

# Israel in God's Plan

Paper for the EA consultation, Thursday 26 June 2003

I am contributing this paper to represent a broadly 'replacementist' position on the issue of Israel and prophecy. The use of the word 'replacementist' is just for convenience, because this term covers quite a range of positions in which either Jesus, or the church, or the new covenant are held to 'replace' Israel or the old covenant. I do not argue for all these views, but only for one within the spectrum. But the word is not well-chosen. The problem with it is its overtone of 'terminate,' which gives the unfortunate impression that those who take this view perforce believe that God has 'finished' with Israel, and written off the old covenant. This is not true, as I hope to show.

We may distinguish between two broad positions on this whole issue, which we may label (again, for convenience), the 'Reformed' and the 'Dispensationalist.' The fundamental difference between the two concerns their starting-point in the interpretation of the Old Testament. 'Reformed' positions start with the New Testament, and read the Old through New Testament eyes. This approach looks back, ultimately, to the Reformers, and especially to Luther's principle that the whole of Scripture must be judged and interpreted in the light of Christ. 'Dispensationalist' positions, on the other hand, start with the Old Testament, and read the Scriptures in a linear fashion, maintaining that older promises and prophecies are not fundamentally altered by later developments, even the coming of Christ. There is no need, therefore (on this view) to 're-read' the Old Testament prophecies, which must be allowed to stand in their original, literal sense.

This paper argues for the 'Reformed' position, but does so in a spirit of respect and acceptance of the differing 'Dispensationalist' approach. This is an issue in which clarity of mutual understanding must go hand-in-hand with commitment to mutual love and acceptance, and a willingness to live with our differences as *inessential* in the light of all that unites us in Christ.

I will develop an argument around **Five Theses**, in defence of a 'replacementist' position. The shape of this argument may seem surprising, because I do not jump straight to 'Israel' texts and start arguing about their exegesis. The particular difficulty of this issue is that it goes right to the heart of New Testament theology, as we will see, and therefore has to be considered in the light of big considerations about the nature of the Gospel.

***1. We must interpret the Old Testament as Christians, from the fundamentally new perspective provided by faith in Christ.***

This first thesis makes this point theologically, and then thesis 2 develops it at greater length from within the New Testament. Right from the start, Christians believed that, because of Jesus, they had a whole new ‘handle’ on the interpretation of the Old Testament. The Epistle of Barnabas (c. 130AD) argues strongly, not just that the Old Testament now has a fuller meaning because of Jesus, but that, apart from him, it cannot be understood at all. This naturally brought Christians and Jews into hot debate with each other. But the widespread Christian view at this time was that Jesus *makes sense of* the Old Testament, which apart from him is left incomplete and contradictory. And this has been the fundamental Christian hermeneutic all down through the centuries—something deeply regretted, now, by some Christian scholars in our contemporary post-Holocaust situation. It is deeply embarrassing, they say, and fundamentally antisemitic, that right from the start Christians *colonized* and *occupied* the Jewish Scriptures as if they no longer belonged to the Jews at all.<sup>1</sup>

I agree, of course, that we must be open and loving in our relationships with Jews, and ready to learn in dialogue with them. But at the same time our conviction that *Jesus is the Word of God, incarnate among us* must shape our reading of the ‘words’ of God which preceded his appearance. Our representation of this conviction does not need to be imperialistic in attitude and condescending in tone—of course not. But neither can we back away from the *hermeneutical* difference that Jesus makes, alongside the revolutionary difference he makes in every other area of life.

I would want to argue that the ‘dispensationalist’ position does not work through this ‘Jesus-centredness’ with sufficient consistency. At too many points, it reads the Old Testament without reference to him, and in a way which treats it as ‘Hebrew Bible’ rather than as what it is for us—the ‘Old’ Testament which forms a single Scripture with the ‘New.’ But I would not argue for this point were it not for the fact that this is precisely what we find within the New Testament itself:

***2. Throughout the New Testament, we see the first Christians wrestling with the relationship between the ‘new’ thing that God has now done in Christ, and the ‘old’ thing which he had done in Israel, and re-interpreting the latter in the light of the former. If we are to be New Testament Christians, we must do the same.***

The *experience* of Jesus Christ was overwhelming, to our first brothers and sisters in Christ. Those that knew him personally, experienced the forgiveness of their sins through him, as though he were empowered to do what only God can do (e.g. Mark 2:1-12, Luke 7:36-50). When the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church as Jesus has promised, they realised that *he* had been authorized to bestow the Spirit *of God*. And then, in his name, healings and prophecies accompanied the preaching of Good News of the Resurrection. This was all wonderfully new, something for which their synagogue upbringing had not prepared them. Messianic expectations were quite varied in the first century, but no one had been expecting anything like this.

