

A Critique of the Dispensational Understanding of the “Land” as a Gift to National Israel

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I will briefly discuss and critique the Dispensationalist’s view of the “land” from the unified perspective of both classic (see Appendix A) and modified (see Appendix B) Dispensationalism. There are differences in how these movements within Dispensationalism understand the relationship of Israel and the church, and there is disagreement in the degree of accepting what is called the “already, not yet” approach to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. However, despite the differences, Dispensationalism is united in its belief that at the end of human history God will restore to national Israel the promise given to Abraham and Israel will then as a nation occupy the physical land of Palestine. At that time the Messiah will rule the entire world from Jerusalem.

This belief about national Israel’s future in the Land is based on what classic dispensationalist’s call a ‘literal’ interpretation¹ of the covenant with Abraham, which they view as an unconditional and eternal covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham, and a ‘literal’ interpretation of the writings of the prophets that depict a future restoration of the nation of Israel. Based upon their ‘literal’ hermeneutic, classic dispensationalists conclude that the land promise to Abraham and his descendants belongs to ethnic Israelites who will acknowledge their Messiah. For classic dispensationalists, the issue of "literal versus spiritual interpretation" lies at the heart of dispensational interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant. Walvoord insists:

¹ For a more detailed discussion of hermeneutical issues related to dispensationalist’s use of the Abrahamic Covenant see Appendix c.

.. the premillennial interpretation of the Abrahamic Covenant takes its provisions literally. In other words, the promises given to Abraham will be fulfilled by Abraham; the promises given to Abraham's seed, will be fulfilled by his physical seed; the promises to 'all the families of the earth,' will be fulfilled by the Gentiles, or those who are not the physical seed, while the possession of the land forever is the promise to the physical seed, the promise of blessing is to 'all the families of the earth.' Both are to be fulfilled exactly as promised (Walvoord 1951, 419).

Moderate and Progressive Dispensationalists are less attached to the literal hermeneutic and allow that ultimately "... the city of God is the common destiny of all the redeemed" (Blaising 1988, 277). Nevertheless, these contemporary dispensationalists acknowledge the first sine qua non, i.e. the distinction between Israel and the church, as dispensationalism's "distinguishing factor" (Blaising 1988, 273). This coincides with Poythress's critique that this distinction is more fundamental than a literal hermeneutic. He writes: "Their approaches toward strict literalness seem to be subordinated to the more fundamental principle of dual destinations for Israel and the church" (Poythress 1987, 78).

Admittedly, a reading of the Old Testament apart from the New Testament leans toward the possibility of these dispensational conclusions. However, I suggest that as Christians we should read the Old Testament in light of the fuller and final revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This 'Christological' reading of the Old Testament yields a wider understanding of both the 'seed' and 'land' of the Abrahamic covenant.

Who is the seed of Abraham?

The Abrahamic covenant often speaks of "seed." The Hebrew word זרע and the related Greek word *sperma* present a complex concept in identifying the recipients of the Abrahamic promise. "Seed" is used at times to include the physical descendants of Abraham, those who share the faith of Abraham, whether physical seed or not, and in Galatians 3:16,

Paul argues forcefully that זרע in the singular finds its ultimate reference to Christ as "the" offspring of Abraham.

This variegated usage produces perplexity in understanding "who are the recipients of the Abrahamic covenant?"

Part of the solution to this complexity is to understand that זרע is used to describe both a singular entity as well as a collective. The promise was given to Abraham and to his seed (Genesis 12:1-3,7; 15; 17:1-22; 22:15-18), i.e. both to Isaac (27:27-29) and to Jacob (28:10-15). Both Isaac and Jacob stood representatively in the Messianic office, an office fulfilled in Jesus Christ. McComiskey notes: "The collective function of זרע allows the writer to refer to the group or to a representative individual of the group" (McComiskey 1985, 20). The focus is not on the physically related זרע, for those who are not physically related can participate in the covenant (Gen 17:9-14). The collective singular disallows any notion of "seeds," physical and spiritual. There is but one seed.

The New Testament clarifies that Jesus Christ is the ideal representative seed, while those in Christ comprise the collective seed, i.e. the community of faith (Gal 3:16,29). Isaac and Jacob cannot ultimately fulfill the promise. Only Jesus Christ can bless the earth in a final sense. The collective seed has no identity apart from their relationship to the ideal representative, Jesus Christ.

This dual concept of "individual representative" and "corporate community of faith" is essential to understanding זרע. It appears that later in the progress of revelation the Davidic covenant expands on the royal status of the representative individual who guarantees

the covenant and the New covenant expands on the spiritual nature of the corporate community of faith who participate in that covenant.

As indicated earlier, another step in resolving the complexity of זרע is to understand that "seed" does not equate to "physical descendants." Though Ishmael was a descendant of Abraham, he was not the seed of Abraham to whom the promise was guaranteed. Likewise, Esau was a descendant of Isaac, yet was not in the line of promise. Also, there were many who were physically seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, yet who stood outside the covenant (Rom 2:28-29).

