

# CHAPTER 1

## THEOLOGY VS. METAPHYSICS

By Pastor Douglas Shearer

Every serious student of Scripture - whether layman, pastor, or theologian - will acknowledge that the Bible is far more than a collection of disparate books stitched haphazardly together. For most believers that much seems obvious. What's not so obvious, however, is its central core - the theme around which its sixty-six books revolve, most especially the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament.

*Kaiser: The organizing  
Theme of the Bible*

Walter Kaiser, in his ground-breaking book, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*,<sup>1</sup> suggests that the fundamental organizing theme of the Bible can be summed up in a single five-part formula ...

1. I will be your God, e.g., Genesis 17:7;
2. You shall be my people, e.g., Exodus 6:7;
3. I will dwell in your midst, e.g., Exodus 29:44-46;
4. therefore, be holy for I am holy; e.g., Leviticus 11:45;
5. I will make you holy; e.g., Jeremiah 31.

Kaiser goes on to trace the progressive development of that theme from Genesis through the Book of Revelation.

Kaiser wrote his book in response to a theological crisis that had begun to surface in the 1930s<sup>2</sup> - and which by the 1970s was causing some theologians to throw up their hands in despair, even to the point of declaring that "theology was dead."<sup>3</sup> The issue giving rise to the crisis could not have been more distressing: *What exactly is the "message" of the Old Testament? Most especially, what is the relationship between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament?*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Though its roots extend well back to the middle and late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and even before that.

<sup>3</sup> e.g., Otto Eissfeldt; Brevard Childs; H. Räisänen; etc.

<sup>4</sup> Other tensions were underscored as well, including the violence sanctioned by God in the Old Testament; sexual behavior and sexual roles; the purpose of certain books of the Old Testament, e.g., Proverbs; the will of God and personal ethics; the meaning of Psalm 8.

### *Kaiser's Input Refreshing*

Kaiser's input was refreshing: he was an evangelical inserting himself into a field traditionally dominated by liberal scholars - scholars whose focus was almost exclusively "source criticism."<sup>1</sup> Kaiser argued that source criticism must not distract theologians from probing the meaning of the text itself - what the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is actually saying. Kaiser was following in the footsteps of Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad, who, a generation earlier, had likewise underscored the importance of staying focused on the text. In doing so, Kaiser was putting his finger on a key difference that distinguishes premillennialism from amillennialism.

### *Premillennialism/Amillennialism*

#### *The Importance of the Text*

For Kaiser, Eichrodt, and von Rod, staying focused on the text is of supreme importance: *it's the basic data a theologian is given to work with* - much like quantifiable observations comprise the basic data<sup>2</sup> a physicist or chemist is given to work with.

The moment a physicist or chemist plays down the utter importance of quantifiable observations to prove his hypothesis he crosses over into metaphysics. It's no different for a theologian. The moment a theologian moves away from the text by imposing on it a' priori assumptions that distort its clear meaning, he too crosses the threshold into metaphysics. It's this very danger that amillennialists flirt with in their treatment of the Old Testament. Their hermeneutic foists a Christocentric bias on the text *that reduces the events, rites, rituals, and even persons it describes to symbols and metaphors only*. In short, it's not what they *are* that's important, it's what they *point to that alone is important*. They are not invested with any on-going existential meaning.

- ✓ For premillennialists, it's the text that's decisive. Yes, an Old Testament passage may indeed be endowed with symbolic and metaphorical significance, but only if the text itself clearly calls for it. And even then, its plain, literal meaning is not necessarily set aside.
- ✓ For amillennialists, however, it's not the text that's decisive, it's their hermeneutic - *a hermeneutic that from the very get-go imposes*

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<sup>1</sup> Source criticism makes the examination of texts outside the biblical canon a crucial test for determining scriptural authenticity. It's an attempt to understand "the world behind the text." Source criticism arouses profound suspicion among Evangelicals - largely because they fully embrace the infallibility of scripture. That's not to suggest that evangelicals find fault with all source criticism, some of which has proven helpful in discovering the historical context in which a certain passage is embedded and hence its meaning; e.g., the meaning of the word "image" in Genesis, Chapter One, i.e., a marker delimiting the authority of a sovereign.

<sup>2</sup> Called "empirical" data, meaning data acquired by the senses - tangible, palpable, material.

*a symbolic/metaphorical meaning on Old Testament persons, events, rites, and rituals.*

Herman Bavinck, a contemporary of Abraham Kuyper, summarizes well the amillennial take on the Old Testament, and does so in no uncertain terms ...

The Old Testament, stripped of its temporal and sensuous (i.e., “material”) form, is the New Testament ... *All* (italics mine) Old Testament (rites, rituals, events, and persons) shed their external, national-Israelish meanings and become manifest (i.e., “acquire their real meaning”) in (a) spritualized ... sense.<sup>1</sup>

Hard to imagine! Dogmatically “stripping” the Old Testament of its “temporal, material forms” - and doing so as a matter of course! It’s obvious here that Bavinck has minimized, if not actually discarded, the very data that alone provides the grist for theology: *the text*. He is no longer a theologian; he has crossed over into metaphysics.