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<sup>1</sup> I am thinking here particularly of Catholic scholars like Gregory Baum and Rosemary Ruether.

There were three options open to them, in seeking to understand all this. (A) *They could have started afresh, regarding their experience of Christ as a new religion, in discontinuity with everything they had experienced before.* This was the option for which the heretic Marcion argued in the 2nd century. But he was rightly judged to be a heretic, for the first Christians did *not* go down this route. In Romans 11:17ff, Paul argues against Gentile Christians who may have been saying something like this. The reason why the first Christians rejected this option is clear: *Jesus himself had called the God of Israel his 'Father', and clearly interpreted the Scriptures around himself.*

On the other hand, (B) *they could have held on to the central 'givens' of their Jewish upbringing, and interpreted Jesus as the wonderful messianic icing on the cake, the rounding-off of God's covenant purposes for Israel.* But they refused to do this, too. This was the option of the so-called Judaisers, the 'circumcision party' (Gal. 2:12 etc), who argued passionately that the coming of Jesus altered *nothing* of what God had done hitherto. The law must still be obeyed in entirety, for it is still entirely God's law. What has changed that? If Gentiles want to join in, they are most welcome—but they must of course be circumcised, as the law requires, for it is only within the covenant people that the covenant blessings of the Messiah can be enjoyed.

Although the Judaisers had such powerful theological arguments on their side, the first Christians (led here by Paul, of course) by and large rejected this viewpoint. It lasted after the New Testament period, maintained into the second century by the Ebionites. But then this distinctive Jewish Christianity finally died out. Why was it not adopted by the church at large? For three reasons, I believe: (i) because the Holy Spirit jumped the gun and poured himself out on Gentiles without scruples about circumcision (Acts 10, etc), (ii) because Jesus himself had clearly set aside some of the old purity laws as no longer applying to his disciples, because the distinction between Jews and Gentiles was being broken down (Mark 7:14-30), and (iii) because ultimately Paul's argument prevailed, that the law was an *interim arrangement* within God's plan (e.g. Gal. 3:15-29).

I do not, of course, accuse our 'Dispensationalist' brothers and sisters of being Judaisers, but I argue that their *hermeneutic* is essentially the same. In believing that the law must *not* be obeyed literally, while Old Testament prophecy *must* be interpreted literally as originally intended, they are living in hermeneutical inconsistency.

This meant that the first Christians were left with the third option, (C) *they sought a complex middle way, a reinterpretation of God's plan which incorporated the New consistently into the Old.* And this is what we see, throughout the New Testament. The letter to the Hebrews is perhaps the most sustained attempt to do this, setting out its stall in the opening statement of faith, 'The God who spoke to our fathers of old, in so many varied ways through the prophets, has at the end of those days spoken to us in his Son ...' (Heb. 1:1-2). Here the phrase 'at the end of those days' suggests the conviction, which Hebrews will

develop at length, that Jesus is the unsurmountable climax of everything that God did in and through Israel, so that no understanding of the words of the prophets can now bypass him.

But the very complexity of Hebrews reveals what a difficult task it was, to find this middle way. *One the one hand*, the integrity of the 'Old' as word of God must be preserved. Jesus, after all, had said that not a single stroke would pass from the law until all was accomplished (Matt. 5:18). But *on the other hand*, the staggering newness of the New must be fully embraced—a newness which against all expectation required the Messiah to *die and rise again*, and which now brought Gentiles into the full experience of God in Christ without any connection to Israel through circumcision or legal observance.

How did they do it? Paul, for instance, wrestles with the relationship between law and Gospel, and begins to say things about the law for which he would have *persecuted* himself, in his pre-Christian days. We are no longer 'under' law, he insists, but under *grace*. This opposition between law and grace is horrifying, from the Judaisers' perspective. The law simply bore fruit for *death* in our lives, he says, but now we've been set free from the law, to serve in the Spirit. Of course the law in itself is holy, right and good—but it is also *weak*, unable to deliver us from the power of sin within us. Praise God, that we have now been delivered from this weak and unstable guardian by Christ. The law was simply waiting for him to come, guarding us until that moment.

