

## SESSION TWENTY – FOUR

**A PROGRESSIVE FULFILMENT VIEW OF ISRAEL'S  
OLD TESTAMENT COVENANTS AND PROMISES*****Part 1: Dispensations and the Fulfilment of  
The New Covenant in Regard to the Church***

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**INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade and a half, a number of books and articles have been written addressing dispensational concerns from the perspective of what has come to be known as "progressive dispensationalism."<sup>1</sup> In this writer's opinion, this movement has brought a number of healthy corrections and refinements to dispensational theology. A systematic presentation of the basic tenets of this newer theology will hopefully be informative and enlightening for both those within and those outside the dispensational camp. In this two-part article, I would like to take a look at how the promises and covenants, originally given to national Israel, come to have their fulfilment in the overall plan of God. In doing so, I hope to address a number of pertinent questions, particularly at the hermeneutical level.<sup>2</sup> How are the covenants and promises made to Israel found to be the property of the church? When and in what manner does God's promise of a New Covenant have its fulfilment? Should we anticipate only a singular fulfilment of the Davidic Covenant, or does it have any sense of progressive fulfilment? Do all the Old Testament promises and expectations for Israel have a fulfilment in the church? Can we (those of us with dispensational leanings) state more accurately the

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the more prominent works from this perspective appearing in print are Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, ed., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church; The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, A Bridgepoint Book, 1993); Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism; The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1993); and Herbert W. Bateman, IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The hermeneutics of progressive dispensationalism have sometimes come under attack over what is perceived to be a different hermeneutical system than was employed by earlier dispensationalists. Robert Thomas not only charges that progressive dispensationalists have shifted away from a grammatical-historical method, but even questions the *motive* by which they have done so. He writes, "In fact, the desire for rapprochement with theologians of other systems appears to be a primary motivation behind the emergence of PD" (Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," *Master's Seminary Journal* 6:1 [Spr 1995]: 81). I hope to show in this paper that such is not the case, however. The conclusions that I have come to (as an Old Testament professor) result from a careful study of relevant Old Testament passages and the use made of them by New Testament authors.

precise relationship between Israel and the church? In addressing these kinds of questions, I feel that it would be helpful to begin by delineating the general dispensational periods and relating these to the gradual unfolding of the biblical covenants. In this, the first article, then, I will take a look at the broad dispensational scheme and focus on the fulfilment of the New Covenant in regard to the church. In the second article, I will then go on to consider the fulfilment of the New Covenant with Israel and the culmination of the covenant promises in the Messianic kingdom.

