Consequently, “we should think of the conquest as bringing order out of nonorder, rather than bringing order out of disorder. Nonorder (the Canaanites) are being cleared away, just as *tohu wabohu* is in Genesis 1, so that order may be established” (p. 166, n. 29).

The fundamental point of Part five is offering a unique definition of *herem*. The authors reject the customary translation, “devote to destruction” or “utterly destroy”. Instead, they propose “to remove from human use” (pp. 170, 220). The point of the

conquest, therefore, is to remove the Canaanite identity from use so that the Israelites would not appropriate that identity (pp. 179, 190).

In Part six, the authors extrapolate ways that their understanding of *herem* can find a place in the church, the New Covenant community.

I am grateful to have John Walton as a friend and a colleague in the ministry of teaching God's Word to hungry students. I also don't question his or his son's affirmation that they view God's Word as a divine word with all authority. Regardless, I have several significant concerns about their argumentation and conclusions.

Generally speaking, in many of John's works it seems that he brings ANE concepts into his exegetical process with disconcerting, far-reaching impact. I don't question that we need to read Scripture against its larger context, part of which involves ANE customs and thinking. However, with John and his son, that ANE background looms much larger in his interpretive process than I can embrace. Their explanation of the ANE literary trope of the "Umman-Manda" and citation of "chaoskampf" as essential to a correct interpretation of the conquest accounts seemed stretched and, in my opinion, examples of bad exegesis and questionable use of ANE concepts.

Their interpretation of Genesis 15:16 as not referring to God's future punishment of the sin of the Canaanites rests heavily on their regarding the expression 'ad *hēnnā* to indicate memory of the past with no expectation of change (p. 50). Whether it refers to exclusive past is debatable, but there is not any indication intrinsic to the expression itself about no expectation of change. That must be drawn from the context and other passages. They also disregard the prediction of divine judgment on Canaan in Genesis 9.

Although the authors define *herem* as "removal of something from human use" (p. 170) instead of "devote to destruction," various passages do not fit their definition. Deuteronomy 20:16–17 connects not leaving any Canaanite survivors as what God expected of Israel (v. 16) to the Israelites completely destroying (*herem*- v. 17) the various people groups who occupied Canaan (cf. Josh 10:40). In Joshua 10:28–39, the author pairs striking or cutting down the people with the sword with completely destroying (*herem*) them several times (vv. 28, 29, 35, 37, 39). The expression "leaving no survivors" also occurs four times in this section (vv. 28, 30, 33, 37).

Joshua 11:12 states that Joshua and the army of Israel struck down the Canaanite rulers and the cities (i.e., inhabitants of the cities) with the sword, completely destroying them (*herem*). 11:14 affirms that the Israelite soldiers "struck down every person with the sword until they had annihilated them, leaving no one alive." The word *herem* does not occur here but the same meaning of total destruction of people is present.

The ethical challenge of Yahweh commanding His army to evict or wipe out the Canaanites has understandably challenged interpreters for years. Scholars have offered various suggestions to which the Walton team's interpretation can be added. To this writer, accepting the face value meaning of verses related to this contested question is best placed against the understanding that God is the Creator of the universe and can arrange the stewardship of land as He wills. Statements regarding the depth of Canaanite sin and the Lord's intention to punish them for that sin (though interpreted differently by the Waltons) point to the divinely appointed removal of the Canaanites from the land of promise.

Those who want to understand the options before them when interpreting the vexing question of Canaanite genocide by Israel need to read this volume along with the other main proposals. To this writer, the Walton team's proposal for the genocide question involves too many strained interpretations that draw too heavily on ANE literary tropes and themes.

Jason S. DeRouchie. *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017. 583 pp. \$30.00.

Reviewed by Iosif J. Zhakevich, Associate Professor of Old Testament, The Master's Seminary.

DeRouchie's *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* aims to guide the student on a journey of exegeting and applying the Old Testament. A professor of Old Testament and Biblical Theology at Bethlehem College and Seminary and an elder at Bethlehem Baptist Church, DeRouchie exhibits his concern for bringing every reader of the Old Testament to a proper understanding of the Old Testament all throughout the book, but explicitly so in the introduction to the book in his discussion on "Ten Reasons That the Old Testament Is Important for Christians" and "The Benefits of Hebrew Exegesis" (pp. 6–15). A noteworthy achievement of this book is that it succeeds in being accessible to readers of the Old Testament at different levels—the easy level (for everyone, requiring no knowledge of Hebrew), the moderate level (also for everyone, but engaging the Hebrew text with English translation), and the challenging level (for the more advanced reader, who is learning or is comfortable with Hebrew) (pp. xxiv–xxv).