Clearly, not all of the physical זרע of Abraham inherit the promise. Only those physical descendants bound in a unique "covenant" relationship or those non-physical "seed" who by faith enter that covenant of Abraham inherit the promise.

The unique relationship that establishes man as the true seed of Abraham is one built on a faith participation in a divinely initiated covenant.² O. Palmer Robertson recognizes covenant as the bond that determines relations between God and his people:

By creation God bound himself to man in covenantal relationship. After man's fall into sin, the God of all creation graciously bound himself to man again by committing himself to redeem a people to himself from lost humanity. From creation to consummation the covenantal bond has determined the relation of God to his people (Robertson 1980, 25).

Daniel P. Fuller in his discussion of the seed of Abraham concludes that since faith is the prerequisite for participation in the Abrahamic covenant by both Jew and Gentile, then "

²See O. Palmer Robertson, "Genesis 15:6; New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text," WTJ 42 (1980): 259-289.

... faith which produces obedience, rather than physical descent, is the primary aspect of the seed of Abraham" (Fuller 1957, 234).

It holds true then that physically related זרע are not guaranteed participation in the Abrahamic promise, but the promise is insured " ... to all the people of faith throughout all ages" (McComiskey 1985, 17). Once again, the New Testament affirms that not all Israelites were inheritors of the promise (Romans 2:28-29) and that some of those outside Abraham's physical seed do inherit the promise (Galatians 3:29).

The "seed" of Abraham are those who by faith engage The Seed, whether physically related or not. It remains for the New Testament to clarify the notion more specifically. In any case, there is no basis for a distinction between physical seed and spiritual seed in these accounts in Genesis.

Finally, Samuel Weldon notes that a comparison of the characteristics and privileges granted to Israel in the Old Testament are assumed by the church in the New Testament (Weldon 2003, 143).

| Old Israel or Church | New Israel or Church |
|---|---|
| 1. Saints (num 16:3; Dt 33.3) | 1. Saints (Eph 1:1; Rom 1:7) |
| 2. Elect (Dt 7:6, 7; 14:2) | 2. Elect (Col 3:12; Tit 1:1) |
| 3. Beloved (Dt 7:7; 4:37) | 3. Beloved (Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4) |
| 4. Called (Isa 41:9; 43:1) | 4. Called (Rom 1:6, 7; 1 Cor 1:2) |
| 5. Church (Ps 89:5; Mic 2:5 (LXX) Act 7:38; Heb 2:12) | 5. Church (Eph 1:1; Acts 20:28) |
| 6. Flock (Eze 34; Ps 77:20) | 6. Flock (Lk 12:32; 1 Pet 5:2) |
| 7. Holy Nation (Ex 19:5, 6) | 7. Holy Nation (1 Pet 2:9) |
| 8. Kingdom of Priests (Ex 19:5, 6) | 8. Kingdom of Priests (1 Pet 2:9) |
| 9. Peculiar Treasure (Ex 19:5, 6) | 9. Peculiar Treasure (1 Pet 2:9) |
| 10. God's People (Hos 1:9, 10) | 10. God's People (1 Pet 2:10) |
| 11. Holy People (Dt 7:6) | 11. Holy People (1 Pet 1:15-16) |
| 12. People of Inheritance (Dt 4:20) | 12. People of Inheritance (Eph 1:18) |
| 13. God's Tabernacle in Israel (Lev 26:11) | 13. God's Tabernacle in Church (John 1:14) |
| 14. God walks among them (Lev 26:12) | 14. God walks among them (2 Cor 6:16-18) |
| 15. Twelve Patriarchs | 15. Twelve Apostles |
| 16. Christ married to them Isa 54:5; Jer 3:13; Hos 2:19; Jer 6:2; 31:32) | 16. Christ married to them (Eph 5:22, 23; 2 Cor 11:12) |

What is entailed in the promise of land?

'Land' is promised to Abraham and his descendants in Gen 12:5-7 and 13:13-17, covenanted in Gen 15:7-18, and explicated in verses 19-21. This promise of land is repeated to Isaac (Gen 26:3-4) and to Jacob (Gen 28:3, 13-15; 35:9-12). Deuteronomy 12:8-32³ describes the land as "... a 'resting place' (menuha) and an 'inheritance' (nahala). It is the place where God will choose a site as a 'dwelling for his Name'(v.11)" (McComiskey 1985, 43).

Land in the Old Testament is both a physical reality as well as a theological symbol. The 2,504 uses of "land" in the Old Testament speak of its importance to theology (Martens 1981, 97). Though God promised to Abraham a specific piece of geography, Abraham apparently understood it as more than geography (Heb 11:16, 39-40).

Theologically, land is the gift of God. Land is the place of blessing. Land is the fulfillment of promise. Land is that sphere of life where one lives out his allegiance to Yahweh. Land is that place where Yahweh uniquely chooses to dwell and to reveal Himself (Martens 1981, 242-7). Land is the sphere of God's kingdom activity.

The conquest under Joshua was more than just a military invasion, it was a theological event wherein the pious in Israel had their faith confirmed in God's promise to Abraham. Joshua 21:44-45 indicates that to a measure the promise was fulfilled in Joshua's day, in Solomon's day (I Kings 8:56) and in Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 9:7-8). However, since the land promise is eternally operative, each and every successive generation looks for the promise of rest in "land."

³ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

Concerning the land promise, some of the poetic material (ca. Prov 2:21) "... demonstrates the vital principle that although the promise is irrevocable in nature, its benefits are only enjoyed by those who maintain a proper relationship to God through the obedience of faith" (McComiskey 1985, 48). Ultimately the realization of the land promise awaits the time of the resurrection, the removal of the curse, and the restoration of all things (Rev 21-22) under the rule of God.

The prophets (cp. Zech 14:1-11) maintain an expectation that there will be, not simply a return to the land of Palestine by the seed of Abraham, but an expansion of the territorial borders of the promised land to include the world. This is fulfilled in the new earth.

Land was always important to the original purpose of God for man. At creation this land included the entire earth and all its resources. Man was given dominion over this land (Gen 1:26-28). In the fall man lost this dominion.

In an act of redemptive grace, God granted to the seed of Abraham the land, then defined more narrowly (Gen 15:18-21), as the nation of Israel was to enjoy in a microcosmic way what God intended originally and eschatologically for the people of God (Rev 21-22). As old Israel found rest in the land of Palestine, so the Church experiences a spiritual deliverance out of the bondage of Satan's world of sin and death to inherit rest in Christ (Heb 3-4) and ultimately awaits a new heaven and new earth in which dwells righteousness (1 Pet 3).

To New Testament believers, this "landedness" presently finds expression in their current experience with Jesus Christ (Col 1:13) as the fulfillment of the theological symbol, accompanied by an expectation, as seen in the eschatology of the Old Testament prophets and of the New Testament, that the physical reality involves an expansion of the territorial

borders to include the entire cosmos, the New Creation, as originally intended in Genesis 1 and 2. Ultimately this is what Abraham understood.

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be *heir of the world*, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (Rom 4:13).

Limiting the seed of Abraham to ethnic Israel confines the land promise to Palestine. Allowing for the inclusion of all believers in the seed of Abraham coincides with the expansion of the land promise to include the new cosmos. This does not abrogate the promise of an inheritance to the believing physical descendants of Abraham, but expands on it.

As noted earlier, McComiskey pointed out that covenant theology does not demand an abrogation of the promise of land. To him the New Testament expands the promise of land to include the whole redeemed world under the kingship of Jesus Christ (McComiskey 1985, 199-209). He concludes his discussion saying:

The land will belong to the people of God because it is part of the larger triumph of Christ. Perhaps the definable borders of Canaan will no longer be important under the rule of David's son, but the promise of the land as a territorial heritage need not be considered as abrogated if one approaches the promises through covenant (McComiskey 1985, 208).

Conclusion

In the New Testament apart from Romans 11:25-27 a future restoration of the nation of Israel is not even hinted at. Of the seventy-four references to Abraham in the New Testament, not one clearly focuses on the 'earthly' elements of the covenant. Even the

acceptance of a mass conversion of Israelites at some future time does not demand a return to a former order of things.

Due to the advent of Christ, as the seed of Abraham, the New Testament sees a semi-realized fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant in New Testament believers and an ultimate eternal fulfillment for all those who are 'seed' of Abraham by faith.

In Christ we have our 'landedness' as we are "blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." (Eph 1:3) and are assured that we have "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven" (1 Pet 1:3).

The New Testament texts that consider the question of 'who are the legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic Covenant?' unequivocally answer 'all of those who are in Christ Jesus.' In reference to the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles George N. H. Peters cogently concludes:

Both elect are the seed, the children of Abraham; both sets of branches are on the same stock, on the same root, on the same olive tree; both constitute the same Israel of God, the members of the same body, fellow-citizens of the same commonwealth; both are Jews 'inwardly' (Romans 2:29), and of the true 'circumcision' (Phil. 3:3), forming the same 'peculiar people,' 'holy nation,' and 'royal priesthood'; both are interested in the same promises, covenants, and kingdom; both inherit and realize the same blessings at the same time (Peters, 1952, 404).

The legitimate heir of the covenant with Abraham is Jesus Christ, the quintessential seed of Abraham. Furthermore, Israelite believers, Palestinian believers, and all other Gentile believers share in that inheritance through faith in Jesus Christ.

Appendix A

Classic Dispensationalism

Within the framework of classic dispensational theology, the Abrahamic covenant initiates the dispensation of Promise and introduces an unconditional and eternal covenant with the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Dispensation of Promise began textually at Genesis 12:1 and ended at Exodus 19:8. That dispensation is distinguished from the covenant itself in that the promise was conditioned on obedience and staying in the land while the covenant itself anticipated the "seed" that should come (Scofield 1909, 20).

Classic dispensationalists normally divide the covenant into seven parts: (1) "I will make you into a great nation," fulfilled in Abraham's natural posterity in a spiritual posterity and in the seed of Ishmael; (2) "I will bless you," entailing both temporal and spiritual blessing to Abraham; (3) "make your name great," referring to a personal promise to Abraham; (4) "you will be a blessing," finding its fulfillment in Galatians 3:13-14; (5 and 6) "bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse," fulfilled in the history of the dispersions of Israel; (7) "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," containing the great evangelistic promise fulfilled in Abraham's seed, Christ (Scofield 1909, 25).