The observant will realise that in this last paragraph I have been summarising the argument of Romans 6-8 (with a bit of Galatians 3 thrown in). It is clear from the structure of Romans that, for Paul, 'the law' and 'Israel' are two sides of the same coin. They go together in the Scriptures, because the law is God's wonderful gift to his chosen people, the pledge of his love for them. They go together also as the two sides of the accusation to which Paul seeks to reply in Romans, namely that he denies all covenant advantage to *the Jews* by undermining the place and role of *the law* in God's plan for Israel and the world. These two accusations come together in Romans 3:1-8, where Paul replies that he does *not* deny covenant advantage to the Jews, and he does *not* undermine God's capacity to judge the world by apparently prizing a law-less relationship with him. Long ago Ulrich Wilckens pointed out that Paul tackles the two sides of this coin in turn, in Romans: in chs 3-8 he deals with the law (not budging an *inch* on his insistence that it no longer provides the foundation of our relationship to God), and then in Romans 9-11 he deals with the issue of the covenant with Israel.

That God's *word* is at stake is clear from his opening: 'It is not as though God's word has failed!!' (9:6). He will *insist* that the covenant promises have been fulfilled—but in a most surprising way, one which allows God's ways to be 'past finding out, and his judgments unsearchable' (11:33): a way that he would never have dreamed of, left alone with his Old Testament, a way that depends upon a dramatic re-reading of Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, in the light of what

God is now doing in the conversion of the Gentiles.<sup>2</sup>

I don't want to get into the interpretation of Romans 9-11 at this point, because my point here is the general one that the first Christians set themselves the wonderful, exciting task of completely re-thinking their understanding of the Scriptures, in the light of Jesus Christ. How far this could go is illustrated dramatically at two points in Acts—chosen here more or less at random, for their relevance to our concerns.

Peter quotes from Joel, on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and James quotes from Amos at the apostolic Council (Acts 15). How do they handle these prophetic texts? Peter claims, dramatically, that Joel's expectation of an eschatological outpouring of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled, in the events of that very day. But this is not just a 'promise-fulfilment' hermeneutical strategy, as becomes clear in the very last verse of Peter's sermon: 'Therefore let the whole house of Israel know, for sure, that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified!' (Acts 2:36). We miss the allusion back to the opening Joel quotation, at our peril. This finished with Joel's powerful promise that, on that day, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21). For Joel, of course, 'the Lord' is Yahweh, the Lord God of Israel. But who is now 'the Lord' for Peter? There is no longer salvation to be had, through calling on the name of Yahweh: now, 'Jesus is Lord' (cf 1 Cor. 12:3), and 'there is salvation in no other, for there is no other name under heaven given among humankind, by which we must be saved!' (Acts 4:12). This bold re-reading of Joel puts *Jesus* in, where Joel intended *Yahweh*, and we must not miss the significance of this.

Similarly, in Acts 15:13-21 James dramatically re-reads Amos' prophecy of the restoration of Israel (Amos 9:11-12). Peter's description of how God has 'taken a people for himself from among the Gentiles,' he says, 'fits with the words of the prophets, as it is written, "After that I shall return, and I shall rebuild David's fallen tent ..."' Here James takes a prophecy of *Israel's* restoration and finds its fulfilment in the blessing of *the Gentiles* in Christ. He deliberately uses Israel's election language of God's action towards the Gentiles—he has 'taken a people for his name'—and on this basis applies Israel's covenant promises to what God has done in saving *Gentiles*. It's a *new* action, demanding a *new* reading of Scripture, one which goes far beyond the simple arguments of the Judaisers, whose case was firmly rejected at that Council.

I think I've said enough to illustrate and defend my second thesis, for which in fact arguments and texts could be adduced from all over the New Testament. It is not, I believe, true to say that the first Christians were claiming to have discovered a fuller meaning in these old texts, a meaning previously hidden from all other interpreters. It's more like a group of aliens meeting a Roll Royce for the first time, when previously all they have seen is the *Reader's Digest Guide to Car Maintenance*—or a group of children spending a day with David Beckham

<sup>2</sup> Paul quotes Deut 32:21 in Rom. 10:19, and this provides him with the fundamental theme of 'jealousy' which he then makes the basis of his argument in ch. 11.

and his family, when previously all they have known is the press presentation of them. In both cases the experience will suddenly make the literature look very different!

My third thesis now concerns more directly the handling of the covenant with Israel in the New Testament:

**3. Broadly, the New Testament view is that, as the Son of God, Jesus steps into the role of Israel, and becomes the place where God 'dwells' on earth, the focus of his eschatological plan for the salvation of the world, and the Lord of the 'people' he forms for himself.**

The view for which I am arguing in this paper does not see *the church* as the 'replacement' for Israel, but sees *Jesus* in this role. I believe that it can be amply demonstrated that this is the view of the New Testament writers, who followed through the hermeneutic just illustrated in specific application to the covenant with Israel. We see it, for instance, in the following places—again, illustrations could be multiplied, but the following must suffice. Here are five quick snapshots, all very different from each other, but all fundamentally making the same point about the relationship between Israel and Jesus:

(A.) In the opening chapters of his Gospel, *Matthew* deliberately tells the story of Jesus' birth, baptism, temptations and entry into ministry in such a way that *Jesus' history replays the Exodus history of Israel*. This is a dramatic re-telling of Israel's story, which would have been immediately obvious to Jewish readers, but can be easily overlooked by us.