*And here’s the shocker: Bavinck acknowledges that if taken in it’s plain, literal sense, the Old Testament text leads to a premillennialist eschatology. And he does so with an out-front honesty that’s astonishing ...*

... *all* (my italics) the prophets announce not only the conversion of Israel and the nations but also the return to Palestine, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and sacrificial worship, and so on ... Prophecy pictures for us but one single image of the future. And this image is either to be taken literally as it presents itself - and as premillennialists take it - ... or this image calls for a very different interpretation (i.e., hermeneutic) than that attempted by (premillennialism).<sup>2</sup>

A “very different interpretation” indeed! An interpretation that’s not grounded in the text; that, instead, is grounded in a hermeneutic that summarily strips away the plain, literal meaning of the text and affirms that the persons, events, rites, rituals, and prophecies described there serve an allegorical purpose only! Once again, what we have here is metaphysics, not theology.

As if Bavinck isn’t enough, Geerhardus Vos, one of the most influential and acclaimed Reformed scholars to take up the topic of eschatology, writes ...

(Premillennialists) to their credit evince an astounding readiness ... to (interpret) the Old Testament Scriptures in a realistic (i.e., “literal”) manner, *with a simple faith*, (italics mine) not asking whether the fulfillment of these things is

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<sup>1</sup> H. Bavinck, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Baker Academic; Abridged edition (June 1, 2011), 658.

logically conceivable.<sup>1</sup>

But that's not the end of it. Vos goes on to say ...

... (premillennialism) daringly literalizes and concretizes the substance of (the Old Testament).<sup>2</sup>

*Premillennialists "daringly literalize and concretize" the text!* Does Vos really know what he is saying here? What else does a theologian have to work with but the text - its simple, straight-forward meaning? How utterly preposterous for one theologian to ridicule another theologian for taking the text seriously - for actually "*daring*" to do so. Once again, Vos's comment is not unlike one physicist ridiculing another physicist for taking seriously the quantifiable observations that alone provide him with the empirical data that make his investigations genuinely "scientific." Notice too the patronizing, even sarcastic tone of Vos's allegation.

### *Premillennialism/Amillennialism The Flesh and Blood of History*

Kaiser also took pains to embed the development of his theme in the flesh and blood history of Israel<sup>3</sup> - and in doing so again<sup>4</sup> highlighted the very truth that's so frequently overlooked by theologians: specifically, that the Christian Faith is *not* metaphysical; that it's grounded in concrete, flesh and blood events ...

- ✓ *that have occurred* in the material world of the "here and now,"
- ✓ *that are continuing to occur* in the material world of the "here and now,"
- ✓ *that will someday culminate* in the material world of the "here and now."

The formula Kaiser spells out ...

1. I will be your God;
2. You shall be my people;
3. I will dwell in the midst of you;
4. therefore, be holy for I am holy;

... begins with Abraham in Genesis Chapter Twelve<sup>5</sup> - and is methodically

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<sup>1</sup> ... "logically conceivable *for him*." G. Vos, *Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton, NJ: published by the author, 1930) 227.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Using what's called a diachronic methodology - meaning "through history," a translation of two Greek words: "dia" (through) and "chronos" (time).

<sup>4</sup> See above, "The Importance of the Text"

<sup>5</sup> However, Kaiser is careful to point out that Genesis Chapters 1-11, the Old Testament's prolegomenon, includes the theme as well, but only by inference.

worked out and clarified *in the on-going history of Israel*, with its fifth part ...

5. I will make you holy

... clearly implied in the sacrificial system of the Levitical Order and then - much later in Israel's history<sup>1</sup> - explicitly declared by both Jeremiah and Ezekiel ...

*... I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34*

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*

*I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them.*

*Ezekiel 36:26b-27*

Both ...

- ✓ the sacrificial system and
- ✓ the prophesies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel

... tell us that the righteousness sinful man so desperately needs to “kick start” the formula<sup>2</sup> and make it work is an *imputed* righteousness, not an earned righteousness. And it is two *concrete historical* events - the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of the God-man Jesus Christ - that provide exactly that.

*The Crucifixion and Resurrection  
Embedded in Israel's History*

It's all too easy, Kaiser contends, for theologians to divorce the Crucifixion and Resurrection from the flesh and blood history of Israel; to think that neither is *necessarily* embedded there;<sup>3</sup> that somehow the mere transition from the Old Testament to the gospels makes it so. And he is quick to rebut that error and sweep it aside. The Crucifixion and the Resurrection, he insists, are unthinkable apart from Israel's history. Israel is not merely extraneous backdrop; it's the sine-qua-non underlying both events.

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<sup>1</sup> About 850 years later.

<sup>2</sup> Meaning, ultimately, to establish a relationship with God grounded in holiness.

<sup>3</sup> For Kaiser, taking note of that simple truth is crucial: whenever the doctrine of atonement is cut away from its mooring in the history of Israel and the Jewish people, it drifts upwards into the clouds of esoteric speculation.

The theme Kaiser spells out is, of course, carried beyond the gospels, where the Crucifixion and Resurrection are recorded, to the epistles - and there restated most explicitly in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Hebrews 8:10 ...

*For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be my people."*

*2 Corinthians 6:16*

*I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

*Hebrews 8:10*

It finds its culmination in the Book of Revelation ...

*Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

*And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."*

*Revelation 21:2-3*

#### *Israel's Continuing Role*

Kaiser's proposed theme has gained wide-spread acceptance among theologians, most especially evangelicals; nevertheless, the exact role of Israel in the continued development of that theme is still very hotly debated ...

- ✓ Did Israel's role cease with the birth of Christ, the emergence of the church, and, most especially, Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD?
- ✓ Does the church alone carry the theme forward to its conclusion in redemptive history, with nothing left for Israel?