### **A BIBLICAL VIEW OF HISTORY**

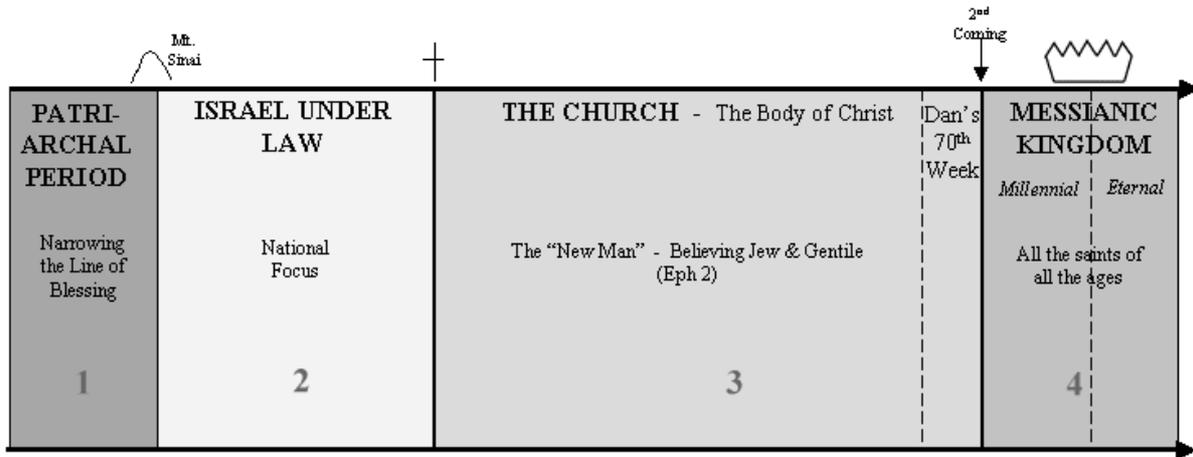
One of the hallmarks of dispensationalism has been its attempt to formulate a coherent biblical view of history. As a theological system, dispensationalism has seen numerous developments and refinements over the past couple of centuries, and especially so in the last forty years.<sup>3</sup> Dispensational theology gained popularity in the early part of this century through the renowned Scofield Reference Bible (what is sometimes referred to as *classical dispensationalism*). Subsequently an attempt was made to refine the system by the distinguished professor of Dallas Seminary, Dr. Charles Ryrie (which some have labelled *revised dispensationalism*).<sup>4</sup> One of the more recent contributions by those in the progressive dispensational camp is the idea that the church is not (as dispensationalists have often claimed) a *parenthesis* disassociated with God's earlier work through Israel. They would affirm, however, that the church is a *distinctive work* introducing both continuity and discontinuity with Israel. In due course, I shall clarify the significance of this issue when I address the church in its relationship to the emerging New Covenant.

A common element to dispensational theology has been the affirmation of differing biblical periods of time. Although God by His very nature is unchanging, His ways of dealing with man are not uniformly the same throughout history. At certain junctures, He has made fundamental changes that alter the way man relates to God. To be very clear, I am not speaking about the basis by which people are "made righteous" with God. Salvation "by grace through faith" is the principle that applies to all saints throughout the ages, and this is based on the blood of Jesus Christ shed at Calvary. Rather, I am speaking about the way God works through the people on earth at any given time and how changes are brought about that result in new expectations and new principles to live by. Quite clearly, God's people before the cross carried out animal sacrifices, but Christians today do not. Why? Precisely because a fundamental change has taken place that radically alters and distinguishes the previous age from the present. I would like to suggest for the sake of our discussion that there are four primary *periods* of biblical history that should be distinguished, which could rightfully be termed *dispensations*. These dispensations are: (1) the patriarchal period; (2) Israel under Law; (3) the Church; and (4) the Messianic Kingdom. The first three will be discussed in this article, while the fourth will be discussed in the subsequent article.

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<sup>3</sup> For a helpful survey of the historical developments pertaining to dispensationalism, see Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1992): 13-34; and Mark L. Bailey, "Dispensational Definitions of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994): 201-221.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965). More recently, Dr. Ryrie has revised and expanded his work in *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995).



I would like to utilize the word "dispensation" as a label for these distinctive periods of biblical history, because it is a biblical concept. This is true for two reasons: (1) the Bible makes statements that imply dispensational periods of history, particularly in regard to the Mosaic Law; and (2) the Bible expresses the concept by terminology such as οἰκονομία in Eph 1:10, translated by the *KJV* as "dispensation" and by the *NASB* as "administration."

*"He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times . . ."*

By dispensation, then, I simply mean an *administration*, or *stewardship* involving a period of time and characterized by certain governing principles that uniquely distinguish it from other periods.<sup>5</sup>

### THE PATRIARCHAL PERIOD

The first of these dispensations is what I shall call the "patriarchal period." This refers to the whole period of time before the giving of the Mosaic Law in 1446 BC.<sup>6</sup> In one sense, this is not an adequate title, because this period concerns more than just the time of the patriarchs of the nation. Nevertheless, the giving of the covenant through the patriarch Abraham is the most significant development of this period, and hence there is some justification for the label. Although there are developments and differences even within this period (before the fall vs. after the fall), the overarching and unifying factor is that the people of this time were not under the Mosaic Law. This characteristic is highlighted by the Apostle Paul in Rom 5:13,

<sup>5</sup>For an elaboration of this meaning of "dispensation" and a helpful study of οἰκονομία, see Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensations in Biblical Theology," in *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993): 106-27.