DeRouchie presents his method of exegeting and applying the Old Testament by deploying twelve steps of interpretation, and he divides these twelve steps into five parts. The following is his outline of this process (taken directly from p. 15):

Part I: Text—"What is the makeup of the passage?"

- 1) Genre: Determine the literary form, subject matter, and function of the passage, compare it to similar genres, and consider the implications for interpretation.
- 2) Literary units and text hierarchy: Determine the limits and basic structure of the passage.
- 3) Text criticism: Establish the passage's original wording.
- 4) Translation: Translate the text and compare other translations.

Part II: Observation—"How is the passage communicated?"

- 5) Clause and text grammar: Assess the makeup and relationship of words, phrases, clauses, and larger text units.
- 6) Argument-tracing: Finish tracing the literary argument and create a message-driven outline that is tied to the passage's main point.

- 7) Word and concept studies: Clarify the meaning of key words, phrases, and concepts.

Part III: Context—"Where does the passage fit?"

- 8) Historical Context: Understand the historical situation from which the authors composed the text and identify any historical details that the author mentions or assumes.
- 9) Literary Context: Comprehend the role that the passage plays in the whole book.

Part IV: Meaning—"What does the passage mean?"

- 10) Biblical Theology: Consider how your passage connects to the Bible's overall flow and message and points to Christ.
- 11) Systematic Theology: Discern how your passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible, assessing key doctrines especially in direct relation to the gospel.

Part V: Application—"Why does the passage matter?"

- 12) Practical Theology: Apply the text to yourself, the church, and the world, stressing the centrality of Christ and the hope of the gospel.

As a whole, DeRouchie's instruction on exegeting the text succeeds in three general respects. First, DeRouchie clearly defines the basic meaning and function of each of the exegetical principles in each chapter (e.g., What is genre? What is the value of genre for interpreting the Old Testament? See p. 22). Second, DeRouchie illustrates each of the twelve steps of the exegetical process by analyzing many different passages in the Old Testament to bring out specific points about the principles of exegesis (e.g., Gen. 12:1–3; Deut. 6:4; 1 Kings 17; 1 Sam. 13:14; Prov. 22:6; Hab. 3:17–19; and this is only a sampling). Third, in addition to the previous point, DeRouchie applies each of the twelve principles of exegesis to one single passage that he selected—Exodus 19:4–6—to demonstrate the exegetical process to the reader from start to finish.

As regards specifics, while DeRouchie's discussion of the particulars of exegesis is overall done quite well, at certain points of his discussion questions do arise and the reader is left wishing for greater clarity.

Chapter 1 (Step 1: Genre) offers a thorough presentation of what genre is and how it is to be considered in the process of exegesis in an edifying manner (pp. 21–97). While this section is lengthy, and sometimes reads like a survey, the value of this discussion is DeRouchie's analysis of specific genre types—Narrative, Prophecy and Law, the various subgenres in the Psalms (lament, trust/confidence, thanksgiving, praise/hymn, royal, wisdom/Torah, liturgy, and historical), and Proverbs.

Chapter 2 (Step 2: Literary Units and Text Hierarchy) focuses on the need to establish the literary unit of a passage—its beginning and its end. DeRouchie emphasizes that "the biblical authors wrote with purpose, logic, and order, creating groupings and hierarchies of thought to guide understanding" (p. 99). To guide the reader in this task, DeRouchie discusses the function of various features of Hebrew that help to ascertain the structure of the text. For example, he considers the function of the

conjunction ׀ and the literary value of its absence (“asyndeton”) within the text; he analyzes marked vs. unmarked clauses (which he develops further in ch. 5, pp. 222–26); he delivers a very helpful assessment of the discourse marker וְיָהִי/וְיָהִי (signaling “turning points or climaxes”; p. 117); and he explains the primary and secondary citation formulas.

