

Who Are the Chosen People of God?

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NT 644 Hebrews  
November 12, 2018

## Introduction

The relationship between Israel and the Church can be a contentious one to say the least. Theological tribes such as the Radical New Perspective on Paul (RNPP – an offshoot of the New Perspective framework), Messianic Judaism, and some strands of dispensationalism, especially those that embrace Christian Zionism, say that Israel (ethnic Jews) will forever be God’s chosen people. They believe in an ongoing covenantal relationship between God and contemporary Jews that exists over and above Christianity. This paper will argue that the promises made to the Jewish people under the Old Covenant have now been fulfilled in the Church and that the Jewish people are no longer God’s chosen people. Instead, this distinction of God’s chosen people is held by all those who have placed their faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ.

I call this understanding of redemptive history, “promise and fulfillment.” There are other names this position goes by such as “supersessionism” and “replacement theology.” According to the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, “Supersessionism is the idea that Christ’s entry into human history replaces all that has come before, including God’s unique covenantal bond with Israel.<sup>1</sup>

This view was the majority view held by Christians until the rise of dispensationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the horrific atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust. It was at that time that many began to see this position as contributing to an anti-Semitic spirit in Christianity. A spirit that many believe, for good reason, led to the outrages of the holocaust. It was at this point that many theologians began to condemn and distance

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<sup>1</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill; Brettler, Marc Zvi. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2011), Kindle Edition, 461.11/28/2018 8:25:00 AM

themselves from this view of Israel and the Church.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, A Catholic writer said a few years ago: “It is now widely agreed among Christian theologians that being a supersessionist is a bad thing.”<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it can be considered a bad thing, especially if your theological tribe holds certain assumptions about Israel based on Scripture or otherwise. However, we must never adjust our interpretation of what we believe to be a biblical teaching to accommodate the current cultural milieu. Instead, we must be faithful to what we believe to be the best interpretation of scripture and base our faith and practice upon that understanding. I believe one can hold to the belief that that ethnic Jews are no longer God’s chosen people while also not holding an anti-Semitic attitude. Furthermore, one can hold that the Church has replaced the Jews as God’s chosen people and still affirm that many Jews will be saved at the end of the age in accordance with the mystery revealed in Romans 11:25 and the promise made in Romans 11:26<sup>4</sup>

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. <sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved . . .

There are a few different directions a paper like this can take but I have decided to look at one primary theological framework through which many Christians develop their view of Israel and the Church: Dispensationalism. The Radical New Perspective on Paul, Messianic Judaism, and Christian Zionism will also be touched on concerning their view that the ancient promises to

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen, Jeremy. “Supersessionism, the Epistle to the Romans, Thomas Aquinas, and the Jews of the Eschaton.” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 52 no. 4, 2017, 528.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce D. Marshall, “Quasi in Figura: A Brief Reflection on Jewish Election, after Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* (English ed.), vol. 7, no. 2 (2009), 477.

<sup>4</sup> Cothran, Todd, *The Glorious Majesty Revealed*, 1.

Israel are eternal but this paper's primary concern will be dispensationalism. I will first state dispensationalism beliefs and then give a rebuttal based on the weaknesses I see in with this view. I will then answer a common objection to supersessionism and that is that the promises of God are irrevocable.

## **The People of God**

While there are various strands of Dispensational Theology, classical and revised dispensationalism argues that there are two peoples of God: Israel and the Church. According to *classical dispensationalism*, God is seen as pursuing two different purposes. One is related to heaven and the other to the earth. According to Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, the "heavenly humanity was to be made up of all the redeemed from all dispensations who would be resurrected from the dead. Whereas the earthly humanity concerned people who had not died but who were preserved by God from death, the heavenly humanity was made up of all the saved who had died, whom God would resurrect from the dead."<sup>5</sup>

*Revised dispensationalism* abandoned the two strands of heavenly and earthly peoples. Instead, the emphasis is on two peoples of God—Israel and the church. These two groups are structured differently with different dispensational roles and responsibilities, but the salvation they each receive is the same. The distinction between Israel and the church, as different anthropological groups, will continue throughout eternity.

Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) believes:

“One of the striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile Nations, Jews, and Gentile people. The

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<sup>5</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 24.

church is neither a separate race of humanity (in contrast to Jews and Gentiles) nor a competing nation alongside Israel and Gentile nations . . . the church is precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this dispensation prior to the coming of Christ. When Paul speaks of the church as “one new man” in Christ (Eph. 2:15), he means precisely redeemed humanity as opposed to the unsaved.”<sup>6</sup>

Blaising and Bock make a radical departure from the two previous forms of dispensationalism when they write, “Progressive Dispensationalists believe that the church is a vital part of this very same plan of redemption. The appearance of the church does not signal a secondary redemption plan, either to be fulfilled in heaven apart from the new earth or in an elite class of Jews and Gentiles who are forever distinguished from the rest of redeemed humanity. Instead, the church today is a revelation of spiritual blessings which all the redeemed will share in spite of their ethnic and national differences.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Progressive Dispensationalists (PD) see more continuity between Israel and the church than either classical or revised dispensationalism. PD stresses that both Israel and the church compose the “people of God” and both are related to the blessings of the New Covenant. However, PD’s do not equate the church as Israel in this age and see a future distinct identity and ruling function for ethnic Israel in the coming millennial kingdom when all the promises to ethnic Israel will be fulfilled.

Blaising and Bock hold to an already/not yet perspective when it comes to the biblical covenants. They do not believe the Abrahamic, Davidic and new covenants are being fulfilled today “in a spiritual sense.” Rather, “the spiritual blessings being given today are blessings actually predicted by the new covenant. These blessings are given in a partial and inaugurated

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<sup>6</sup> Blaising and Bock., 49.

<sup>7</sup> Blaising and Bock., 47.

form, which looks forward to complete fulfillment at the return of Christ.” They go on to say that “all of these covenants will be fulfilled in a future dispensation consistent with the historical-grammatical sense of their promises.”<sup>8</sup>

### **God’s Promises to Israel**

Blaising and Bock give a robust argument as to why they believe many of the Davidic blessings have already been granted while others await Christ’s return.<sup>9</sup> However, I do believe they are incorrect when they say “all of these covenants will be fulfilled in a future dispensation consistent with the historical-grammatical sense of their promises.”<sup>10</sup> Put simply, they are saying that Israel will receive the physical promises made to them through the Abrahamic covenant at Christ’s second coming. This is an orthodox dispensational belief; the Abrahamic covenant has never been fulfilled completely by the descendants of Abraham. Blaising and Block state that “much of the New Testament writings concern the extension of present kingdom blessings to Gentile believers as consistent with Old Testament promises about Gentiles. However, the New Testament never presents these events as a replacement of the specific hopes of Israel. Instead, they are argued as compatible or complementary to the hopes of Israel.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Answering Dispensationalism**

I contend that Scripture makes it clear that these promises or hopes have indeed been fulfilled. God promises Abraham in Genesis 12:2 that He would make Abraham a great nation. While many modern skeptics would like us to believe that David was nothing more than a leader in a small tribal village, archaeological evidence is beginning to support the fact that Israel under

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<sup>8</sup> Blaising and Bock., 53.

<sup>9</sup> Blaising and Bock., 174-190.

<sup>10</sup> Blaising and Bock., 53.

<sup>11</sup> Blaising and Bock., 267.

both David and Solomon was a great nation. God promised Abraham in Gen. 13:16 that his descendants would be as “the dust of the earth.” 2 Chronicles 1:9 tells us that Solomon prays, “O LORD God, let your word to David my father be now fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people *as numerous as the dust of the earth*” (emphasis mine). Concerning the promise in Gen. 15:5 that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore, 1 Kings 4:20 tells us, “Judah and Israel were *as many as the sand by the sea*” (emphasis mine). These verses indicate that the numerical promises concerning the Jewish people have been fulfilled.

There are numerous passages in the Old Testament that speak to the land promises made to Abraham as well (Josh. 11:23, 21:41-45, Neh. 9:21-25). Joshua 21:43-45 makes it clear that all the land that God promised Israel was given to them: “So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. *Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass*” (emphasis mine, Joshua 21:43-45). Scripture indicates that the physical promises of rest, land, and a vast number of Jewish people have been fulfilled.

Genesis 17:1-8 is also a favorite passage of dispensationalists. They claim this verse is undeniable scriptural evidence that God promised to be the God of Israel for all time.

Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, 2 that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, 4 “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you

exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. 7 And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. 8 And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

It is true that Israel enjoyed a special relationship like no other people in the world at that time. This relationship was one of adoption. It was not a saving relationship in a spiritual sense but rather physical. The Israelites were “loved,” “chosen,” and “redeemed” but only in a physical sense. The vast majority of Jews died in their sin and unbelief.