#### *Israel: Existentially Significant or Symbolic Only*

If the Old Testament is nothing more than a series of figures, metaphors, and images pointing to the truths of the New Testament - which is exactly what amillennialists make of it<sup>1</sup> - then the actual history of redemption does not really begin with Abraham in Chapter Twelve of Genesis, but only with the birth of Jesus in the New Testament. The Old Testament is little more than a footnote to the New Testament - little more than gratuitous trimming. Whether or not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even Moses ever actually lived is not truly important. It's their typological significance that alone is important. And story-book figures could just as well serve that purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf page 2

Amillennialists will, of course, take exception with that assessment, claiming that the fundamental significance of the Old Testament is found in the promise that's so clearly revealed there - the promise of a Coming Redeemer. But that's not a valid argument. Yes, the Old Testament does indeed promise redemption - and, more than that, it provides a description of the Redeemer himself. That much is true. But how does that, in and of itself, make Israel and her entire history spiritually significant ...

- ✓ so much so that her existential reality is carried over into the New Testament era and beyond?
- ✓ so much so that she boasts an *intrinsic* significance beyond the symbolic import amillennialists are willing to lend her?

It doesn't. No, for Israel to be truly significant, she cannot be reduced to "footnote status" by a hermeneutic that deems the persons, events, ceremonies, rites, and institutions of the Old Testament to be nothing more than types and shadows of the New. Holding to that interpretation makes her continuation beyond the Day of Pentecost completely pointless. Robert Strimple, a leading amillennialist, is forthright ...

"... when the reality of *any type* (italics mine) - be it sacrifice, feast, temple, or land - is introduced, *the shadow passes away*. *And it does not pass away to be restored at some future time* (italics mine) - because in Christ it has been fulfilled."<sup>1</sup>

#### *Israel: Bavinck and Berkhof*

Herman Bavinck underscored the "standard" amillennial take - and the eschatological narrative arising from it - when in the first decade of 20th Century he penned ...

It should be noted that ... Paul does not say a word about the return of the Jews to Palestine and about rebuilding (Jerusalem) ... In (Paul's) view of the future, *there is simply no room for all this*." (italics mine)<sup>2</sup>

Bavinck surely knows that his argument here is what's called "an argument from silence" ("argumentum e silentio") - and, as such, proves nothing conclusively - though, clearly, in saying "*there is simply no room for all this*" that's exactly the "take-away" he's urging. It's a shame that Bavinck didn't live to witness with his own eyes Israel's restoration in 1948. We can only imagine his surprise - and wonder what his response might have been.

Louis Berkhof, another leading amillennialist of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, declared much the same in 1938 - ironically, the very year that Hitler and the Nazis

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Strimple, "Amillennialism," in *The Millennium and Beyond*, ed., Gundry and Bock (Zondervan, 1999) page 86.

<sup>2</sup> H. Bavinck, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1996), 107 ...

were orchestrating “Kristallnacht,” the “Night of Broken Glass,” sealing the doom of over six million Jews throughout Europe ...

Premillennialists ... maintain that there will be a national restoration ... of Israel, that the Jewish nation will be re-established in the Holy Land - and that this will take place immediately preceding or during the millennial reign of Jesus Christ. It is very doubtful, however, that Scripture warrants the *expectation that Israel will finally be re-established as a nation ...*" (italics mine).<sup>1</sup>

Berkhof, not content to leave it at that, went even further ...

(Premillennialism) is based on a literal interpretation of the (Old Testament) which (spells out) a future for Israel ... which is *entirely untenable*.<sup>2</sup>" (italics mine).<sup>3</sup>

Berkhof, though, unlike Bavinck, did indeed live to witness Israel's restoration. And what was his response? Nothing! Nothing at all! Unbroken silence! Having declared so pointedly that the restoration of Israel would never occur, the UN vote in 1948 to make it so certainly deserved more from Berkhof than a studied silence. Berkhof died in 1957, giving him plenty of time to have acknowledged just how wrong he'd been in 1938. But he never did. Disingenuous? There's no other way to describe it.

In light of Israel's jaw-dropping restoration in 1948, Berkhof's silence has not been an intellectually suitable rejoinder for amillennialists - most especially after Jerusalem was captured in 1967 and the very next day made Israel's capital. *Now, not just Israel, but Israel with her capital at Jerusalem!* A miracle that only the most cynical could dismiss out of hand.

#### *R.C. Sproul - Second Thoughts*

The capture of Jerusalem by Israel in June of 1967 shook many Reformed theologians to their very core, causing some of them to question their amillennial take on the End Days.<sup>4</sup> R.C. Sproul, perhaps the foremost Calvinist scholar of the present era, is a case in point. Following Israel's dramatic victory in 1967, Dr. Sproul wrote ...

I remember sitting on my porch in Boston, and watching on television the Jewish soldiers coming into Jerusalem, dropping their weapons and rushing to the Wailing Wall, and

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 712.