<sup>6</sup>The Mosaic Law was given at the time the Hebrews came out of Egypt (see Ex 19:1ff.). I am assuming here an early date for the Exodus, i.e., about 1446 BC, though other Old Testament scholars would favor a later date (about 1275 BC). For a helpful introduction to the discussion, see Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 224-45. The early date of the Exodus is defended by Eugene Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), 66-75; and more recently by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holmon, Publishers, 1998), 104-109.

*"For until the Law, sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law."*

There are a couple of matters that ought to be highlighted here that have a significant bearing upon our subject. The first is the original intention for man when God created him. According to Gen 1--2, man was created in God's image, experiencing fellowship with God, being blessed by God, and entrusted to share in the administration of God's creation by having dominion (i.e., ruling with God). The fall (prompted by Satanic subversion) radically affected these initial intentions such that man was rendered a sinner in need of redemption. In one sense, we could say that the rest of the Bible is the story of how God acts to reverse this situation and return man to the initial divine intentions. For this reason, there are striking similarities between man's state in the Garden of Eden and in the New Jerusalem of Rev 21--22 (no curse, no death, tree of paradise, etc.). Following the fall in Gen 3, we witness a progressive turning away from the Lord by the emerging people groups until in Gen 11 we find them hopelessly scattered across the face of the earth in rebellion and not experiencing the blessing of God. The call of Abraham to start a new nation represents God's effort to counteract the rebellion. God's promises to Abraham are formalized in a covenant that serves as the foundation to all of God's dealings with man throughout history. Not only will God uniquely work with Abraham's descendants (including the promise to give them the land of Canaan forever - see Gen 15:18-21 and 1 Chron 16:15-19), but more significantly he also promises to "bless all the families of the earth" through Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:3).<sup>7</sup>

*"And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*

The significance of this Abrahamic Covenant then is to assure us from the outset that God will ultimately work to bring His "blessing" to all family groups of the earth. This will eventually result in the salvation accomplished at the cross being made available to all who are "of faith" (Gal 3:6-9) and the recipients being *blessed* with incorporation into the New Covenant and its provision of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14). Ultimately, the "blessing" will be climactically fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.

## **ISRAEL UNDER LAW**

To accomplish this plan of bringing all mankind under God's blessing, it will be necessary to establish a nation through whom God will raise up the Messiah. Hence, the next dispensation portrays the nation of Israel emerging from Egypt and being made "God's people" formally by covenant. This is reflected in the proposition put before the nation by God in Exodus 19:5-6:

*"Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."*

There is a relation to the previous dispensation in that God is extending His blessing to this one nation as an *initial fulfilment* of the Abrahamic Covenant. They are placed under the Mosaic Law so that they will know what a holy God demands. To the extent they obey His Law, they will be blessed. This, then, is another covenant that builds upon the previous one. In that it was given through Moses, we can refer to it as the Mosaic Covenant. In contrast to the Abrahamic Covenant, which was an unconditional covenant (the significance of Gen 15:7-21), the Mosaic Covenant is a conditional covenant. The distinction is this: under the Abrahamic Covenant, the failure of the people does not nullify God's covenant promises or bring about a termination of the covenant itself. Furthermore, God

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<sup>7</sup>Regarding the enduring aspect of the "land" promises to Israel, see W. C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (Oct-Dec 1981): 302-12; and J. L. Townsend, "Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (Oct-Dec 1985): 320-37.

is obligating Himself to the keeping of the covenant regardless of Israel's response (hence, a unilateral covenant). Under the Mosaic Covenant, failure will eventually lead to a replacement of the covenant. With both covenants, the experiencing of God's blessing is proportional to obedience. This is more carefully defined by the Mosaic Covenant in which particular blessings are promised for obedience and particular "curses" (discipline) are promised for disobedience (Deut 28--29).