So why do dispensationalists still believe that Israel is God’s chosen people and will play a prominent role in the future? The problem comes from dispensationalism’s refusal to believe that the church is the spiritual fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. Israel experienced the physical fulfillment of “many descendants,” “possession of the land,” and a special relationship with God like no other people in that He chose them for His purposes and for a time He was their God. He gave them the Old Covenant with its types and shadows of things to come. They possessed the “oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). However, their inability to fulfill the requirements of the Mosaic Covenant required God to end His special relationship with the Jews. They no longer have a claim on His special affections. Those affections have always been set on the spiritual descendants of Abraham, both Jew and Gentile. Those who believe by faith and were chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight (Eph. 1:4).

The physical promises made to Israel were always types and shadows of the ultimate fulfillment found in Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:28,29 helps us understand how the “many descendants” is fulfilled in Christ, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor

female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The Church is the spiritual descendant of Abraham and will enjoy the spiritual blessings made to Abraham.

As has already been stated, Joshua makes it clear that the land promises made to Israel have been fulfilled. However, the *rest* the Israelites enjoyed was not the ultimate *rest* promised to Abraham, "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Heb. 4:8-11). The *rest* the Israelites enjoyed was a physical rest from war while the *rest* enjoyed by the Church (believing Jews and Gentiles) is an everlasting possession of our eternal salvation.

The New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment of the "I will be their God" (Gen. 17:3) promise made to Abraham. The New Covenant is a completely different covenant from the Old. The contrast is not between something evil (the Old Covenant/Judaism) and something good (New Covenant/Christianity), rather, it is between something good (Old Covenant) and something better (New Covenant).<sup>12</sup> The OC was based upon requirements; If Israel obeyed they would be blessed, if they disobeyed, they would be judged.

"And the LORD said to me, "Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem: Hear the words of this covenant and do them. For I solemnly warned your fathers when I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, warning them persistently, even to this day, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they did not obey or incline

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<sup>12</sup> Hagner, D.A., *Covenant and Jewish Christianity*, Martin, R.P., & Davids, P.H. (Eds.) Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press).

their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore, I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.” (Jer. 31:6-8)

God is a faithful God and He carried out His part of the covenant with Israel. He judged them for their disobedience. This judgment did not happen immediately and indeed he gave them many opportunities to repent and start living by the covenant again. However, they did not and He brought multiple judgments upon them ultimately culminating with the final judgment, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., brought on by their final act of obstinacy; the rejection of his Son, the Messiah. Jesus told them the end was near when he said, “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matt. 21:43).

It is because of Christ’s work on the cross that a New Covenant is possible. This covenant was prophesied in Jeremiah 31 and reiterated in Hebrews 8 as now being enacted for the old one is now obsolete and has passed away (Heb. 8:13). The author of Hebrews writes,

“The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Heb. 8:8-10).

Again, here is the fulfillment of the “I will be their God” promise in all its glory. Because of Christ’s work on the cross, he was able to purchase complete forgiveness for sins and a God-

loving heart for everyone who professed faith in him. The Levitical priesthood under the Old Covenant was unable to do this but our High Priest, Jesus, was able to accomplish this by his work on the cross. There is no longer a veil, there are no longer sacrifices required, for Jesus is our one sacrifice for all times. He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant and has ushered in a gracious new one.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The promises made to literal, physical Israel were fulfilled by a literal, physical Israelite, Jesus the Messiah. He is *the Seed* of Abraham. What dispensationalism fails to fully grasp is that through union with Christ, all who are His by faith have become members of His body.

The Abrahamic promises do not require a future fulfillment by a national Israel in order for God's Word to be true. The promises were typologically fulfilled by national Israel in the Old Testament and are now being fulfilled by the true Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). Paul makes it clear that those who are in the New Covenant are the real heirs of the covenantal promises.

“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Rom. 9:6-8).

To understand how Scripture fits together it is important to understand how the Abrahamic Covenant encompasses both the Old and New Covenant. The Old Covenant is the physical fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises and the New Covenant is the spiritual fulfillment of these promises.

### **Answering Objections: Supersessionism and the Radical New Perspective on Paul**

Many theologians within the Radical New Perspective on Paul condemn the idea that the church is now God's chosen people exclusively and reaffirms the election and salvific promises of *Jewish* Israel alongside, though not necessarily inside, the community of Christian faithful. Two ways lead to redemption: the way of the cross, which Paul preaches to the gentiles, and a special way or *Sonderweg*, the way of the Torah, exclusively for the Jews.<sup>13</sup>

Proponents of RNPP and dispensationalism point to both the irrevocable promises of God mentioned by Paul in Romans 11:29, "for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable", and the resolve with which he answers his own question in Rom. 3:1–4a: "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every man be false."