<sup>2</sup> Untenable on what basis? Only on the basis of a hermeneutic that distorts the plain, literal meaning of the text. It's certainly not untenable on the basis of the text itself.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., page 712.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that not all Calvinists are amillennialists. Charles Spurgeon in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and John MacArthur in our own era, are both well-known premillennialists.

weeping and weeping. Immediately I telephone one of my dear friends, a professor of Old Testament theology, who does not believe that modern-day Israel has any significance whatsoever. I asked him, "What do you think now? From 70 Ad until 1967, almost 1900 years, Jerusalem has been under the domination and control of Gentiles; and now the Jews have recaptured the city. Jesus said that Jerusalem will be trodden under foot by the Gentiles, until the fullness of the Gentiles be fulfilled. What's the significance of that?" He replied, "*I am going to have to rethink this situation.*" (my italics) It was startling.<sup>1</sup>

*Their Rejoinder:*

*Israel - Yes; but Not Really Israel*

Amillennialists concede that large numbers of Jews are being brought back to Palestine - hard to argue otherwise! But not as a concrete flesh and blood embodiment of Old Testament Israel. Their *national* identity, so they insist, is neither relevant nor significant, only their *ethnic* identity. Simply put: it's not that Israel is being restored, but only that vast numbers of Jews are being gathered from around the world to a single spot on earth, there to be saved. In short, modern Israel is nothing more than a collection site. God is honoring his promise in Romans Eleven to redeem myriads of Jews in the End Days - and that's the end of it. Nothing more.

On the face of it, that's an awfully hard pill to swallow. Certainly, amillennialists are well aware of the unbreakable link the Old Testament forges between ethnicity and land, not just for Jews, but for all ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> To invalidate a Jew's link to his ancient homeland is tantamount to denying his Jewishness. It's that simple. Still, that's exactly the basic tweak amillennialists have concocted ...

- ✓ Individual Jews regathered to the Holy Land and established there as a sovereign nation - Yes!
- ✓ Restoration of Old Testament Israel - No, not its actual flesh and blood continuation.

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *The Gospel of God: Romans* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1990), 191-92.

<sup>2</sup> The unbreakable link between ethnicity and land accounts for much of the turmoil engulfing the world today - with Kurds, Armenians, Chechens, Catalonians, Basques, Scots, Welsh, and so many more - all demanding their own sovereign territories. It's this very link that the framers of the Versailles Treaty tried to honor following World War I. The framers realized that much of the conflict leading to World War I arose from the nationalistic aspirations of not just the Serbs, but so many other marginalized ethnic groups within the Austrian Empire. It's this same nationalistic impulse that led to the Vietnam War in the 1970s and Balkan War in the 1990s. The examples are endless.

*Riddlebarger's Tack*

That's exactly the "tack" Kim Riddlebarger proposes in his admittedly thoughtful and well-written book *A Case for Amillennialism* ...

... there can be little doubt that any future mass conversion of ethnic Jews<sup>1</sup> will be greatly facilitated by the rebirth ... of Israel and the relocation of significant numbers (of them) to a single country<sup>2</sup>

Here Riddlebarger is "killing two birds with one stone." On the one hand he's acknowledging that Romans Eleven foretells the redemption of vast numbers of Jews; and, on the other hand, he's telling us that modern Israel is not a restoration of "Old Testament Israel."

And there is really no other "tack" that Riddlebarger and his fellow amillennialists can set for themselves - *while at the same time remaining true to their hermeneutic*. After all, if Old Testament Israel is nothing more than a type of the church - which is exactly what Riddlebarger asserts on page 267 of his book ...

... the Old Testament images are types and shadows of the glorious realities that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ ... This means that Jesus Christ (and his Body, the Church)<sup>3</sup> is the true Israel, that Jesus Christ is the true temple ... and so on and on.<sup>4</sup>

... then her continued role in redemptive history *beyond the Day of Pentecost* is uncalled for, unwarranted, unreasonable, and unnecessary. She has been supplanted by her antitype, the church. Once again, modern Israel is little more than a mere "collection site" to facilitate the salvation of ethnic Jews.

Riddlebarger is even more pointed elsewhere ...

According to Reformed theologians, the promised restoration of Israel, point(s) ahead to the church. This is because the New Testament explicitly represent(s) this promise as being fulfilled in the church<sup>5</sup>, which Paul call(s) the "Israel of God."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this quote, Riddlebarger actually uses the word "Israel" - with the two words "ethnic Jews" following in parentheses. Obviously, that's to make it clear that for him "Israel" means nothing more than a collection of individual Jews. I've omitted the word "Israel" simply to make his intention clear.

<sup>2</sup> Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism* (Baker Books, 2013), page 287.

<sup>3</sup> For clarification purposes, I have added the phrase that's in the parentheses.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, page 267. Later on, I will explain the exegetical mistake that equates the church with the term "the Israel of God." Paul does not call the church "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16.

<sup>5</sup> A complete misreading of Galatians 6:16 – which I will be taking up later on.

Robert Strimple says much the same ...

... the Old Testament sacrifices, feasts, and ceremonies ... are types, that is teaching tools pointing forward to the work of Christ. Why then should ... the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the throne of David, *the nation of Israel itself* (italics mine) not be understood using the same interpretive insight that we use in interpreting the sacrifices and ceremonies.<sup>2</sup>

The two graphics on pages 14 and 15 depict ...

- ✓ how premillennialists interpret the relationship between Old Testament Israel and the modern state of Israel; and
- ✓ how amillennialists interpret that relationship.

#### *Cornelis Venema's Softened Approach*

The two eschatologies - premillennialism and amillennialism - are at odds; and are so at their very core. Nevertheless, some amillennialists, prompted by Israel's restoration in 1948 and Jerusalem's capture in 1967, have proposed softening the difference, making room for some sort of compromise. A case in point is Cornelis Venema, a leading amillennialist and a professor of doctrinal studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana. Venema writes ...