Jesus, too, goes down to Egypt by divine guidance, just like Jacob and his family. Then he comes out of Egypt, in fulfilment of Hosea 11:1, 'Out of Egypt have I called my son' (Matt. 2:15). Matthew knows full well that he is applying to *Jesus* a verse originally about *the Exodus!* He is giving a clue to help us interpret the significance of Jesus. Armed with this clue, we then see how Jesus passes through water, just like Israel on her way out of Egypt, and, just as for Israel, this is a defining moment in Jesus' relationship with God (Matt. 3). Then he is tested in the wilderness, just like Israel after the Exodus (Matt 4:1-11), and he quotes to the Devil three verses all drawn from the story of that wilderness testing of Israel, God's *other* 'Son' (cf Deut. 8:3-5). Where Israel failed the test, Jesus comes through with flying colours. Finally, just as Israel came to a mountain where she heard God's ten 'words', constitutive of her life with him, so now Jesus climbs a mountain and utters the nine 'words' constitutive of life in the Kingdom of God—statements not of duty, but of blessedness (Matt. 5:1-12).

We could hardly ask for a clearer presentation of the conviction that Jesus steps into the role of Israel, in God's plan.

(B.) *John* dramatically pictures Jesus as, in his own person, the temple, the focus of atonement. The theme of temple and its significance is most important for

John's Gospel, which is deliberately structured around the main festivals. Before the destruction of the temple in 70AD, the celebration of these festivals (Passover, Tabernacles, Dedication) focused upon the temple. Perhaps with an eye to the impact of his words in the situation after the destruction of the temple, when Jews were left desperate and bereft, robbed of their great centre of worship, John presents Jesus as *the rebuilt temple in his body*, the one in whom the true meaning of the festivals is located, and through whom atonement is made and the shekinah-glory of God is seen on earth.

The main passage here is John 2:18-22, where Jesus makes the emigmatic comment to 'the Jews,' 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.' John then makes it clear that, although the conversation was about the literal temple in Jerusalem, Jesus was actually referring to his death and resurrection. Because *he* (not the temple) is the place where God's shekinah-glory is now located (John 1:14), the *true* destruction of the temple took place not in 70AD, when the Romans razed Jerusalem to the ground, but some 37 years earlier when Jesus was crucified. But *that* destruction of the temple was followed by rebuilding! Around and in *him* all the festivals now have full meaning—and so around him Israel can be gathered again from exile. John makes it clear that this is in his mind, in his dramatic (and ironic) telling of Caiaphas' plot against Jesus in John 11:48-52. Caiaphas *thought* that he was acting against Jesus to *protect* 'our holy place' from the Romans (11:48). Of course, killing Jesus did nothing to keep the Romans at bay—but in another sense Caiaphas *did* save Israel through his action, because his words had another meaning, completely unknown to him. This man will die 'for the people,' so that through him the scattered people of God *will* be 'gathered into one' (11:52).

John knows, of course, that this people, for whom Jesus dies and whom he gathers, will include *Gentiles* (see 10:14-16). *Jesus* becomes the 'True Vine' (15:1—'vine' was a common image for Israel), and apart from *him* there can be no fruit acceptable to God. He becomes the new focus of the people of God, their life and their worship.

(C.) *Paul* develops an extraordinary argument in Galatians 3 which must have bowled his Gentile readers over, if they really stopped to take it in. His overall strategy in that chapter is to argue that God's promises to Abraham take precedence over his gift of the law through Moses. Once given, the promises cannot be annulled—they are like a will, which cannot be 'set aside' (3:15). It can have a codicil added, but the will stands secure in law. The law of Moses, Paul suggests, is like a codicil to the Abrahamic promises, given as a temporary measure to 'guard us' (3:23) until the moment of the fulfilment of the promises comes—the moment when the will is put into effect. That moment, of course, is the coming of Jesus, for Paul interprets the Abrahamic promise as *addressed to him*. He asks, 'who is the "seed" of Abraham to whom the promises are given?'—and instead of replying 'Israel, of course, Abraham's descendants,' his answer is '*Christ*' (3:16).