Although it is Israel alone who is being constituted a "people of God" under the Mosaic Covenant, we should keep in mind that this does not prevent God from taking other *nation groups* and also making them part of His people. We will come back to this when we discuss the replacement of the Mosaic Covenant by the New Covenant. God is certainly free to *broaden* the scope of participation. What is important for now is to recognize that the taking of Abraham's physical descendants and placing them under the Mosaic Law constitutes a special dispensation in history. This is evidenced by the way the Law is seen from the New Testament vantage point, as for example in Gal 3:19,23-25:

*"Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed should come to whom the promise had been made . . . . But before faith came [i.e., the saving work of Christ and the full revelation of faith in Him], we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor."*

According to this passage, the Law is viewed as a "tutor" until the coming of Christ. The Law serves as a dispensation from the point of Exodus 19 until the death of Christ on the cross. As such, the Mosaic Covenant is only a *temporary covenant*. It is not in effect today . . . at least not in the full-orbed sense in which it was enjoined upon national Israel as a "system" of obedience.<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ fully lived up to the demands of the Law, so that we can say the Law has been fulfilled. His death marks an end to the Law and a new beginning point. This seems to be the precise point of Romans 7:1-6 where Paul uses the illustration of death bringing about a termination of marriage obligation. Since believers today are "in Christ," then we have participated in His death and have died to the Law. Paul writes in Rom 7:4,

*"Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another."*

Consequently, Paul concludes in verse six that we are not under the Law today:

*"But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."*

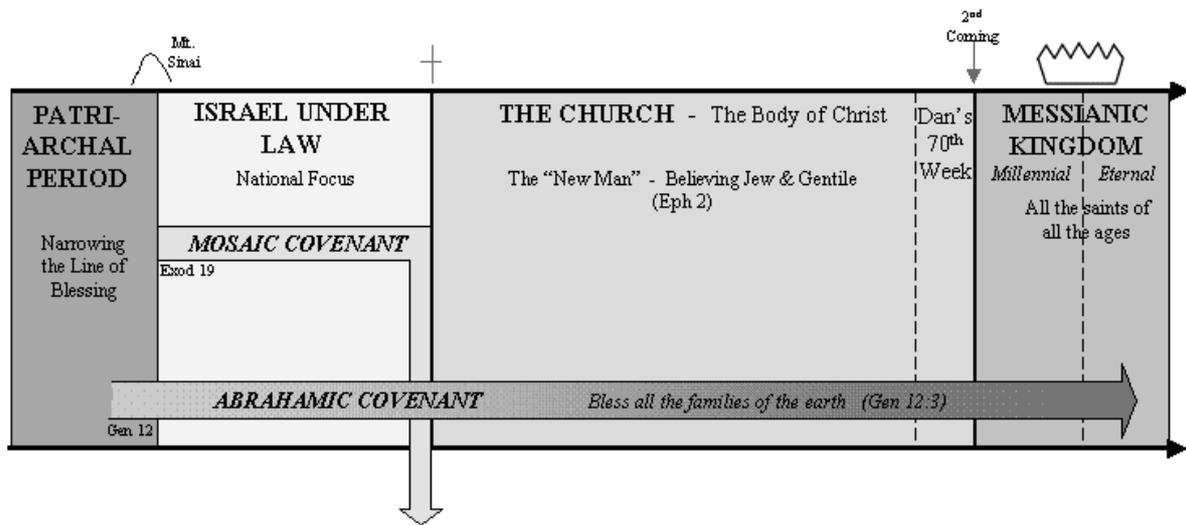
It is not just that our faith in Christ releases us from the Law, but the Law itself has ceased as an active covenant before God. When the author of Hebrews attempts to reason with his readers for the superiority of the New Covenant, he quotes from Jer 31:31-34 regarding the New Covenant and places it in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant. He concludes (in Heb 8:13) by saying,

*"When He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear."*

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<sup>8</sup>Most dispensationalists hold the position that the Mosaic Law ceased in its entirety at the cross. Kenneth Barker, however, has argued more recently against a total abrogation of the Law in favor of the idea that the Old Testament moral and ethical law is still in force. See Barker, "The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (293-328).