Whether one holds to a RNPP position or is dispensational in any of its forms, Romans 11:25-26a and Romans 3:1-4a are important verses that speak to God's faithfulness to the Jewish people.

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen, Jeremy. "Supersessionism, the Epistle to the Romans, Thomas Aquinas, and the Jews of the Eschaton." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 52 no. 4, 2017, 530. *MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/ecu.2017.0052](https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2017.0052)

Romans 11:25-26a: “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this *mystery* (emphasis mine), brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.<sup>26</sup> And in this way all Israel will be saved . . .”

One does not need to deny every single promise of God to ethnic Jews to hold to supersessionism, it just depends on how far reaching one believes those promises or promise to be. According to Romans 26a, there is one promise made to ethnic Israel that has yet to be fulfilled and that is “all Israel will be saved.” But what does “all Israel” mean? We will look at that in a moment.

Paul believes that many Jews will come to faith in Christ and lays the groundwork for his argument by pointing out that it is possible for Jews to be included in the people of God. “If they do not persist in unbelief . . . God is able to graft them in again” (Romans 11: 23). If he was able to save those who were “wild by nature” (v 24) — the Gentiles — “how much more” is he able to bring the Jews, the “natural branches,” back “into their own olive tree!” It is at this point that Paul returns to a concept used in other letters, especially Ephesians—mystery. Douglas Moo offers that the concept of mystery “refers to a complex cluster of ideas . . . Generally, it has the sense of a purpose of God that previously has not been revealed.”<sup>14</sup> Paul’s reference to mystery in Romans 11:25 is a perfect example of something that was once unknown now being revealed to better explain God’s redemptive purposes. In this instance, God is revealing the process of hardening ethnic Israel’s hearts, followed by gentile salvation, which in turn leads to the salvation of ethnic Israel (11:26a), ultimately resulting in the return of Christ. Paul is revealing what was once unknown: namely, that God is working through His sovereign redemptive process

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<sup>14</sup> Moo, Douglas J.. *Encountering the Book of Romans: Encountering Biblical Studies, A Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2014), Kindle Edition, 3655.

to save “all Israel.”

Two points need to be made. First, “all Israel” does not refer to every single ethnic Jew that has ever lived or is even living at the end of the age. The use of “all Israel” in other key passages such as 2 Chronicles 12:1, and 2 Samuel 16:22 help us to understand that while many Jews will be saved, it does not mean every single one.<sup>15</sup>

The second point is that every ethnic Jew that is saved will be saved through acceptance of Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Contrary to the Radical New Perspective on Paul or even radical forms of dispensationalism, no matter whether one has been faithful to the Torah, there is no “special way or *Sonderweg*” through which ethnic Jews are made right with God.<sup>16</sup> As Bruce Longenecker states, “Paul’s christocentrism applies even when he imagines the salvation of both parts of Israel [Jewish and non-Jewish], so that the future elimination of Israel’s ‘ungodliness’ is a cipher envisaging Israel’s complete adoption of christocentric faith.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Paul did not see any other way that one could be saved, whether Jew or Gentile, apart from the atoning work of Christ.

This New Covenant is the “eternal covenant”<sup>18</sup> in Christ, through which believers shall forever have fellowship with God. The Old Testament covenants and the teachings of the Torah come to a glorious climax in the person of Jesus Christ. The Mosaic, or Old covenant gives way to a “better covenant enacted on better promises.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cothran., 3-4.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen., 530.

<sup>17</sup> Longenecker, Bruce. “On Israel’s God and God’s Israel,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, Volume 58, Issue 1, 1 April 2007, 26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flj109>

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 13:20

<sup>19</sup> Hebrews 8:6

Anyone who has any hope of being saved must agree with the author of Acts, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

## **Conclusion**

The Abrahamic promises do not require a future fulfillment by a national Israel in order for God’s Word to be true. Nor does it require that ethnic Jews still be considered the people of God. The promises were typologically fulfilled by national Israel in the Old Testament when they were considered God’s chosen people and are now being fulfilled by the true Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16). Paul makes it clear that those who are in the New Covenant are the real heirs of the covenantal promises and God is not ashamed that we, as his children, call him Father (Heb. 11:16).

“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (Rom. 9:6-8).

The people of God are not two distinct groups, ethnic Jews and the Church. The true people of God are those who have placed their faith in the Jewish Messiah, the one who has come and established a New Covenant. This people group is comprised of those who had faith in a coming Messiah (some ethnic Jews but far from all) and those (both believing Jews and Gentiles) who have placed their faith in the Messiah who has come – Jesus. It is in this new people of God that all the spiritual blessings of Abraham will be fulfilled.

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