How can he do this? He insists on the permanence of the Abrahamic promises, a point which is emphatically underlined by the ‘dispensationalist’ approach to these issues. But (a) he clearly does not feel that the promise was fulfilled during the Old Testament, in spite of the fact that Israel entered the ‘promised land’, and (b) he makes *Jesus*, rather than Israel, the heir of the promise. He can only do this through the process we outlined above, a process of re-reading the promises in the light of what God has now done, in Christ. Paul does *not* feel that he is denying the ‘meaning’ of the texts he quotes. He thinks that the real heart and core of the promises to Abraham was the one in Genesis 12:3, which he quotes in Galatians 3:8, ‘All the Gentiles will be blessed in you.’<sup>3</sup> He thinks that this is the underlying purpose behind the whole election of Israel—the ‘blessing’ of the rest of the world. And *that* never happened in the Old Testament: it is only happening now, through his own ministry of the *Gospel of Jesus Christ*. The blessing is not coming to the Gentiles through Israel, but through Jesus—therefore Jesus must be the ‘seed’ to whom the promise is addressed, ‘in *you* all the nations will be blessed.’

Dramatic? Paul’s *coup de grace* comes at the end of the chapter, where he draws the logical conclusion: ‘if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise’ (Gal. 3:29). Believers in Jesus, *whether Jewish or Gentile*, inherit the promises to Abraham. It apparently does not occur to Paul that *the land* was promised to Abraham. He does not add to 3:29, ‘And therefore all Abraham’s descendants who believe in Jesus, whether Jewish or Gentile, can claim a part of the promised turf.’ For him, the promise of land pales into insignificance compared to the glorious truth that the foundational promise of universal blessing has now been wonderfully fulfilled in Christ, through the universal outpouring of the Holy Spirit (3:14). The promise of land, like the Mosaic law itself, was just a staging-post on the way to that fulfilment.

We see why this is, in the next chapter. Here Paul draws in an aspect of the land-promise when he talks about Jerusalem in Galatians 4:25-26. It may well be, as C.K. Barrett argued, that the Judaisers were insisting to the Galatians that they must think of Jerusalem as the special chosen city, the ‘place’ where the Lord has chosen to make his name dwell (Deut. 12:5-7, etc). Paul needs to reply to this. Along with circumcision, he *will not yield for one moment* (cf Gal 2:5) to the requirement that his Gentile Galatian converts should start travelling to Jerusalem for the pilgrim festivals—even though both circumcision and worship in Jerusalem are required by the law. No, he says, we have been *delivered from* being citizens of the earthly Jerusalem, because something much more glorious has been given to us in Christ. To be dependent on the earthly Jerusalem is *slavery*, but we are now *free* citizens of ‘the Jerusalem above.’ It was a standard piece of Jewish theology that the earthly city (and especially the temple) were representations on earth of the heavenly city (and temple) where God dwells—and the belief of course was that those who prize the *earthly* will also be members of the *heavenly*. But Paul drives a wedge between the two: in Christ, he says, we enter the heavenly city direct, *and leave the earthly behind*.

<sup>3</sup> This promise is repeated several times in Genesis—18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14. Maybe this is one reason why Paul feels justified in highlighting it so strongly.



(D.) In *Acts* there are two speeches or sermons which summarize the history of Israel, and do so in a remarkable way designed to present *Jesus* as the one who makes sense of, and brings to completion, the long story of Israel's life with her covenant God.

*Stephen's* speech in Acts 7 is a subtle presentation, which also hinges around the promise to Abraham. Stephen gives the promise a very different and particular 'spin' in 7:7, 'afterwards they will come out of that country (Egypt) and worship me in this place.' These words were actually addressed to *Moses*, in Exodus 3:12, but Stephen draws them forward in time and attaches them to the foundational promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:14. Why does he do this? The strategy seems to be to suggest that the promise of worshipping God in this place has *never yet been fulfilled*—not, that is, until the coming of Jesus and the worship associated with him. Stephen tells Israel's history so as to highlight (a) Israel's constant unfaithfulness to the law and worship of other gods, (b) the inadequacy of the both the tabernacle and the temple as places of worship, and (c) the strange way in which the most *real* encounters with God all took place *outside* the promised land.

Stephen never quite makes the point, but the implied punchline, never delivered because his hearers shouted him down and covered their ears, is 'the promise to Abraham has now, at last, been fulfilled in the Righteous One you crucified!' For him, too, the *real point* of the covenant was not possession of the land or the physical temple, but the inner relationship with God, which was now open to all who were ready to abandon loyalty to land and temple, and believe in Jesus.