“The ongoing debate about Israel and the church needs to maintain the Apostle's *balance* (my italics), neither separating Israel and the church nor displacing Israel with the church.”<sup>3</sup>

It's hard to find fault with Venema's irenic spirit; it's commendable. However, the “balance” he advocates - “*neither separating Israel and the church nor displacing Israel with the church*” - is not possible given the hermeneutic he endorses: *if indeed Israel's only raison d'être is to foreshadow the church, then how can Venema claim that the church, in point of fact, has not displaced Israel?* He can't. At least he can't and remain true to an amillennialist hermeneutic. Strimple's hard-nosed take bears repeating ...

... when the reality of *any type* (italics mine) - be it sacrifice, feast, temple, or land - is introduced, *the shadow passes away. And it does not pass away to be restored at some future time* (italics mine) - because in Christ it has been fulfilled.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Riddlebarger, op. cit., pages 69-70. Their take on the phrase “Israel of God” is quite “off the mark.” I will be taking up this matter later on.

<sup>2</sup> Strimple, op. cit. page 85

<sup>3</sup> Cornelis Venema, “The Church and Israel: The Issue,” in *Table Talk Magazine*, October 1, 2012; reprined in Ligoier Ministries, The Teaching Ministry of R.C. Sproul.

<sup>4</sup> This same quote is found on page 7. See the footnote there.

“The shadow (i.e., Israel) has passed away” - and, according to Strimple, that’s that. She will never again be restored. It’s a tough, straight-on, no-nonsense conclusion - one that amillennialists simply can’t get around. Once again their hermeneutic forces it on them.<sup>1</sup> Venema’s softer approach, while well intentioned, doesn’t pass muster.

*What’s so exasperating  
about eschatology*

What’s so exasperating about an eschatology - whether it’s “premill,” “postmill,” or “amill” - is that its proponents can’t protect it from the acid test of history<sup>2</sup>. The narrative it lays out is either validated by the on-going march of history - actual flesh and blood events - or it isn’t. And if it isn’t, it must be either revised or discarded. In short, it’s not just that an eschatology ...

- ✓ must conform to the Biblical text<sup>3</sup> - though clearly it must,
- ✓ it must also conform to the stubborn facts of history.

And it can stumble on either account.

Still, theologians tend to fixate on the one, the Biblical text, and eschew the other, the on-going flow of history - some because they don’t want to be accused of “newspaper exegesis,” and some because they’re more metaphysical than genuinely theological - meaning they don’t want the flesh and blood facts of history intruding on the “axiomatic first principles” they’ve concocted and from which they spin out their doctrinal corollaries.

Just since 1900, all three primary eschatologies have encountered stubborn historical facts that have proven disquieting at best and invalidating at worst ...

- ✓ postmillennialism has stumbled over the genocidal murders and wartime carnage that took place during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:
  - World War I: forty million deaths;
  - World War II: seventy-two million deaths;
  - the Holocaust: Hitler’s psychopathic murder of six million European Jews;
  - Stalin’s forced starvation of the Kulaks: six million deaths;
  - the killing fields of Cambodia: two and a half million deaths;

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<sup>1</sup> See page 6 ff.

<sup>2</sup> It’s not just that New Testament truths are grounded in the history of Israel and are unthinkable apart from that history - e.g., the Crucifixion and Resurrection, see page 5 - it’s that eschatology, which comprises a major part of the New Testament, is, at its very core, predictive, and, therefore, its actual fulfillment in real, concrete historical events is a valid criterion for judging its accuracy.

<sup>3</sup> Cf page 4.

- the slaughter of three quarters of the entire Tutsi Tribe in Rwanda;
- The carnage and bestial cruelty of Isis;
- and the list goes on and on.

Hardly the narrative postmillennialists affirm!

- ✓ Amillennialism has stumbled over the birth of Israel in 1948 and the capture of Jerusalem in 1967. Simply put, its underlying hermeneutic doesn't provide for a narrative that can account for either - notwithstanding all the tweaks they've proposed over the last sixty-eight years to make it so.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Premillennialism has stumbled over the many erroneous predictions its "pre-trib"<sup>2</sup> backers made during the 1970s and 1980s; most especially: that in light of Israel's restoration and Jerusalem's capture, the Second Coming and the Rapture of the Church would occur sometime during the 1980s<sup>3</sup> - which, of course, didn't happen.

Kenneth Gentry, a leading proponent of postmillennialism, exemplifies the propensity of some theologians to focus on "exegetical issues" to prove their claims while dismissing out of hand the acid test of history. After acknowledging the savagery and mayhem of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, he rather cavalierly waves off its importance, turning instead to his interpretation of certain cherry-picked texts to make his case ...

"In light of the present world conditions, some Christians are surprised at the resilience of the postmillennial hope." (Nevertheless), the basic theology of Scripture is congenial to it. Indeed, (scripture) suggests the prima facie (sic) plausibility of dominionism."<sup>4</sup>

"Surprised"? You bet surprised! Surprised that some believers still buy into postmillennialism. It doesn't seem to bother Gentry that the facts of history argue otherwise - and decisively so. No, there's little historical evidence to lend credibility to the postmillennial hope that the gospel will spread over the

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 9 to 12 for a discussion of the tweaks amillennialists have been developing to account for Israel's restoration and Jerusalem's capture.

