

CHAPTER 2

RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO ISRAEL

Various views about this topic reflect different approaches to biblical theology and hermeneutics. They can be grouped conveniently into some of the basic eschatological positions.

Classic amillennial system

This treatment of Israel and the church is that which has been held by Augustine, the Roman Catholic church, the Lutheran churches, and Calvin and most Reformed traditions.

Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (1945)

William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (1968)

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Interpreting Prophecy* (1976)

Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (1979)

1. The promises made to the physical seed of Abraham are understood as explicitly or implicitly conditional, requiring faith.
2. Many physical promises are regarded as having been fulfilled already

Josh 21:43-45, “So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. 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 all the LORD’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.”

Neh 9:8, “You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.”

Neh 9:23-24, “You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess. Their sons went in and

took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased.”

3. Spiritual promises are considered far more important than physical promises. Many physical promises are understood allegorically as referring to spiritual matters, or to the intermediate or the eternal state.
4. By and large, the NT church is viewed as the recipient of the OT kingdom promises to Israel.
 - a. The Jews as a nation cease to have the promises directed especially to them.
 - b. The church, made up of the faithful remnant of the Jews and the believing Gentiles, is spiritual Israel; it is all there will be of Israel (postmillennialists assert a future conversion of the nation of Israel).
 - c. Therefore, the biblical references to Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem, etc., refer to the church, either on earth or in heaven.
5. In short, Israel is grafted into the church.

Dispensational system

Popularized by the Old Scofield Bible

Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (1959)

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (1964)

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (1965, rev. ed. 1995)

Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism* (1994)

1. OT saints were saved by faith, just as NT saints, but the knowledge content of faith in OT times was much more limited than amillennialists believe.
2. OT promises to Israel are conceived of as unconditional, and there is greater emphasis on the physical nature of these promises and on their literal fulfilment.
3. In the time of Jesus, the nation of Israel rejected the Mosaic covenant law and its promises.
4. The kingdom promises were thus withdrawn from Israel until the millennium, when they will be fulfilled. The OT “prophetic clock” has stopped ticking during the present time; it will resume ticking when the church is raptured to heaven and the seven-year tribulation period begins.

[E.g., see J. Randall Price, Ch. 7: “Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts,” in *Issues of Dispensationalism*.]

5. The NT church is a separate body from Israel, with separate identity, functions, promises, and destination; it is never called Israel.
 - a. The NT church is a mystery not known in OT prophecy; it can be called a “parenthesis.”
 - b. The NT church considers Jew and Gentile as equal within itself.
 - c. The NT church is primarily a spiritual body, with spiritual promises—not those of the OT, which were made to Israel.
6. In the millennium, Israel will have been converted and will receive the kingdom promises. These promises include the reestablishment of the Jewish legal system and temple sacrifices (see John C. Whitcomb, “Christ’s Atonement and Animal Sacrifices in Israel,” *GTJ* 6:2 [1985], 201-217). Israel will be an earthly people; the church, a heavenly people, will reside in heaven.
7. In short, Israel and the church are entirely distinct.

[E.g., see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, Ch. 6: “Israel and the Church” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*.]

Covenant premillennial system

George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (1884); J. Barton Payne, *Encyclopedia of Biblical Prophecy* (1973; post-tribulational, 554; Ezekiel temple 657 #686 and 286 #8; but cf. 354-55); E. E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (pp. 136-39 are excellent)

1. The OT promises to Israel are understood literally, as both spiritual and physical. The biblical covenants are outworkings of the covenant of grace.
2. When so stated, the promises are unconditional (Abrahamic, Davidic, new covenants); others are stated to be conditional (Mosaic, phps. Ezekiel’s temple).
3. Because of Israel’s disobedience, the theocracy was withdrawn until the second coming of Christ, at which time the promises will be fulfilled. The theocracy has been suspended since the Babylonian Captivity, with the exception of the Messianic works of Christ during his life on earth.
4. The church of Israel has continued to the present, with important modifications:

- a. The NT church is still in essence the continuation of the OT church; true Jews in NT times became Christians; the visible Christian church continues to operate under the Abrahamic covenant.
 - b. The church in this new dispensation, has sustained important changes in administration (see above, ch. 1). Nevertheless, its unity is maintained.
5. The NT church, along with the OT church, is the heir of the OT literal promises to Israel, and will share in the millennial “Jewish” kingdom (cf. Matt 21:43, “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit”).
 6. Unbelieving Jews will be converted at the second coming of Christ.
 7. In short, the NT church is grafted into Israel.