His point is simply this: from the moment of Jer 31:31 and its announcement that a *new covenant* was coming, it was only logical to conclude that time was running out for the present covenant (i.e., the Mosaic Covenant). When the New Covenant was instituted (and it was with the death of Christ), the old covenant did indeed "disappear" (i.e., terminate). Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant is an ongoing abiding covenant, whereas the Mosaic Covenant was temporary. We could schematize them in the following way:



Those Jews who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah and spurned the gospel continued to see themselves as still under the Law, but this was only a self-deception. The Apostle Paul (a Jew if ever there was one) was clear that he himself was not under the Law. He states in 1 Cor 9:20-21,

*"And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law."*

Paul states categorically that He was not under the Law, i.e., the Mosaic Covenant. This should not lead to a charge of antinomianism, for he immediately acknowledges that he is under the law of Christ (i.e., all New Covenant obligations, particularly as they are recorded in the New Testament epistles).

If we view the Abrahamic Covenant as a continuing covenant through the dispensation of "Israel Under Law," we can understand that though the Law was only instituted with one nation, God is ultimately concerned with the welfare of all nations and peoples. The things that transpire during the period of the Law are going to work ultimately toward the incorporation of Gentiles into God's blessing. This divine intention is reflected in Jonah's mission to the Ninevites, and later through Isaiah's utterances. In Isa 45:22 God declared,

*"Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other."*

Since God's program is ultimately headed in the direction of worldwide outreach, other developments during this dispensation will contribute to that eventuality. This includes the Davidic Covenant.

**The Davidic Covenant**

During the dispensation when Israel was under the Mosaic Law, God initiated another covenant that is commonly referred to as the Davidic Covenant. The essentials of this covenant are recorded in 2 Sam 7:11b-16:

*"The LORD also declares to you that the LORD will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."*<sup>9</sup>

From the seed of David, God raised up a line of kings (each of whom was looked upon as God's son) who would sit on the throne of David, i.e., form a dynasty.<sup>10</sup> One of his descendants would build a temple for God, and the promise would eventuate in an eternal kingdom. So, the words "son," "throne," "temple," and "kingdom" became important theological words, especially in relation to the Davidic Covenant. There was an initial fulfilment of this in the person of Solomon, for He did sit upon David's throne and built a literal temple for God (1 Kgs 8:15-20). From the divine perspective, however, God intended to do much more than this. A future son would build a temple far beyond the scope of the temple built by Solomon and would establish a kingdom that would extend far beyond the confines of the nation of Israel. He would be *the* Son of God. Though glimpses of the Messiah had been given earlier, this revelation to David provided a significant contribution to the understanding of Messiah as David's greater son. The prophets amplified the profile of Messiah's person and work, such that there was a progressive revelation about Him through the centuries following David. That David clearly understood His greater son to be the Messiah is evident from what he wrote in such psalms as Psalm 2 and 110. Solomon likewise anticipated the Messiah having a universal rule in Psalm 72. Further comments on the outworking of the Davidic Covenant will be reserved for discussion of the Messianic Kingdom. For now, we need to recognize that the Davidic Covenant was a *progressively fulfilled covenant*. It was fulfilled to some degree in Solomon; it will be fulfilled even more so with the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ; and it will be fulfilled further still during the Tribulation Period and following the Second Coming.

### **The Church**

The third major dispensation is the "Church Age." Once again, I acknowledge that the label is somewhat inadequate, for it has the tendency to convey a *total distinction* with God's preceding work with Israel, and it could imply a *limitation* of the church to the period concluding with the "rapture." At least, this is how it has traditionally been understood within *dispensationalism*. My own understanding has shifted, however, and I feel a need to clarify my viewpoint about the church.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Though not termed a *covenant* in 2 Sam 7, these promises to David do indeed constitute a covenant and are spoken of as such in other passages such as Ps 89:3-4.