Classic dispensationalists assert that apart from the soteriological aspect of blessing in Christ, the covenant is largely one for Abraham's physical seed. Walvoord maintains: "While the Abrahamic covenant is essentially gracious and promises blessings, it deals for the most part with physical blessings and a physical seed" (Walvoord 1951, 418). A rigid distinction

between Israel, Abraham's physical seed, and the Church, Abraham's spiritual seed, is the benchmark of classic dispensationalism.

In his discussion of what he called the "sine qua non of dispensationalism" Ryrie asserted:

A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct. . . . This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a man is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive (Ryrie 1965, 44-45).

Later he concluded that "the essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church" (Ryrie 1965, 47).

In his discussion of the Abrahamic covenant Dwight Pentecost reiterates the separation between physical blessings and physical seed versus spiritual blessings and spiritual seed as set forth by Scofield and Walvoord. In an attempt to demonstrate some relationship among the various covenants, Pentecost suggests that the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant are developed in the Palestinian covenant, the seed promises in the Davidic covenant, and the blessing promises in the New Covenant (Pentecost 1958, 72). All of these covenants relate to Israel.

The discovery of a Palestinian covenant in Deuteronomy 30:1-10 is distinctive to dispensationalism. Feinberg in his argument against Allis's charge that dispensationalists equate "... being 'in the land' as the pre-condition of blessing under this covenant" responds:

There is a failure here to recognize that ownership of the land depended upon the Abrahamic covenant, and that in perpetuity; whereas occupation of the land depended and still depends on the Palestinian covenant of Deuteronomy 28 to 30, which demands obedience as a prerequisite (Feinberg 1985, 87-88).

This introduction of a Palestinian covenant provides an avenue of escape for dispensationalists from the some of the charges of amillennialists who allege that the

Abrahamic covenant was conditional. Classic dispensationalists would say that the Palestinian covenant sets forth the conditions for temporal participation in the blessings, yet guarantees ultimate fulfillment for all of Israel.

For the classic dispensationalist the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant awaits an eschatological time when physical Israel is restored to their land permanently. The New Testament age does not relate to the Abrahamic covenant apart from one's faith participation in the soteriological aspect of blessing in Christ. New Testament believers in no other way fulfill or participate in the promises to the physical seed of Abraham.

To the classic dispensationalist the anticipated kingdom is marked by the superior position of Israel over the rest of the world wherein for one thousand years they will enjoy the unprecedented earthly blessing promised to Abraham.

Some of the more important treatments on the Abrahamic covenant by classic dispensationalists are those by John Walvoord (Walvoord 1951-2), the discussion by Dwight Pentecost (Pentecost 1958, 65-94), the works by Charles Ryrie (Ryrie 1965; 1986) and the notes found in both the Old and New Scofield Bibles (Scofield 1909; 1969).

Appendix B

Modified Dispensationalism

Among other things, modified dispensationalists recognize varying degrees of realized eschatology in the New Testament. In discussing the eschatological blessing promised to Israel, Robert Saucy suggests the possibility that the present experience of the Church may be "the beginning of the eschatological blessings promised for the messianic age which will be shared by all believers" (Saucy 1988, 250). He views the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit, though having direct reference to Israel in the book of Joel, as participation in that new messianic age (Saucy 1988, 250).

This is definitely a "progression" in dispensational teaching. It is a tacit admission of the "already, not yet" approach to fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Also, modified dispensationalists see much more continuity between Israel and the Church. Though Saucy would reject "... a new continuity which sees the Church as a kind of new Israel which has now taken over the promises of Israel ..." (Saucy 1988, 241), he does adhere to a continuity of the "people of God." He explains:

... it is perhaps best to say that the 'people of God' is one people, since all will be related to him through the same covenant salvation. But the affirmation of this fundamental unity in a relation to God through Christ does not eliminate the distinctiveness of Israel as a special nation called of God for a unique ministry in the world as a nation among nations (Saucy 1988, 241).

Robert Saucy also represents a softening of the earthly/heavenly dichotomy between Israel and the Church when he asserts:

The earlier dispensational teaching that divided the people of God into an earthly and heavenly people (i.e., the Church and Israel), with fundamentally no continuity in the plan of God on the historical plane, must be rejected ..." (Saucy 1988, 241).

Saucy views the people of God as " ... enlarged to include those from other nations other than Israel," though without the Church assuming that position exclusively for herself (Saucy 1988, 241).

This admission of unity between Israel and the Church as "people of God" marks another shift in dispensationalism.

Furthermore, modified dispensationalists speak more consistently of the method of salvation. Allen P. Ross, though maintaining that the actual content of revelation for saving faith differed throughout the dispensations, sets forth Abraham as an example that salvation in both testaments is by grace through faith (Ross 1988, 164-9). His closing admission that being "a covenant theologian with a dispensational hermeneutic" best describes the biblical method of salvation (Ross 1988, 178) is another tacit admission of the unity of redemption in both Testaments.