*Paul's* sermon in Pisidian Antioch in Acts 13 is a very different account of the same history. Paul concentrates on the kings, and quickly jumps to Jesus, who has come 'of David's seed, according to promise' (13:23). He then applies Psalm 2—a coronation Psalm—to the resurrection (13:33), and finds messianic meaning in David's confidence in the face of death (Psalm 16:10, quoted in 13:35). Because of Jesus, David's 'greater son,' these Psalms all now have a much bigger meaning than hitherto. Then comes the punchline: 'through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses' (13:39). The *community* which trusted in the law for salvation must recognise that it could not deliver the goods: and its failures are now remedied in Jesus alone. Implicitly, a new community is being founded: the people who *are* saved, through faith in Christ, from all that Moses offered but failed to deliver. Here we come quite close to a sense that the *church* steps into Israel's place—but the focus on Jesus is at the heart of the picture.

(E.) Our final snapshot comes from *Hebrews*, which provides in fact a whole album of photographs relevant to this theme. But we will pick out the presentation of Jesus as High Priest in Hebrews 9. Here, too, the issue of the relationship between the heavenly and earthly sanctuaries is fundamental to the

argument. But the extra twist is *the person of the High Priest*. In the Old Testament the High Priest was a representative figure: when he entered the Most Holy Place alone on the Day of Atonement, he was not doing it as a private individual on a day out. He went, representing the whole nation, bearing sacrificial blood to atone for all the unconfessed and unconscious sins of the previous year. And his *acceptance*, therefore, was a token of the acceptance of the whole people. The tradition was that the people, waiting outside, would be assured if they could still hear the bells on the bottom of the High Priest's robe as he moved about in the Most Holy Place, proving that he had not been struck dead. And when he re-emerged, it would be to great rejoicing that the sacrifice had been accepted.

The author of Hebrews uses this imagery in Heb 9:24-28, applying it to Jesus. But as High Priest, he has entered not the earthly Most Holy Place, but the heavenly, the place where God *really* dwells, bearing *his own* sacrificial blood. And now we are waiting outside, waiting for him to reappear—which he will do, at his second coming, 'to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him' (9:28).

This is the sense in which Jesus steps into the role of Israel in Hebrews—a sense different from that which we encounter elsewhere in the New Testament. He *stands for* the people, both literally and metaphorically. He stands for us in the presence of God—and of course the 'people' for whom he stands are now all who trust in him, who are waiting for his reappearance. For the author of Hebrews, this people is a united company of Jews and Gentiles together.

In different ways, these five snapshots present varying angles on the same view. For all these New Testament writers, the process of re-reading the Old Testament promises produces a *christology* which takes up the great themes associated with the covenant in the Old Testament (people, election, law, worship, temple, sacrifice, land, Jerusalem, the presence of God, witness to the nations and universal blessing)—and re-focuses them around Jesus. My fourth thesis summarises this point, and draws an implication:

***4. The New Testament 're-reading' of the Old Testament promises sees their climax in Jesus, and makes him the 'end' of the story. The interpretation of Old Testament prophecy and other 'Israel' texts must be approached from the perspective of this basic New Testament teaching, and must follow the guidelines of New Testament interpretation.***

It is sometimes argued that the interpretation of the Old Testament in the New is unique, because of the prophetic status of the New Testament writers. They did things to these texts that we cannot—and therefore we have to read them in a different and much more straightforward way, because we cannot claim their inspiration. We must read texts much more literally (this view says), not looking for hidden or further meanings. So, for instance, if a particular Old Testament text or prophecy is not quoted in the New, then it is more appropriate for us to interpret it literally than give it some 'spiritual' meaning. And where a passage is

quoted in the New Testament, then—because of the uniqueness of the New Testament writers—it would be appropriate for us to *note* their interpretation but not *feel bound* by it. Why should the prophecies not have further, literal fulfilments? Even if the New Testament writers applied the prophecies to Jesus, this surely does not exclude further, secondary fulfilments more in line with the original Israel-focus of the prophecy?

I believe that this is not right, and will now present some arguments against this view, and in favour of the contention that *the New Testament writers are 'normative' for us, in showing us how to interpret Old Testament prophecy*. The best way to do this is through looking at some examples. We will briefly look at three Old Testament texts, of different types.

(A.) The command to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem' in *Psalms 122:6* is often quoted, and we are encouraged simply to obey it—to do what it says, and to pray for the city which is so troubled by violence and division today. Sometimes the implication is given that this Psalm provides Christians with a fundamental orientation of their world-view: unless we, like the Psalmist, are focused upon the good of Jerusalem, then we are living out of line with the focus of *God's* concern in the world today.