<sup>10</sup>The promise of the king being God's son should not be regarded as limited to Solomon. A comparison of the "discipline element" in both 2 Sam 7:14 and Ps 89:30ff. (note that v 30 uses the plural word "sons") suggests that each Davidic king became God's son.

<sup>11</sup>I would like to express my indebtedness to Robert L. Saucy for his excellent discussion and analysis of the church on pages 143-218 of his book, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1993).

Classical dispensationalism tended to view the church as a *parenthesis* in God's program. The church was seen as a distinct entity in relation to Israel, with virtually no continuity between the two. Furthermore, the church would be removed at the pretribulational rapture, such that believers subsequent to that time were viewed as a separate class, i.e., they were not part of the "body of Christ." This "parenthesis" concept stemmed from the view of Daniel's vision of the *seventy weeks* in Daniel 9:24-27. The first *sixty-nine* weeks (the Hebrew "week" in this case meaning a period of seven years) accounted for the period from Artaxerxes's decree in Nehemiah 2 (444 BC) until the presentation of Christ as Messiah at Jerusalem in AD 33. The 70th and final "week" (i.e., 7 years) did not follow the first sixty-nine directly, and would not be completed until just before the return of Christ. Thus, the church was seen as a *parenthesis* (or "intercalation") standing in this gap in Daniel's prophecy.

In my own understanding, I would affirm that Daniel's prophecy of *seventy weeks* does have a gap of time before the 70th and final "week" of years. I also think this will be a seven year period preceding the Second Coming, during which time the Tribulation will take place (though I personally understand the Tribulation to be only the latter half of this period, i.e., three and a half years). This prophetic viewpoint has been adequately defended elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> What I think needs correction is the way in which the church is seen in relation to the previous dispensation of Israel under Law and the relation of the church to those in Daniel's 70th week (and afterwards). For me, the key to this understanding lies in the relation of the church to the New Covenant.

### The New Covenant and Its Fulfilment with the Church

On the night in which our Lord was betrayed, He celebrated the last supper with the disciples. Luke 22:20 records,

*"And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.'*

In light of this and other New Testament passages (notably 2 Cor 3 and Heb 8), we can safely conclude that the New Covenant was inaugurated at the death of Christ and is operative at this time.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Paul D. Feinberg, "An Exegetical and Theological Study of Daniel 9:24-27," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981): 189-220; and Harold Hoehner, "Chronological Aspects for the Life of Christ; Part VI: Daniel's Seventy Weeks and New Testament Chronology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (Jan-Mar 1975): 47-65.

<sup>13</sup>Dr. Ryrie, however, rejects the idea that the New Covenant is operative in this dispensation. Instead, he holds that the *payment* for the New Covenant has been made (at the cross), but not the inauguration of it (*Dispensationalism*, 172). He then tries to minimize the reference to the New Covenant in 2 Cor 3:6 by pointing out that the text says we are ministers of "a new covenant" (no article!), not "the New Covenant." His conclusion, then, is that *a new covenant* is operative now, but not *The New Covenant* prophesied in Jeremiah 31. I would respond with two points. First, we are told in Eph 2:12 that the Gentiles were formerly "separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise . . . ." A few verses later, in 2:19, Paul says, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens . . . ." What covenants does Paul have in mind? This could not simply be referring to the Abrahamic Covenant, because Paul uses the plural (covenants!). Surely, this must include the New Covenant, but whatever it is, it is certainly the same Old Testament covenants (not just something similar). Second, the absence of the article in 2 Cor 3:6 and Heb 9:15 in reference to "new covenant" should not be used to argue for a new covenant other than the one of Jer 31. In the case of 2 Cor 3:6, we should observe that Paul's statement regarding God's writing on tablets of fleshly hearts (verse 3) echoes the language of Jer 31:33 ("I will write it on their hearts") and Ezek 36:26 ("and give you a heart of flesh"). Since he has already alluded to these two primary Old Testament texts on the New Covenant, Paul can dispense with the article when he explicitly mentions the New Covenant in verse 6. Furthermore, the