This continuity of the "people of God" sharing "the same covenant salvation" marks another alteration in dispensationalism.

Modified dispensationlists have made at least three major modifications in their theological system. They allow for a limited "already, not yet" approach to fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, they adhere to more of a continuity between Israel and the Church, and they no longer maintain the rigid grace\law distinction, seeing more coherence in the history of redemption.

Appendix C

Issues of Hermeneutics

Introduction

The hermeneutical issues in dispensationalism's understanding of the Abrahamic covenant revolve around two of the three aspects of what Ryrie has termed "the sine qua non of dispensationalism" (Ryrie 1965, 43-47). These two aspects are (1) the distinction between Israel and the Church and (2) the normal or plain interpretation of Scripture. As will be seen, both of these are inextricably woven together.

For some, the second sine qua non provides the basis for determining the first (Ryrie 1965, 97). Vern Poythress recognized that "... nearly all the problems associated with the dispensationalist-nondispensationalist conflict are buried beneath the question of literal interpretation" (Poythress 1987, 78). However, the question of "literal interpretation" solicits conflicting answers from those who employ the term. Consequently, due to the difficulty of conclusively answering the question of "what is meant by literal?", recent dispensationalists have conceded "... that consistently literal exegesis is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of dispensationalism" (Blaising 1988, 272).

What dispensationalists traditionally perceived to be "literal interpretation" resulted in a bifurcation of the material in the two Testaments and a corollary, continuing distinction between Israel and the Church. Daniel Fuller summarizes Oswald T. Allis's objection to dispensationalism saying that the "... basic hermeneutical error in dispensationalism was its insistence on dividing and compartmentalizing the Scriptures, with the result that a most important distinction was made between those Scriptures relating to Israel and those relating to the Church" (Fuller 1980, 19).

Contemporary dispensationalism has returned to the first sine qua non, i.e. the distinction between Israel and the church, as its "distinguishing factor" (Blaising 1988, 273). This return coincides with Poythress's further recognition that this distinction is more fundamental than a literal hermeneutic. He writes: "Their approaches toward strict literalness seem to be subordinated to the more fundamental principle of dual destinations for Israel and the church" (Poythress 1987, 78).

Strikingly, in discussing those dual destinations dispensationalists have moderated from the absolute earthly\heavenly dualism of early dispensationalism. Early dispensationalism, as evidenced in Darby's teaching, provided the groundwork for an absolute distinction. Darby maintained a distinction between Israel and the Church that was both temporal and eschatological. He propounded an earthly\heavenly dichotomy between Israel and the Church (Blaising 1988, 273-275). His views were followed by Lewis Sperry Chafer and others.

Nevertheless, Blaising notes that in the 1950s and 1960s dispensational writers had dropped the earthly\heavenly dualism and instead accepted that both Israel and the Church ultimately shared eternal destinies in the same sphere (Blaising 1988, 276).

Apparently among contemporary dispensationalists there is agreement that "... the city of God is the common destiny of all the redeemed" (Blaising 1988, 277). However, the question remains, if ultimately both share a common destiny, then wherein lies the "distinguishing factor," namely, the distinction between Israel and the Church? That distinction appears to lie in the earthly fulfillment of the land promise to national, ethnic Israel whom dispensationalists understand to be the "seed" of Abraham. For the dispensationalist, this is what "literal" hermeneutics demand. Walvoord remarks:

The Old Testament saints and prophets expected a special program for the nation of Israel consummating in a kingdom era. This was the normal understanding of the promises (Walvoord 1980, 19).

However, a plaguing issue with dispensational hermeneutics is the lack of consistency in definition and application of "what is literal" which results in confusion. Vern Poythress relates this problem of consistency when he asks concerning dispensationalists:

Are they really begging the important questions? Are they really slanting the case in favor of `flat interpretation'? Or are they just being imprecise? Maybe they are just imprecise, but the particular way in which they are imprecise does not help to delineate the issues separating dispensationalist from nondispensationalist hermeneutics. It rather confuses them (Poythress 1987, 94).

Literal Interpretation

If literal interpretation is confined to what the human author or recipient of revelation would have understood, then its application to the Abrahamic covenant would seem to result in a limitation of its scope to ethnic Israel and the land of Palestine. However, if by literal interpretation one means any meaning inherent in the words of a text even as nuanced by future revelation, then its application to the Abrahamic covenant results in a fuller understanding of "seed" and "land."

Walter Kaiser is right in insisting that the meaning of a text can only be informed by antecedent revelation (Kaiser 1987, 99), if he refers to meaning as understood by its original recipients. Certainly without the benefit of future revelation they could only understand in terms of what existed. However, to maintain that the recipients of later revelation are confined to the original recipient's sometimes limited understanding of a text is too narrow.

Scalise comments in this regard:

The history of exegesis seems generally to demonstrate that when the sensus literalis of Scripture has been defined in a positive and more than woodenly literal way (cf.

especially Augustine and Luther), resulting in a synthesis of grammatical, historical, and theological understandings, a flourishing of the exegetical discipline and a renewal of dynamic biblical theology has recurred (Scalise 1989, 65).