Chapter 3 (Step 3: Text Criticism) offers an introductory presentation of text criticism, an often intimidating and laborious task for the student. DeRouchie explains that “*criticism* means not ‘finding fault with’ but ‘evaluating’ the existing copies” of the biblical text, and he adds to this that “Most of the biblical text is certain, and where variations do occur among existing copies, we can usually determine the original wording with a good degree of certainty” (italics original; p. 129). His discussion of some of the more common scribal errors is informative, though this section often lacks in examples, leaving the discussion abstract (pp. 144–46). While he defines and describes the meaning of *homoioteleuton*, he offers no actual example to make this phenomenon concrete (p. 145). The same is the case with *homoioarcton*, *improper conformity to parallels*, *insertion of marginal note*, and various others. As regards specific passages, his choice of Psalm 22:17 [v. 16 in Eng.] to introduce the discussion on text criticism is astute, as it is both an excellent case study and an intriguing passage. Unfortunately, he relegates much of the technical material to a footnote (see fn. 4 on p. 130), though the material is unquestionably relevant to the study of this exegetical step. His remark that the vocalization of Psalm 22:17 in the Masoretic Text might betray a “bias of later Jewish scribes against Christianity”—in that it presents the passage in a “less messianic way”—befits a defense more robust than he was able to offer in this book (see pp. 130–31 and nn. 6–7). Additionally, DeRouchie’s conclusion that Psalm 22:17 refers to “the piercing of [Jesus’] hands and feet” makes the reader wonder why the New Testament never cites specifically Psalm 22:17 to refer to the death of Jesus.

Chapter 4 (Step 4: Translation) provides a concise introduction to translation, explaining different types of translation (form-equivalence, sense-equivalence, and idea-equivalence) and how to produce a good translation.

Chapter 5 (Step 5: Clause and Text Grammar)—arguably the most technical chapter in the book—delivers a helpful presentation of grammar and syntax (pp. 181–236). DeRouchie discusses here the relationship between tense, *aktionsart*, mood, and aspect. On the one hand, he explains that Hebrew conjugations “are not tense-specific,” on the other, he recognizes that “certain verbal conjugations more naturally align with past [*qatal*, *wayyiqtol*] or nonpast [*yiqtol*] contexts” (p. 193). His chart of the Hebrew verbs on p. 190 is excellent, but his decision to exclude the cohortative form from the chart is perplexing. While he recognizes the key role of context for determining the tense of a verbal form (p. 194), he also proposes giving attention to *aktionsart* (dynamic/stative; p. 194) and to the position of the *yiqtol* in the clause to help determine the verb’s tense (*yiqtol* in the first position = nonindicative; *yiqtol* not in the first position = indicative; though he notes that there are exceptions to this guideline; p. 200). The chapter also explains more specifically the function of the nonindicative *yiqtol* and *weyiqtol*, the markers of immediate significance הֵן and הֵןהֵן, the inference markers לָכֵן and לְעֵתָהּ, verbless clauses, the prepositions מִן and לְ, the function of כִּי, and other matters related to the specifics of grammar and syntax. As

in other chapters, here too DeRouchie does a fine job at illustrating the principles of grammar by applying these principles to specific passages (e.g., 1 Sam. 13:14; Prov. 31:10–31; Gen. 12:1–3; Deut. 6:4; Exod. 19:4–6; etc.). The conclusions he reaches with some of his case studies, however, are sometimes more and sometimes less persuasive.

While this chapter's discussion of grammar and syntax is successful for purposes of a big-picture overview of reading the Hebrew text, the truth is that the Hebrew text demands more than this chapter is able to offer, on account of the rich complexities of the Hebrew language. For example, the chapter does not give attention to the function of the Hebrew stem for determining the meaning of a verb (*qal*, *niphal*, *piel*, etc.), although DeRouchie does recognize the importance of analyzing the stem (p. 186). The chapter does not address the prevalent and important genitive construction in Hebrew (i.e., construct state). And in addition to the particles discussed in this chapter (e.g., ׀, ׀, etc.), so many more particles appear in the Old Testament, the knowledge of which is necessary to exegete the Hebrew text. The point of my remarks here is simply that, while the discussion of grammar and syntax in this book is done well, the student must recognize that this book is limited in matters of grammar and syntax. In order for the student to be more fully equipped to interact with the details of the Hebrew text, the student will need to turn to additional reference grammars. Consequently, DeRouchie's volume, whether used for personal study or for teaching purposes, in my view, must be complemented by other Hebrew reference grammars, those akin to Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*.

Chapter 6 (Step 6: Argument Tracing) successfully guides the student from producing a basic content outline to producing an exegetical outline that captures the message of the passage (pp. 256–58). As regards DeRouchie's promotion of diagramming passages by means of arcing (see pp. 243–46), no doubt some students will find this helpful, while others will be confounded by the complexity of this exercise.