There is no quotation from this Psalm in the New Testament, and no echo of this prayer or command. But the procedure to apply, in such cases, is to read the Psalm carefully in the light of the New Testament treatment of *related or relevant themes*. This is not difficult in the case of Psalm 122, where the prayer for Jerusalem's peace is motivated by two things, both fundamental to New Testament christology:

(i) Firstly, for the Psalmist, love of Jerusalem and of pilgrimage there is motivated by *the presence of the Davidic kingship*: 'For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David' (Ps. 122:5). Jerusalem is the God-given judicial centre for God's people, securing the settlement of disputes and therefore their peace and prosperity. But, for us as Christians, *Jesus* is now the Davidic king (Luke 1:32f, etc), and we believe that God has given all judgment to him (John 5:27, Romans 2:16, etc). How then can we pray for the peace of the *earthly* city with the same motivation as the Psalmist?

(ii) Secondly, *the presence of the temple* is a vital factor: 'For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.' (Ps. 122:9). But once again, the New Testament teaches us—as we have seen—to think of *Jesus* as the temple, where we find the presence of God, where our worship is focused, and where atonement for our sins is made. How then—*without being disloyal to Jesus*—can we prize Jerusalem with the same motivation as the Psalmist?

Of course we must pray for peace in Israel today. But this Psalm does not provide us with *reasons* for that prayer which we as Christians can adopt. Following the lead of the New Testament, we must *re-read* the Psalm, focusing its message

around Jesus Christ. We believe that we are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, where his throne is set (1 Cor. 15:23-25, Gal. 4:26, Phil. 3:20, Rev. 21:22-27).

**(B.) Ezekiel 37** is a 'restoration' passage, the fulfilment of which is often claimed today. It starts with Ezekiel's vision of the 'valley of dry bones' (37:1-14), and then interprets and applies the vision to Israel: the people will be restored to the Lord, and to the land, with the divided northern and southern kingdoms re-united under one king ('my servant David,' 37:24), never to be divided again (37:22). The Lord will re-establish his sanctuary and dwelling-place among them (37:26f).

Again, there are no quotations from this passage in the New Testament. Paul alludes to verse 27 in 2 Corinthians 6:16, Jesus alludes to verse 24 in John 10:16, and the picture of the Holy Spirit as a wind in verses 9-10 is probably lying behind Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:8. We can see how these allusions—if they are really there—point in the direction of the Jesus-focused interpretation typical of the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul sees the church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, as the sanctuary where God dwells. In John 10, *Jesus* is the One Shepherd, the David appointed by God. And Jesus offers Nicodemus (representing Israel, whose 'teacher' he is, 3:10) the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy, new birth by the Spirit.

All of these allusions locate the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy *not* in a literal return of Israel to the physical land, but in the regeneration brought by Christ and wrought by the Spirit. But this raises a question for us. Since there was *also* a literal fulfilment, in that Israel did indeed return from Babylonian exile, some 45 years after Ezekiel's prophecy, can we not say that prophecy can have multiple fulfilments, some literal and some spiritual, and that it would be therefore open to us to look for, or discern, further literal fulfilments today? The *match* between Ezekiel and the events surrounding and following the establishment of the State of Israel appeal very strongly to some: are we seeing Scripture fulfilled before our eyes?

I would argue that the Jesus-focus of the fulfilment of these prophecies is so consistent and unwavering in the New Testament, that it is not really open to us to look for further, literal fulfilments *after* the coming of Jesus. We find no hints in the New Testament that further, literal fulfilments are to be expected. Romans 11:26 is often quoted as proving that Paul was expecting a mass conversion of Jews, immediately following or preceding the second coming of Christ. Even if this interpretation is correct, Paul does not say that this mass 'returning to the Lord' will be accompanied by a mass 'returning to the land.' He never gives the smallest hint that he believed this. Rather, it is the *spiritual restoration only* which thrills him: 'this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins' (11:27).

I do not want in any way to limit what God might do to fulfil his purposes in his world. All I suggest is that the New Testament gives us no support for believing that there will be further, literal fulfilments of the prophecies of the restoration of

Israel to the land.

(C.) **Zechariah 14** is often quoted in prophetic scenarios of the events of the end-time, usually interpreted literally of a mighty battle around Jerusalem, which will be broken up by the appearance of the Lord in judgment, ushering in a universal rule under which pilgrims will flock to Jerusalem for a renewed festival of Tabernacles. How should we read a prophecy like this?