Scalise's point requires some amplification. As stated earlier, to limit a text's fullest interpretation to its grammatical-historical meaning is too restrictive. On the other hand to include theological interpretation with the grammatical-historical is to allow progressive revelation to inform the text.

Berkhof asserts that grammatical-historical interpretation does not meet "... all the requirements for the proper interpretation of the Bible (Berkhof 1950, 133). In his view grammatical-historical interpretation does not account for the following:

that the Bible is the word of God; (2) that it constitutes an organic whole, of which each individual book is an integral part; (3) that the Old and New Testament are related to each other as type and antitype, prophecy and fulfillment, germ and perfect development; (4) that not only explicit statements of the Bible, but also what may be deduced from it by good and necessary consequences, constitute the Word of God (Berkhof 1950, 133).

As noted earlier, Kaiser's view that only antecedent revelation can inform a text is inadequate. Equally inadequate is a view of interpretation that limits itself to grammatical-historical meaning. Though dispensationalists have quoted Bernard Ramm to support their understanding of "literal" (Pentecost 1958, 9-11), they fail to notice that Bernard Ramm aptly affirmed that though literal interpretation "... is the only conceivable method of beginning and commencing to understand literature of all kinds" (Ramm 1970, 123), he also recognized the role of typology:

The program of the literal interpretation of Scripture does not overlook the figures of speech, the symbols, the types, the allegories that as a matter of fact are to be found in Holy Scripture. It is not a blind letterism nor a wooden literalism as is so often the accusation (Ramm 1970, 126).

Theological interpretation adds another dimension to understanding the historical-grammatical meaning of Scripture. Vern Poythress defines grammatical-historical interpretation as interpretation that "... deals with what a passage says against the background of its original time and culture, bearing in mind the purpose of the human author" (Poythress 1987, 97).

He correctly concludes that what dispensationalists mean by literal is actually the grammatical-historical interpretation of a text (Poythress 1987, 86). Pentecost equates the grammatical-historical method with literal interpretation (Pentecost 1958, 9) as does Ryrie (Ryrie 1965, 92-96) who also charges that nondispensationalists "introduce another hermeneutical principle (the 'theological' method) in order to have a hermeneutical basis for the system which he holds" (Ryrie 1965, 94).

The grammatical-historical approach to Scripture is necessary and adequate as a starting point. However, it falls short due to the now enlarged context of Scripture. It must be conceded that knowing what Abraham understood by the words of the covenant cannot be fully arrived at from the Old Testament text itself, as is indicated by the writer of Hebrews commentary on that understanding in Hebrews 11:16: "Instead they were longing for a better country--a heavenly one." No reading of the Old Testament text alone will confirm that Abraham was looking for a heavenly city. Yet, the New Testament declares that he was.

The New Testament text introduces a dimension in understanding the heavenly nature of the land that a grammatical-historical approach alone does not yield.

Theological Correspondence

A related issue to the grammatical-historical-theological approach to Scripture is that of theological correspondence. Correct interpretation is grounded in the recognition of continuity in the theological purpose of God. The dualism of the earthly and heavenly, of Israel and the Church, and of law vs. grace, and the bifurcation of the testaments on those bases produce a theological discontinuity. In this author's investigation of Old Testament theology, a tentative theological paradigm has been developed through which the rest of Scripture is viewed.

This paradigm for the study of Old Testament theology is set within the parameters of God's stated purpose for man as recorded in Genesis 1:26-27. An examination of this purpose discloses a two-fold, yet united, design for humanity.

Primarily, God intended for man to have relationship with Himself. The term used to describe this relationship is "Sonship." Secondly, God intended that man should be responsible to Him and responsible for His creation. This responsibility is termed "Stewardship." This "Sonship/Stewardship" motif provides an initial paradigm for the study of Old Testament Biblical Theology.

However, the fall of man, which disoriented man from fulfilling God's design, necessitates an additional motif that runs parallel to the first and that, at times, overshadows the first. From the event of the fall, there emerges a "Redemptive\Restoration" motif that continues throughout the Scripture.

It is within the parameters of God's original intent of Sonship\Stewardship, paralleled by and at times overshadowed by Redemptive\Restoration, that a paradigm for Old Testament Theology and for understanding the Abrahamic covenant is presented.

The function of covenant relates to this overarching motif. The covenant served to insure that there would be a seed to carry forth the Sonship\Stewardship purpose of God.

The covenant grows out of the Redemptive\Restoration motif.

It is the above theological basis and understanding of the unity of the purpose of God that supply certain normative features for making theological interpretations. When applied to the Abrahamic covenant, a paradigm such as this relates that covenant to the original purpose of God and establishes a unity and continuity in that purpose. As Dumbrell was previously quoted: "The call of that patriarch began a programme of redemption which aimed at full and final restoration of man and his world" (Dumbrell 1982, 50).

Theological correspondence relates the concepts of seed, land, and divine\human relationship to the original and ultimate purposes of God and thus yields more than a provincial interpretation.