Chapter 7 (Step 7: Word and Concept Studies) leads the student step-by-step in performing word and concept studies in a passage.

Chapter 8 (Step 8: Historical Context) and chapter 9 (Step 9: Literary Context) are particularly clear presentations of the process of integrating historical and literary contexts into the study of the Old Testament. Concerning the historical context, DeRouchie explains that "the goal is not simply to identify the author, date, or cause of writing or to grasp a historical detail but also to clarify how these data affect the interpretation of your passage" (p. 302). As regards the literary context, he charges the reader not simply to take note of the context of the passage, but to examine how the passage contributes "to the overall story or argument of the book" (p. 324).

The final chapters of the book, Chapter 10 (Step 10: Biblical Theology), Chapter 11 (Step 11: Systematic Theology), and chapter 12 (Step 12: Practical Theology) are instructive for incorporating theological analysis to the study of the Old Testament. As characteristic of DeRouchie throughout the book, the principles he articulates on the page are illustrated by his application of those principles to concrete passages.

In addition to the content of the book, DeRouchie provides the reader with over 150 figures throughout the book; lists of key words and concepts, along with questions for further reflection, and resources for further study at the end of every chapter;

and an appendix with a Bible reading plan, a glossary defining terms relevant for exegesis, a bibliography, an index of Scripture, and an index of subjects and names at the end of the book.

In the end, DeRouchie succeeds in the overarching goal he sets out to achieve in this book. In his own words: “I wrote this book to help believers better study, practice, and teach the Old Testament as *Christian Scripture*” (emphasis original; p. xxiii). DeRouchie’s burden to show the lasting relevance of exegesis manifests itself at various points throughout the book; but one vivid instance of this appears in his discussion of the translation of the Bible (in chapter 4), where he observes that of the approximately 7,000 languages in the world, 3,955 still do not have a translation of the Bible (p. 158). This book does a fine job at reminding the reader that exegesis of the Hebrew Bible is consequential and that it must be done properly.

Mike Fabarez. *Raising Men, Not Boys: Shepherding Your Sons to Be Men of God*. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2017. 205 pp. \$14.99 (paper).

Reviewed by John W. Dube. Adjunct Professor, Arizona Christian University.

Mike Fabarez is the founding pastor of Compass Bible Church in Aliso Viejo, California. Pastor Fabarez is the voice of the *Focal Point* radio ministry and has previously written a very helpful volume on preaching, *Preaching That Changes Lives* (Wipf and Stock, 2002). In the volume under review, Pastor Fabarez uses biblical principles and well thought-out practices to teach parents how to shepherd their sons to be men of God.

As Pastor Fabarez opens the book, it becomes very clear that this is not your average parenting book. The underlying principle of raising boys is stated in chapter 1, “His temporary consignment to your family is to prepare him to take his place in this world as a trophy of God’s grace and as an agent of God’s values and priorities in this upcoming generation” (p. 18). Therefore, a primary aim of this book is to help parents understand their goal is separation. This goal seems obvious enough, but may surprise readers who are accustomed to the psychological jargon found in most parenting books. Thus, Pastor Fabarez reminds parents “that the marriage relationship is to be permanent, while the parenting relationship is to be temporary” (p. 19). This foundational principle of parenting for the purpose of separation is met with rich practicality. Pastor Fabarez urges parents to see a little boy’s world as an opportunity to learn what godly “dominion” looks like (pp. 24–25), the necessity of “managing himself in the solitude of his bed” (p. 30), and lengthening of the leash on outside playtime (p. 32–33).

In chapters 2 (*Walking Away from God*) and 3 (*Lack of Respect for Marriage*) Pastor Fabarez addresses a boy’s spiritual trajectory and the kind of home that will build a godly man. Readers are reminded that raising a man of God requires a home filled with the Bible, prayer, and thankfulness. A thorough explanation of the Gospel is given in pp. 43–51. Here Pastor Fabarez reminds parents, “teaching our boys first about God’s love is out of biblical sequence ... The Bible doesn’t begin with God’s love; it begins with God’s position over us as the sovereign Creator” (pp. 44–45). In



chapter 3 the primacy of marriage is addressed—"God designed marriage to be first in time, first in duration, and first in priority" (p. 62).