(This understanding of covenant premillennialism is that which is presented in this course; it follows our understanding of both the OT and the NT, as, e.g., Rom 11.)

Note on historic premillennialism

Historic premillennialism is the name given to the belief that Christ will return before the promised millennium, but that his coming is not divided into two separate phases (before & after the tribulation). Many of the theologians who hold this position would agree with covenant premillennialism, as presented above.

However, others accept a more allegorical interpretation of the OT promises, as in the tradition of the amillennialists. These men base their premillennial position solely on NT passages. *E.g.*, see George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (1952); and *The Presence of the Future* (1974; Ladd says he agrees with Ridderbos, p. 36). Ladd recognizes his similarity of approach in the OT and in a partially realized eschatology to that of the amillennial scholar Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (1950, ET 1962).

Ladd’s position:

- 1) OT prophecies and covenants must be interpreted in the light of NT fulfilment passages—i.e., as spiritually applied to the church in many cases. Some of the OT prophecies may still refer to national Israel, but we cannot determine which prophecies.

- 2) Christ began his messianic rule with his resurrection and ascension; his rule will be made visible at his second coming. The promised kingdom is therefore both present and future.
- 3) The NT seldom discusses the millennium; it is hinted at in 1 Cor 15:23-26, and taught in Rev 20:4-6.
- 4) According to Rom 11:26, the Jews eventually will all be saved, but the exact relationship of this event to the second coming or the millennium is uncertain.

The mystery revealed to Paul

Paul links the church in NT times to the word *mystery*, and says this mystery was unknown before his ministry. Many have taken Paul's statements to teach that the church is an entirely new entity, and separate from Israel. Rather, it appears that the NT church is mysterious in that it accepts Jew and Gentile on equal standing, without requiring the Gentile to become a Jew.

The term μυστήριον musterion

This Greek word, transliterated in English as *mystery*, means a secret which was unknown previously, but which now has been revealed.

In the gospels Jesus is quoted as using the word one time, when he told the disciples that they would know the "mysteries of the kingdom of God" (Matt 13:11 = Mark 4:11 = Luke 8:10).

John uses the term a few times in Revelation, describing various symbols, or, in one place (10:7), the end result of prophecy.

Rev 10:7, "But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

But the vast majority of usages occur in Paul's epistles (21x). Paul uses the term to describe various aspects of the gospel and God's prophetic purpose. However, some usages seem to refer directly to the church, and dispensationalists claim that these references prove that the existence of the NT church is something entirely new and unexpected and that the church is therefore not a part of Israel.

Rom 16:25-26, ". . . my gospel . . . according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him"

Eph 3:3, 4, 9, “. . . the mystery made known to me by revelation, . . . my insight into the mystery of Christ . . . to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God”

Cf. NIV at 3:6, for definition of the mystery: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

Col 1:26-27, “the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you [Colossians = Gentiles], the hope of glory.”

Col 2:2 (note Gk. text, followed here by NIV), “. . . in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ” (for “Christ” in his corporate sense, cf. 1:24)

Careful examination of these passages will reveal that the mystery of which Paul speaks is not the existence of the church, but the nature of the church: the church now includes Jews and Gentiles together in one body. This development was not predicted in the OT, nor expected by pious Jews.

The mystery and OT prophecy

While this development was not specifically predicted in the OT, it was agreeable to the OT.

There was uncertainty in the OT regarding the nature and timing of the fulfilment of the promises (1 Pet 1:10-12). Yet certain OT predictions indicate that the blessings promised to Israel will result in blessings on the Gentiles (e.g., Gen 12:3; 22:18; Isa 11:10; 42:1, 6; 49:6, 22; 52:15; Mal 1:11; Matt 4:15-16, cf. Isa 9:1-2).

These blessings on the Gentiles are predicted in a context of Jewish supremacy in the kingdom (e.g., Isa 49:23; 60:3, 5, 10-11, 14, 16). The “mystery” is that now Gentiles in the kingdom will share with the Jews this favored position. See Isa 32:1; cf. Matt 19:28; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 20:4-6.

James saw that the OT recognized the fact that Gentiles as Gentiles would be God’s people as the kingdom began (Acts 15:14-18, quoting Amos 9:11-12, probably from an older Hebrew text than the MT, cf. LXX). And Paul saw in the OT justification for his mission to the Gentiles (Rom 15:4-12, 20-21).

The vagueness of OT prophecy on this point allowed great flexibility in the providential fulfilment of these prophecies. It enabled the conditional promises of the Mosaic covenant and of

Jesus himself to be made in good faith, so that the Jewish nation could have received these promises earlier, without violating predictive prophecy.