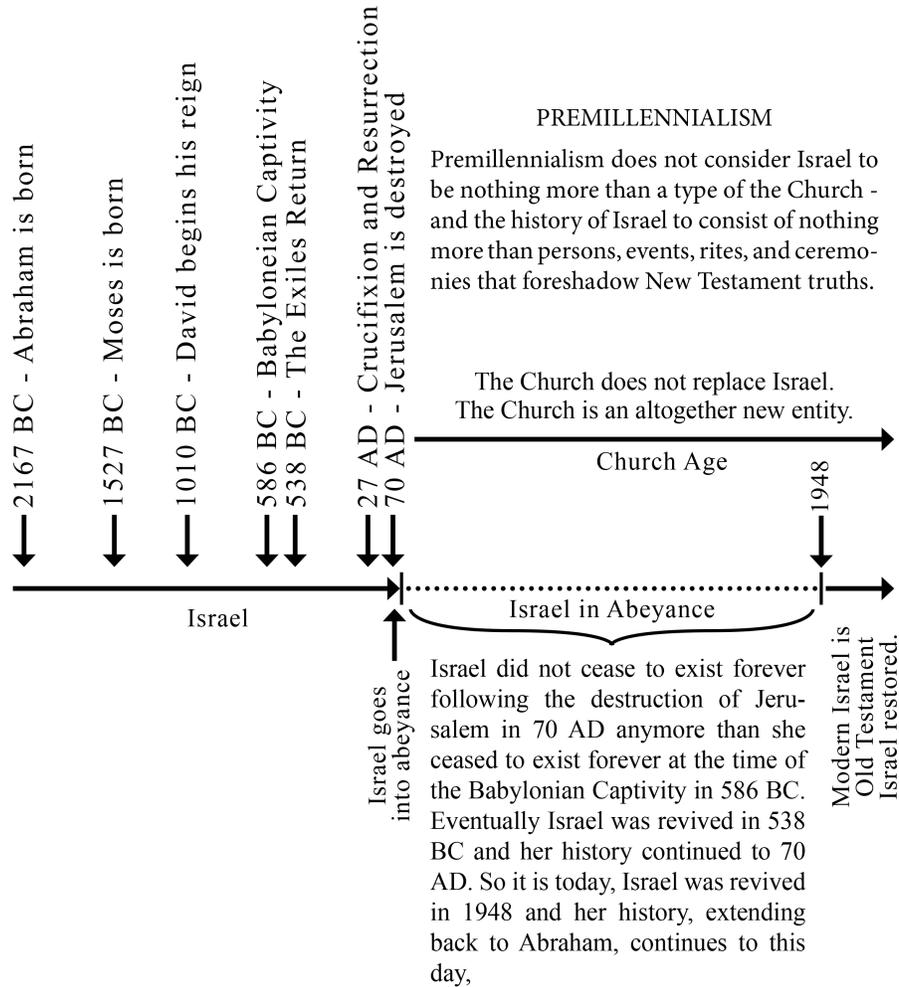
<sup>2</sup> It hardly needs to be pointed out, however, that not all premillennialists are pretribulational in their thinking, and were put off by those predictions.

<sup>3</sup> Boldly asserted in the first printing of Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Gentry, "Dominionism," in the book *The Millennium and Beyond* (Zondervan: 1999) pages 13 - 14.

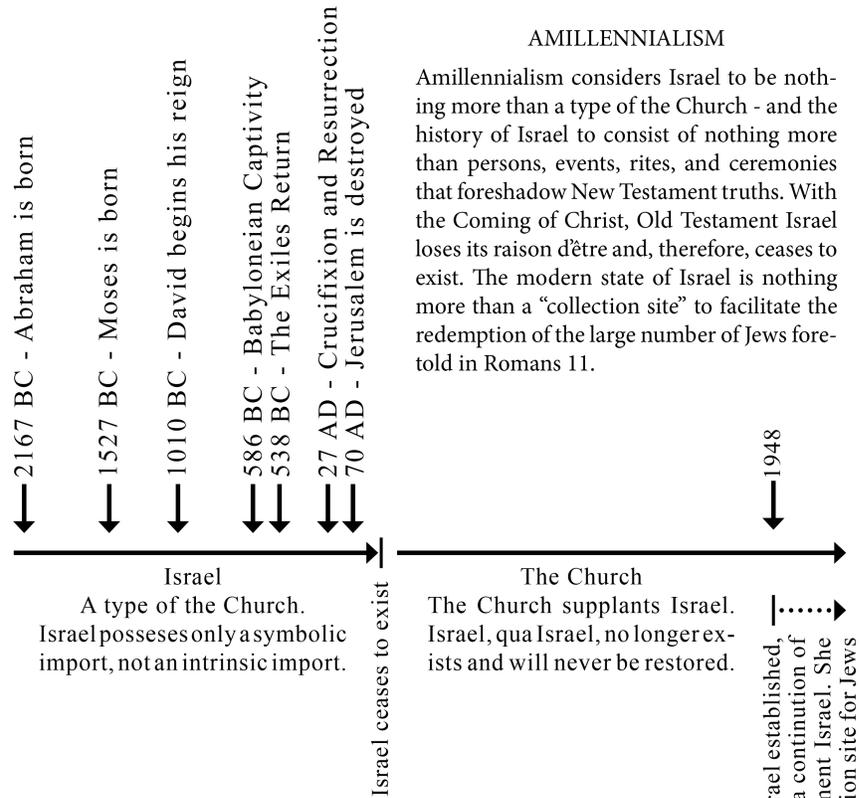
whole earth, such that “faith, righteousness, peace, and prosperity will (gradually) prevail in the affairs of people and nations.”<sup>1</sup>

## Premillennialist Take on the Relationship between Old Testament Israel and Modern Israel



<sup>1</sup> Ibid, page 13 - 14.