The sticky issues of discipline and instruction are addressed in chapter 4 (*Is Spanking Child Abuse?*). Here again, Fabarez excels. The chapter begins by encouraging parents to carefully think through the legislation in their homes. Pastor Fabarez champions an approach to rules that is well balanced and biblically based (Eph. 6:4). In addressing the topic of discipline Pastor Fabarez mines out a rich nugget of truth from the tragic story of Eli's sons (1 Sam. 3:11–13). "The chilling thing about the charge against Eli was that he had certainly *confronted* his boys about their rebellion (1 Sam 2:22–25), but apparently that was all he did. He didn't *restrain* them" (p. 79). While most books on parenting conceal the delicate details of discipline, Fabarez exposes them (pp. 84–91). Parents are encouraged to use biblical discipline in a way that is reasonable and proportional based on the infraction.

Pastor Fabarez tackles the gender issue in chapter 5 (*Make Him Sweat Every Day*). He affirms gender distinctions and calls Christian parents to embrace, applaud, celebrate, and maintain them. Biblical support for gender distinctions is garnered from Deuteronomy 22:5; 1 Corinthians 11:2–13; and Matthew 19:4, 6. Having embraced a boy's maleness, Fabarez moves to the practical and cautions parents against raising bubble-wrapped boys. "[T]he effects of shielding our children from physical pain, emotional disappointment, or unpleasant experiences are reaping an overwhelming load of unintended consequences. It's time to accept a measure of those physical dangers, which are inherent in raising a rollicking, adventurous, active little boy" (p. 97). In chapter 6 Pastor Fabarez turns to the topic of work. Pastor Fabarez covers such topics as chores, laziness, making excuses, and resting to work. Further, the chapter teaches parents how to instill a manly work ethic in their boys through well-managed sleep times, winsome productivity (e.g., egg timer), dinnertime duties, laundry, and perseverance (i.e., "crawl in, don't call in). A highlight from this chapter is the reminder that a parent's attitude about work is crucial in instilling a biblical work ethic in children. Pastor Fabarez warns parents against a "Wednesday hump day" and "Thank God It's Friday" mentality. He warns with this attitude, "We are bound to raise clock-watchers who will never approach their work 'as to the Lord'" (Col. 3:23, p. 113).

In chapter 7 (*Help Him Foster Dominion over His Wallet*) Pastor Fabarez teaches parents how to help their boys think about money. He uses Ecclesiastes 2:1–11 to remind parents about the lie offered by the love of money. Urging parents to teach boys about generosity Fabarez says, "[S]eek to model for your boys a daily pattern of lending, generosity, and the holding of the things of the world loosely for the sake of Christ" (p. 130). For practical help, the topics of allowance, saving, giving, and bank accounts are addressed.

The subject of sex, marriage, and dating is covered in the cleverly titled chapter 8, *Raising Men in a World Half-Full of Women*. Most memorable here is the advice to have the difficult "sex talk" sooner rather than later, "If you procrastinate, you will by omission be handling your son's sex education over to a set of ill-informed and unfit peers" (p. 144). Pastor Fabarez also urges dads to lead in this area with their sons. A charge to trepidatious men: "I exhort you to man up, work through your apprehensions, and have the discussion" (p. 145). Popularity, social skills, and humility are covered in chapter 9 (*Prepare Him to Face the World*). In this chapter,

Pastor Fabarez builds on the description of the boy Jesus in Luke 2:52. As Jesus increased “in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man,” so shall boys. Thus, practical ways in which parents can help their boys follow Christ’s example of growing in favor with the people who populate their lives include: hygiene and grooming, respect for authority, gratitude and thank-you notes, learning to converse, giving apologies, and praying and prayer lists (pp. 167–70).

Pastor Fabarez addresses the fear of raising a boy addicted to video games and screen time in chapter 10 (*A Righteous Man’s Fun and Games*). While affirming that godliness is not incompatible with fun and lightheartedness (p. 172), Fabarez reminds parents that it’s easy to overdo it. Most interesting in this chapter is the sub-section entitled “God’s Military Motifs.” In this section Pastor Fabarez demonstrates how the Bible uses the military motif. And, how the Bible draws on that motif in order to engender a “battle-ready” mindset for the Christian life. As a result, Fabarez permits parents some latitude concerning “combative games that boys are so prone to want to play” (p. 179). However, Pastor Fabarez is quick to caution parents against video games “gratuitous in their depictions, unjust in their tactics, and encourage genuine abuse in the ways a player could go about raking up points” (p. 181). In this chapter Pastor Fabarez urges parents to use “seemingly uncommon sanctified common sense” as they teach their boys how to balance work and play (p. 182).