This is a different *kind* of prophecy from Ezekiel 37. Here we are dealing with apocalyptic prophecy, of the kind which we meet in the New Testament Apocalypse. Here the visionary language fills the whole prophecy—it does not just provide interludes within it, like the vision of the Valley of Bones in Ezekiel 37.

But once again, our approach must surely be to ask how the New Testament authors read it, and to seek to be obedient to their approach. Once again, the Jesus-focus is clear in the wider context, through the quotation of Zechariah 9:9 in connection with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (e.g. Matt. 21:5), the quotation of Zechariah 11:13 in application to Judas' betrayal of Jesus (e.g. Matt. 27:9), the quotation of Zechariah 12:10 in connection with the crucifixion (John 19:37), and the quotation of Zechariah 13:7 in connection with Jesus' abandonment by the disciples at his arrest (e.g. Matt. 26:31).

There are no specific quotations of Zechariah 14 in the New Testament, but there are several clear allusions. In verse 5, 'then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him,' is applied to the second coming of Jesus in Matthew 25:31 and 1 Thessalonians 3:13. In verse 8, the reference to 'living water' flowing from Jerusalem is one of several texts lying behind the picture of *Jesus* as the giver of 'living water' in John 4:10 and 7:38. In verse 11, the absence of 'curse' from the restored Jerusalem is alluded to in Revelation 22:3, as part of the picture of the heavenly city. And in verse 21 the reference to the absence of traders from the house of the Lord is alluded to, in Jesus' 'cleansing' of the temple in Matthew 21:12.

It is clear from this list that the New Testament writers applied the language of Zechariah 14 *both* to the events of Jesus' ministry, *and*, in prospect, to his second coming. This suggests that we should not be dogmatic about applying this chapter just to the end-times. For the New Testament writers, the repeated references to 'on that day ...' were pointing either to the day of Jesus' first coming, or his second—just depending on the applicability of the language. The allusion to the chapter in Revelation, in particular, suggests that we should not insist on interpreting 'Jerusalem' literally. Zechariah, of course, was writing about the literal city he knew. But *on us*, reading his prophecy after the coming of Christ, there rests a duty of *re-reading*, I suggest, which takes us beyond Zechariah's original intention and discerns something of the mind of the divine Author who gave the prophecy in the first place. Such a re-reading is already accepted in principle even by those who read the whole chapter as a literal prophecy of the

events of the end-time, because all Christian interpreters (so far as I know) understand 'the LORD' in verses 3 and 5 to be *the Lord Jesus*. This is not what Zechariah intended.

There rests upon us, I believe, a duty to read Zechariah 14—and indeed all Old Testament prophecies—in line with the *theological initiative* given to us by the writers of the New Testament. As Christians, what else can we do?

These three passages can serve as representative examples of the way in which this 'Reformed' approach might handle Old Testament prophecy. Now my final thesis concerns the New Testament text which often stands at the centre of this discussion:

***5. Paul's prophecy of the conversion of Israel in Romans 11 should not be turned into the centre-piece of a prophetic scheme, outlining the events of the end-time, nor should this text be interpreted in independence from its context in Romans and in New Testament theology.***

Romans 9-11 is a marvellous passage, constructed out of Paul's passionate engagement with precisely the issues which concern us in this debate. But I have deliberately not concerned myself with this passage in this paper, because its interpretation is gloriously complex, and depends to some extent on the kind of *wider issues* with which we have occupied ourselves here. Also, the wider picture is of more hermeneutical significance for us, than the voice of a single text.

Paul is certainly looking forward to the conversion of Israel, in Romans 11:26. Personally, I believe that interpretations which redefine 'Israel' here as 'the church' are mistaken. It is the covenant *with Israel* which concerns Paul throughout these chapters, and the contrast with 'the Gentiles' in the previous verse suggests that the particular reference to the nation Israel is still in his mind. But how does he expect this conversion, which is *necessary* because of God's faithfulness to the covenant (11:28-29), actually to occur?

The discussion of this question is way beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that there are other ways of reading it, than that Paul is predicting a mass end-time conversion of the Jews.<sup>4</sup> The vital point with which to conclude this paper is that Paul's confidence in God's faithfulness to the covenant with Israel rests upon his experience of Jesus Christ, and—as we have seen—he feels impelled by that experience, along with all the other writers of the New Testament, to reinterpret from the roots up all their previous experience of God 'under the law.' The law and the prophets must be completely re-read, in the light of their experience of righteousness in and through Jesus Christ.

Steve Motyer  
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<sup>4</sup> I have attempted to explore these, and to defend another reading, in my book *Israel in the Plan of God. Light on Today's Debate* (IVP, 1989).