# Amillennialism's Take on the Relationship between Old Testament Israel and Modern Israel



Note: The restoration of Israel in 1948 is shown as a broken line to indicate that what was established then is not the Israel depicted in the Old Testament.

### *Reading the End before the Beginning*

Walter Kaiser<sup>1</sup> reminds us that at its core the Bible sketches out a *narrative* - with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It's a narrative that assumes the lofty status of a "world-view," what in German is called a "weltanschauung"<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> See pages 1 and 6.

The ending of any narrative is critically important - because it tells us what, at bottom, the narrative is all about - its terminus ad quem, its end-point, its objective, its goal, its design. In short, then, an eschatology, if it's accurately put together, reveals the ultimate purpose of salvation, the goal toward which redemptive history is pressing. If we get it right, it provides us with a "center" around which the whole Bible - all sixty-six books - revolves. It links them into an organic whole that is otherwise difficult to discern. In addition, it becomes, in the words of Stanley Grenz, a "call to action and obedience in the present."<sup>2</sup>

The problem, then, is "getting it right" - and that starts with a thorough read-through of the beginning and the middle of a narrative *before* reading the end. Too many of us succumb to the temptation to read the last chapter of a novel first - or have someone else read or teach it to us. Inevitably, that leaves us unable to get at the meaning of what's *really* being said in the last chapter. The reason is obvious, though we seldom take the time to think much about it: the words, phrases, terms, figures of speech, and even the gestures used in the last chapter have been developed and encrusted with meaning and significance in the beginning and middle chapters. That means the dramatic impact of the last chapter - together with much of its meaning - is lost altogether if it's read first; and, just as importantly, its feedback into the meaning of the beginning and middle chapters is lost as well.

It's impossible, for example, to understand the meaning of Shakespeare's *King Lear* if we begin at Act V, scene 3, the point at which King Lear appears on stage with Cordelia dead in his arms! And even if somehow a bit of its meaning is discerned, the dramatic impact is lost altogether - and with it the link to our own lives - specifically, how impossible it is to reduce to mere words the love of a daughter for her father - or, for that matter, the love of anyone for anyone else.

Likewise, it's impossible to get to the bottom of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* if we begin reading the book at the point Kurtz dies in the Belgian Congo, whispering into Marlow's ear "The horror! The horror!" We must start at the beginning of the book, on board the *Nellie*, a small ship moored on the Thames River in London, to grasp what Conrad is getting at - specifically, that European civilization is the real heart of darkness in the modern world.

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<sup>1</sup> Though this word has actually been carried over into English and made a part of the English lexicon as well.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze, Sorting out Evangelical Options*, (Downers Grove, Ill.; Intervarsity Press, 1992), page 202. Grenz's flirtations with postmodernism and his association with Brian McLaren and Doug Pagett link him to the "emergent church" movement and, therefore, call into question his orthodoxy; nevertheless, his quote here is right on target. See my book, *Facing the Storm*, pages 13 - 14. Purchase on Amazon.

Gordon Wenham underscores this same truth in his book *Story as Torah*. He tells us that it's only during the beginning and middle chapters of any narrative, including the Bible, that we form an identity with the author - an identity that makes us "*feel*" what the author is saying and, therefore, leads us to an accurate assessment of his conclusion in the final chapter.

"I succumb - I begin to see as he (the author) sees, to feel as he feels, to love what he loves, or to mock as he mocks."<sup>1</sup>

If we jump ahead to the end before reading the beginning and middle chapters, we invariably impose a meaning on the last chapter that in all likelihood is at odds with the author's intention - a meaning that reflects the conclusion *we want, not what the author intends*. And over time we can become so invested in it that making any kind of significant change is all but unthinkable - so much so that we subvert the obvious meaning of any Biblical text that appears to contradict it! In short, we resort to eisegesis.

*EXAMPLES:*

For well over one hundred years, the vast majority of Evangelicals have believed that Matthew 24, the first half of the Olivet Discourse, describes events that have no bearing on the church; that it amounts to little more than a sop to sate our curiosity. Why? Because those events, taken together, comprise the Tribulation - and to suggest that Matthew 24 is meant for the church runs contrary to the pretribulation<sup>2</sup> doctrine they've been taught.

However, writing the church out of Matthew 24 has always been a hard pill to swallow. Why? Because Jesus is here speaking to "The Twelve," soon to be commissioned the founding apostles of the church. With just a short time left to be with them, would Jesus spend those few remaining hours on a teaching that has no bearing whatsoever on the prodigious responsibilities they're about to shoulder? That's not very likely. And, in any event, Jesus has already been narrowing down the focus of his teaching ministry to that one single task - ever since, a year earlier, he had asked his disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" - leading him for the first time to pull back the veil concealing the church and to unmistakably link his messianic mission to its establishment.

Isn't it only reasonable to assume, therefore, that Matthew 24 is freighted with staggering significance for the church? And, if so, doesn't that beg the question, are evangelicals allowing their take on Matthew 24 to be guided less by the text itself and more by a preconceived eschatological interpretation, making it a classic example of textural distortion?

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Story as Torah* (Baker Academics, 2000) page 11. Gordon Wenham is Professor of Old Testament studies at the University of Gloucestershire and one of the most astute living Old Testament scholars.