Fortunately, the suggestion of two new covenants, once held by some dispensationalists, has now been abandoned by most.<sup>14</sup> But what "new covenant" is this, and how does it relate to the other covenants (particularly the Mosaic Covenant)? The primary passage on this is given in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

*"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them' declares the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD, 'for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, 'declares the LORD, 'for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sins I will remember no more."*

The first thing we learn here about the New Covenant is that it is in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant that the people had received at Sinai. Second, it *appears* that the New Covenant is with Israel, i.e., Israel alone (though from God's perspective, He is not bound to exclude others). Third, it involves greater promises than were given through the Mosaic Covenant. For example, the New Covenant promised the absolute forgiveness of sins and a *transformed heart*. Yet, Jeremiah was not the first prophet to speak of the New Covenant. As I have sought to show elsewhere, the New Covenant has its roots in God's plan of restoration for the nation revealed in Deuteronomy 30, in which God

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first use of "Spirit" in verse 6 is anarthrous, though it should clearly be understood as definite (the word Spirit which occurs twice in verse 6 is the same, though the second has the article in contrast to the first). [I am indebted to my good friend, Dr. Jim Routt, for these observations on 2 Cor 3.] In the case of Heb 9:15, we are told, "And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant . . . ." The author's point is simply to contrast this "new covenant" with the Old Covenant, not to argue for a new covenant similar to (but different from) the "new covenant" announced by Jeremiah. Why then does the author not use the definite article? The answer is to be explained in the quotation of the LXX text. If one observes the quotation of Jer 31:31 in Hebrews 8:8, the text reads, "Behold, days are coming, says the LORD, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel . . . ." The Septuagint text has διαθήκην καινήν without the article (see Jer 38:31 for the LXX text). When the author of Hebrews points out this new covenant in Heb 9:15, he uses the same expression as the LXX text did while only modifying it for the genitive case: διαθήκης καινής. He is certainly not thinking of any other "new covenant" than the very one that Jeremiah had spoken of. Even in the Jeremiah passage, the reference to "new covenant" was without the article. Furthermore, there is another problem with Dr. Ryrie's proposal in light of the matter of *covenant inauguration* in the Book of Hebrews. In the context of Hebrews 9, the author makes a contrast of these two covenants and how each was inaugurated with blood (see 9:16-28). When the Old Covenant was inaugurated with blood, the covenant was then in effect (9:18-22). It would be inconsistent to say that Christ had "made the payment" for the New Covenant, but that the New Covenant itself was not now in effect. This is further substantiated by Heb 10:14-18 where the author clearly makes the point that the forgiveness of sins which we experience today is that very forgiveness which was promised by the New Covenant, not merely something similar.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Seminary, had argued that two new covenants existed, one for the church and one for national Israel ("Bibliology," *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 1:43). For a helpful survey of the way in which dispensationalists have viewed the church's relationship to the New Covenant, see Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant: Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:608 (Oct–Dec 1995): 431-56.

promised a time when the people would receive a *circumcised heart*.<sup>15</sup> The New Covenant surfaces on several occasions in the prophets Joel, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Ezekiel, this theme of the New Covenant is spoken of in conjunction with the restoration of the nation from exile. In this context, the granting of the Holy Spirit is seen to be a vital part of the restoration and New Covenant fulfilment. For instance, we read in Ezek 36:24,26-27 (cf. 37:14,26; 39:27-29):

*"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land . . . Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."*

In summary, Israel is promised a New Covenant, and this covenant involves the pouring out of God's Spirit (cf. Joel 2:28-32) and the granting of eternal forgiveness. From the Old Testament perspective, one would tend to get the impression that the fulfilment coincided with an eschatological regathering and restoration of the nation to the land of Israel. Yet, the New Testament clearly teaches that the New Covenant has been inaugurated with the death of Christ, it is done so with Gentiles, and is not dependent upon any regathering of Israel to the land following exile. How should such a seeming paradox be resolved?