Authorial Intention

The issue of literal interpretation also involves that of authorial intention. Must interpreters limit the scope of interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant to what Moses understood in recording those words for the nation of Israel? Since Scripture is marked by both divine and human authorship, is it necessary that the intent of the words was shared equally by both authors? Conceivably, due to the dual authorship of the Bible (Divine\human), the answer to the question of intention may be thought of as unattainable because of the absence of the Author\author.

However, since God has preserved only the words of these authors, and in those words expects men to understand the message, interpreters must conclude that the intention

of the Author\author is that which is based singularly in the words of Scripture as contained in the canon of Scripture. Any other supposed intention is not available and, therefore, not necessary to the interpretation of Scripture. Any contextual interpretation must then be based on the words found in the text.

Although having affirmed that intention is based on the textual meaning of the words, dispensationalists must yet realize that the scope of intended meaning was not necessarily shared by both authors. Paul D. Feinberg in defending the hermeneutics of dispensationalism rejects any notion that there could be any difference between the human author's intentions and in God's (Feinberg 1988, 177). Nevertheless, though the human author's intention would not conflict with the divine author's, there is no necessity for it to have been coordinate with the scope of the Divine author's intention.

For instance, there are some who would hold that in Psalm 2 the human author envisioned the human Davidic king as the anointed of God, while the divine author, as is seen in the New Testament usage of Psalm 2, ultimately intended to focus on one particular Davidic king, the Messianic King. Is there contradiction? No! There is merely difference in the intended scope of the words. It is this difference in the depth and scope of intention that helps us to understand some of the New Testament uses of the Old Testament, especially in prophetic and poetic passages.

The same can be said of the Abrahamic covenant. Though the human recipient, Abraham, and the human author, Moses, may have had a provincial, limited understanding of the scope of that covenant, the latter prophets and New Testament authors share the expanded scope of the divine author.

It is also plausible that an interpreter of Scripture may underestimate what the original recipients understood. Though the Abrahamic covenant furnishes a theological justification for the conquest of Palestine by Israel, is it not possible that the Israelites also maintained an understanding of the covenant that was set against the larger backdrop of God's original and continuing purposes for all creation as recorded in Genesis 1-11? Again, Hebrews 11:16 indicates this.

A contextual interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant does not abrogate the human author's grammatical-historical intent of seed, land, and divine\human relationship, but recognizes that those same words allow a fuller and deeper meaning, not always perceived by the human author.

Kunjummen, who writes from the context of dispensationalism, agrees saying: "Divine accommodation in the use of human language is not tantamount to divine self-reduction of authorial intent to the understanding of the biblical writer" (Kunjummen 1986, 109).

Progressive Revelation

Another issue of hermeneutics that relates to the Abrahamic covenant is that of progressive revelation. John Walvoord in speaking to this issue says:

The issue accordingly is not progressive revelation versus nonprogressive revelation, but rather whether in progressive revelation there is contradiction or correction of what was commonly assumed to be the main tenor of Old Testament revelation (Walvoord 1980, 20).

The problem with Walvoord's statement is what is meant by "... commonly assumed to be the main tenor of Old Testament revelation." Though this author concurs with Turner

that "it appears exceedingly doubtful that the New Testament reinterprets the Old Testament so as to evaporate the plain meaning of its promises" (Turner 1985, 282), the argument persists concerning what is meant by "plain meaning."

Daniel Fuller's understanding of progressive revelation is helpful:

Why could not the Old Testament revelation be thought of as the grain of sand, which, after entering the oyster of progressive revelation, has the pearl of additional and deeper concepts added to it without necessarily canceling out the original grain of sand (Fuller 1957, 233)?

Any interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant must take into account the seventy-four references to Abraham in the New Testament and how they interpret and inform the Old Testament text.

Directly related to the issue of progressive revelation are that of prophecy and fulfillment, the use of the Old in the New, and typology. Each of these issues is obviously influenced by the addition of new revelation that speaks to the prophecies and types of the Old Testament and to the way the New Testament understands and interprets the Old. The limited scope of this paper will allow only a brief discussion of these issues.

Though Pentecost notes the problems of interpreting prophecy (Pentecost 1958, 45-59), the rules stated for correct interpretation are once again restricted by limiting any interpretation to a grammatical-historical interpretation (Pentecost 1958, 59).

Contrariwise, Joel B. Green argues that those who seek literal and detailed fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy "... must face the reality that fulfillment is often not quite what was anticipated" (Green 1984, 103). He explains:

When fulfillment exceeds promise, three things are underscored: God's freedom and creativity and the historical quality of biblical prophecy. Given in particular, historical circumstances, prophecy uses words and ideas appropriate to its day. A different historical situation at the time of fulfillment, however, may involve a

realization in updated terms beyond the literal meaning of the original prediction (Green 1984, 104).

Dispensationalists, as represented by Charles L. Feinberg, would disagree with Green and instead affirm that "in the interpretation of prophecy that has not yet been fulfilled, those prophecies that have been fulfilled are to form the pattern" (Feinberg 1985, 41).

Contrariwise, Vern Poythress in his critique of dispensational hermeneutics adequately demonstrates that "preeschatological prophetic fulfillments have a hermeneutically different character than do eschatological fulfillments" (Poythress 1987, 105).