The teen years are addressed in chapter 11 (*Wisdom to Navigate the Teen Years*). For parents who rationalize certain behavior in the teen years, Fabarez reminds, “The Bible does not carve out a special exemption if their son is a ‘teenager’” (p. 188). Although this chapter is helpful, there are fewer practical helps than in the rest of the book. As good as this book is, parents may be longing for more help from Fabarez on how to parent their teens. This reviewer is hopeful the brevity of the subject will result in a dedicated volume from Pastor Fabarez covering the subject of parenting teens.

*Raising Men, Not Boys* is a superior volume on parenting. Pastor Fabarez does nearly everything right. The book is absolutely filled with the practical helps all parents long for. Readers will immediately connect with Fabarez’s well-placed anecdotes and appreciate his well-worn path. While this book does specifically address raising *boys*, parents will be surprised at how comprehensive most of the principles and practices are. Many of the helps found in this volume can be easily transformed into more general practices that would apply to raising girls. In the final analysis, *Raising Men, Not Boys* is not your average parenting book. The volume surpasses other parenting books and should find its place among the greats on the topic.

John A. Beck. *The Holy Land for Christian Travelers: An Illustrated Guide to Israel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017. 256 pp. \$16.99 (paper).

Reviewed by Michael A. Grisanti, Professor of Old Testament, The Master’s Seminary.

As someone who leads at least two trips to Israel each year, I am always looking for solid sources to help me learn more about the land of Israel as well as resources for people who travel with me to Israel. The author of this volume, John Beck, was an OT professor and now focuses on researching and writing material to help people understand the Bible. John shares our (TMS's) high view of Scripture as well as our chronology of the Old and New Testaments.

The first section of this book provides “big picture” information about the land of Israel. In addition to modern-day maps of Israel and Jerusalem, Beck provides an overview of Israel's history as well as the geography and climate of the Promised Land—geographical zones, agricultural year, seasons and culture, winds, water, and rainfall. Then he offers various suggested itineraries—for various numbers of days to visit all Israel as well as smaller itineraries for touring Jerusalem. He ends this “big picture” section with suggestions of things a traveler should know when travelling to Israel.

The central (main) section of the book provides an overview of sites in the Jerusalem area (sites you can walk to and sites you need to drive to around Jerusalem) and then discusses sites in four major regions—Coastal Plain, Central Mountains South, Central Mountains Center, and Central Mountains North.

For each of the chapters that focus on the sites in and around Jerusalem or in the three sections of Israel that Beck identifies, he begins by listing the sites he will explain. As he works through these sites, as needed, he expands his “commentary” to consider that area in various historical periods. Throughout this explanation, he provides several photos of artifacts and artist reconstructions of various buildings or cities. For example, in his consideration of Jerusalem, Beck includes some helpful artist reconstructions of the appearance and extent of Jerusalem (in the times of David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Jesus—pp. 48, 52, 56, 65).

In his explanation of Christ's birth at Bethlehem (p. 90), he provides a great artist reconstruction of a home in that period which demonstrates that in Judea many homes were built on top of natural caves. This would provide the family a place for additional storage as well as a shelter for their animals (and where Jesus was likely born). In his explanation of sites in the Galilee region, Beck summarizes (and depicts with artistic reconstructions) three kinds of fishing that took place in that area (cast net, drag net, and trammel net—pp. 227–29). These and many other helpful features of the book do not simply provide some geographic tidbits but shed light on a biblical place or practice that enables a reader to better understand various biblical passages. Finally, every site treatment ends with a blue box with key information—directions to take to get to your desired location.

The last section involves numerous clear and helpful maps—OT and NT cities, the road system, tribal divisions, maps of the united and divided kingdoms, and maps of all Israel and then Galilee in the NT. This section ends with a Bible timeline and an index of locations explained throughout the volume. He provides a key to symbols that occur throughout his explanations that remind the reader whether there are fees or if modest dress is required.

For scholars or lay people who want to have a great resource to help guide their learning about important features of the land of promise, this relatively small volume by John Beck deserves a place in every backpack of people heading to Israel. While

there are several good written guides for those travelling to Israel, Beck's volume is the top of this trip leader's list!