<sup>2</sup> ... that the church will be raptured before the onset of the Tribulation

To make their case, pretribulationists resort to a deft sleight of hand ...

Because here in Matthew 24 the church age has not yet been formally inaugurated, the disciples to whom Jesus is speaking represent not the church, but Israel.<sup>1</sup>

But is that really tenable? That simply because the Day of Pentecost had not yet come, the disciples here in Matthew 24 aren't representative of the church, but of Israel? That seems a bit farfetched. I doubt very much that it would survive "Occam's Razor."<sup>2</sup> All the truths Jesus proclaimed during his ministry, not just those here in Matthew 24, were taught before the Day of Pentecost. Does that undercut their relevance for the church as well? The answer is so obvious it hardly needs to be stated.

Again, what we have here appears to be a clear distortion of the text for the purpose of preserving an eschatological bias - in this case, the pretribulation rapture.

*REVELATION 20:1-3*

Revelation 20:1-3 reads ...

*Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand.*

*He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years;*

*and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.*

*Revelation 20:1-3*

The phrase "laid hold of" in verse 2 translates the Greek word "ekrātēsīn" (ἐκράτησεν) It's a word that implies the use of both force and violence. In short, the dragon is not being simply grasped and held, but seized violently - much like a ferocious dog seizing a child's rag-doll and shaking it viciously. He's thoroughly overpowered.

Not only that, but he's then bound with a great chain "alusīn mēgalēn" (ἄλυσιν μεγάλην). The word "bound" translates the Greek word "ēdēsīn" (ἔδησεν) - and, like the word "ekrātēsīn," it also implies the use of both force and violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas Ice, for example, writes in Part 5 of his study series on Matthew 24: "I take it that in Christ's discourse, the disciples (are) the representatives of godly Jews, and (are being) warned of what should befall their nation."

<sup>2</sup> The principle suggesting that among competing hypotheses, the one that's least complicated should be selected. A more complicated solution may ultimately prove correct, but, in the absence of certainty, the less complicated, the better.

- ✓ Ekrātēsin
- ✓ Ēdēsin
- ✓ Alusin mēgalēn

The sense here is perfectly clear: the devil is *thoroughly* constrained - to the point of being immobilized.

But that's not the end of it. In verse 3, we have the verb "cast" in the phrase "cast him into the bottomless pit." The word "cast" translates the Greek word "ēbālen" (ἐβάλεν). It means to "throw down," and is sometimes translated "to beat." Next, we have the phrase "shut him up," the Greek word "eklēsin" (ἐκλείσεν) - which means "to imprison." And not only shut but locked, which the word "key" in verse 1 clearly implies! Then the final coup de grâce, the prison door is "sealed" - the Greek word "esphragēsin" (ἐσφράγισεν).

- ✓ It's not simply that the devil is grasped and held, but that he's violently seized and unable to resist.
- ✓ *Not only that*, but he is tightly bound with a great chain - meaning he is thoroughly constrained; he is immobilized.
- ✓ *Not only that*, but he is then thrown (beaten) down into a bottomless pit.
- ✓ *Not only that*, but the door to the bottomless pit is both shut and then locked.
- ✓ *Not only that*, but then we have the final "nail in the coffin," the door is sealed, clearly obviating any possibility of an escape.

The text couldn't be clearer. The word-picture that's drawn is dramatic. But the text, as it's written, throws a monkey wrench into the machinery of amillennialism. The reason is simple and straightforward: if the thousand years (χίλια ἔτη) is nothing more than a metaphor for the church age, which is exactly what amillennialists make of it, then it can't possibly be that the angel in Revelation 20:1-3 has truly incapacitated Satan. Why? Because it's all too clear that Satan is "alive and well," and prowling the earth to wreak havoc and destruction during the entire span of the church age. Amillennialists must either abandon their eschatological scheme or tweak Revelation 20:1-3 to accommodate their bias.

And tweak it they do! Notwithstanding the dramatic clarity of the passage - that Satan is violently seized, bound with a great chain and utterly disabled, thrown down into a "prison cell" called the "bottomless pit" that's then shut, locked, and sealed - amillennialists twist the passage to read that Satan is only partially bound: that he is constrained only to the extent *that he's unable any longer to deceive the nations*; that he's still free to roam the earth fomenting sin, rebellion, mayhem, and savage cruelty. In short, they make the "binding" dependent on the clause "that he should not deceive the nations;" that he's still otherwise free. And, frankly, that's a sham. Nothing the proponents of amillennialism either say or do can excuse that level of exegetical violence. How

could it possibly be otherwise? Once again: Satan has been seized, bound tightly with a chain, cast into a prison cell, with the door shut, locked, and sealed. That's what the text tells us – that's its plain, literal meaning.

But it's not just that the amillennialist interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3 fails at the bar of textual exegesis, it also fails at the bar of history (cf pages 12 - 14). Certainly, nothing is more obvious today than just how closed so many nations<sup>1</sup> are to the spread of the Christian Faith - including, sadly, many Western nations beguiled by a postmodern mindset that now indicts Christians for being narrow-minded bigots who stir up hatred and antagonism. In short, the devil has *not* been kept from "deceiving the nations" to prevent the spread of the gospel.

Once again, what we have here is a premise - meaning an eschatological take - that's forcing a conclusion - meaning an unsound exegetical rendering of an important passage of scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> The Moslem nations, which together boast a population of 1.6 billion people, are especially closed to the gospel - some to the point of actually prohibiting its spread under threat of imprisonment and death.