The often enigmatic nature of prophecy should solicit humility and tentativeness in assertions regarding its fulfillment. For example, Odendaal in his discussion of Isaiah 40-66 notes that those chapters offer an eschatological fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Odendaal 1966, 265). In regard to the fulfillment of that passage he reservedly concludes that "... it is evident that neither a purely spiritual nor a purely literal explanation can fathom the fullness of the prophetic proclamation (Odendaal 1966, 274).

Also related to the issue of progressive revelation are the issues of typology and the use of the Old Testament in the New. Again, it is not the scope of this paper to fully develop these issues, but rather to note how they relate to the interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant.

Specifically, does the word "land" have any typological significance? Douglas Moo suggests that "typology is best viewed as a specific form of the larger 'promise-fulfillment' scheme that provides the essential framework within which the relationship of the testaments must be understood" (Moo 1986, 196). He maintains:

The two Testaments are bound together by their common witness to the unfolding revelation of God's character, purpose, and plan. But the salvation wrought by God through Christ is the fulfillment of 'Old Testament' history, law, and prophecy (Moo

1986, 196).

For example, Hebrews 3:7-4:8 employs a typological significance of "land." Based on the pattern of Psalm 95, throughout the passage the word "land" is replaced with the word "rest." It is significant that in the patriarchal promises **נַחֲלָה** is never used to describe the land. **נַחֲלָה** is introduced once positively in Deuteronomy to describe the land as **הַמְנוּחָה** and once in a warning passage that disobedience would result in **יָבֵאוּן אֶל-מְנוּחָתִי**.

Interestingly, the Psalmist chooses **מְנוּחָה** to describe life in the land. The writer of Hebrews picks up on this and takes it a step further. Employing the same word from the Septuagint **καταπαυσι**, he refers to the present and ultimate blessing of being in Christ as one of **καταπαυσι**.

"Rest" in the "land" anticipated "rest" in Jesus Christ. This rest is semi-realized in the believers present experience in Christ (Heb 4:3), yet it awaits a more consummate fulfillment (Heb 4:9). Moo perceptively concludes "that God had so ordered Old Testament history that it prefigures and anticipates His climatic redemptive acts and that the New Testament is the inspired record of those redemptive acts (Moo 1986, 198).

One other issue that relates to progressive revelation is the thorny issue of the use of the Old Testament in the New. This author would suggest the "canonical approach" to that issue wherein "any specific biblical text can be interpreted in light of its ultimate literary context--the whole canon, which receives its unity from the single divine author of the whole" (Moo 1986, 205). Moo offers four commendations of the canonical approach:

(1) it builds on the scripturally sound basis of a redemptive-historical framework, in which the Old Testament as a whole points forward to, anticipates, and prefigures Christ and the church; (2) this scheme can be shown to have its antecedents in what the Old Testament itself does with earlier revelation; (3) the questionable division between the intent of the human author and that of the divine author in a given text is decreased; (4) the 'fuller sense' discovered by Jesus and the apostles in Old Testament texts is, at least to some extent, open to verification (Moo 1986, 205-6).
When applied to the Abrahamic covenant, the canonical approach enriches and expands the interpretation of it, loosing it from its purely ethnic, national, and geographical bonds (Moo 1986, 205).

Textual Authority

Though dispensationalists are concerned with the textual authority of Scripture, more thought needs to be given to what is meant by the authority of the text. All that every text says is not always to be taken as normative. Because of certain theological contingencies, such as administrative changes, and because of certain national or cultural contingencies there may be an interpretation of the text that is arrived at from a New Testament perspective that goes beyond the understanding of the original recipients.

Though the Biblical text is never to be stripped of its authority, it must be recognized that the interpretation deriving from that authority is not necessarily constant. Concerning its authority the Biblical text is normative; however, concerning its interpretation the Biblical text may be contingent. Its interpretation remains normative unless there are apparent theological, historical, or cultural contingencies.

In any Biblical text, however, there will always be something normative because of the theological message of the Bible itself. The Bible is concerned about who God is, what He is up to in this world, and how He is going about to accomplish this.

To avoid a "flat interpretation" (Poythress 1987, 89) of the Abrahamic covenant one must consider the issue of textual authority and determine what is normative in the Abrahamic covenant passages in reference to what they teach about God, about what He is up to, and about how He is going about to accomplish this.

The Readers' Context

One final issue relating to the understanding of the Abrahamic covenant is the that of the influence of one's own context on his interpretation of the text.

Within the reader's own context there are several considerations that influence the interpretation of the text. All interpreters approach the text with an already existing world view and pre-understanding. A self-consciousness of this pre-existing world view, along with a willingness to subject it to possible reformation under the authority of the text are essential for relevant and authoritative interpretation.

Also, there must be a consciousness of the actuality that the world of the Bible and the world of subsequent readers are changed worlds. The interpreter must look for

legitimate correspondences between his world and the world of the Bible and beware of making illegitimate correspondences. The interpreter must also be aware that in his contemporary world there exists a gap, not only between his culture and that of the Bible, but also between cultures within his own world. This self-awareness of cultural gap will serve as a check on undue outside influence being brought to the text.

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