The solution is to be found in an understanding of the New Covenant as a *progressively fulfilled* covenant.<sup>16</sup> In other words, we have not yet seen the full and final "fulfilment" of the New Covenant (especially with Israel as a nation). But we have seen an initial (and real) fulfilment beginning with the death of Christ.<sup>17</sup> The pouring out of the Holy Spirit and granting of eternal forgiveness are happening in the present age.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, we should not say that God has done this with Gentiles *rather than* with Israel. That is to put the cart before the horse. The New Covenant has indeed seen a *fulfilment* with Israel, as long as we understand that God was doing so through the believing remnant

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<sup>15</sup>See my study of the New Covenant in relation to Ezekiel's prophecies on pp 37-40 of "Rethinking Ezekiel's Invasion by Gog," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:1 (Mar 1996): 29-45.

<sup>16</sup>For a helpful understanding of this matter of the progressive fulfillment of prophecy, see Kenneth Barker, "The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope," 323-328. He writes, "As I conceive it, it means that prophecies quite frequently include two or more stages (not the same as double or multiple sense) in the progressive fulfillment of the whole picture seen by the prophet. . . . Conceptually, each stage is necessary in order to fulfill completely (i.e., fill to the full) the total content of what the prophet envisioned or foretold" (323-24). Cf. Kenneth L. Barker, "Micah," in *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 41.

<sup>17</sup>Elliott Johnson, though willing to acknowledge that the new covenant was "instituted" at the death of Christ, nevertheless denies "fulfilment." He states, "But such an institution ought not to be regarded as fulfilment with Israel who rejected Him (Acts 4:8-20) nor even with the church. The church is merely the beneficiary of some of the provisions of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:4-6) without becoming a covenant partner. In this way, numerous promises and provisions are fulfilled at the First Advent without a covenant having been fulfilled" (*Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 206). Such a stance, however, not only fails to adequately account for the Apostle Paul's claim that we are now "servants of a new covenant" which is of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:6), but misses Paul's point in Ephesians 2 that Gentiles are no longer strangers to the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12,19).

<sup>18</sup>For a defense of the notion of a partial fulfilment of the New Covenant, see Paul R. Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:3 (Sept 1998): 397-413.

of the nation (as opposed to the nation as a whole). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit obviously has a fulfilment with the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 (hence the quotation of Joel 2 by Peter). To whom did this come? To the disciples and believing Jews of that day! Take notice that it was not to the Gentile world!

The fulfilment of the New Covenant promises, and in particular the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, was not dependent upon God doing so to every living Israelite. The fulfilment of the promise with the believing remnant within the nation satisfies the promise obligation of God. This is the significance of Romans 9:6-8:

*"But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'Through Isaac your descendants will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."*

The Apostle Paul is not speaking of Gentiles here, but of the believing remnant of Jews within the nation of Israel. This is completely in keeping with what he had said earlier of the New Covenant fulfilment of the Holy Spirit with the "true Jews" in Rom 2:28-29:

*"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."*

Thus, we can say that God did begin to fulfill the New Covenant with the "Jews," since He did so with the believing remnant of the nation. This, however, does not prevent or limit God from fulfilling the same blessings to others, i.e., Gentiles. Although it was not clearly foretold in the Old Testament, nothing prevents God from giving Israel's New Covenant promises (at least some of them) to others. Because He is a sovereign God, He can certainly *expand* the scope of the promise.<sup>19</sup> That He did so should not be surprising at all, since His original declared intention through the Abrahamic Covenant was to "bless all the families of the earth."

If we could grasp the significance of this manner of fulfilment, we could understand how the church is a new entity and yet at the same time has tremendous continuity with Israel and her promises. The church certainly includes Israel . . . the believing remnant, that is . . . and yet is not limited to Israel. It is the expansion of the scope of fulfilment that makes the church unique and a *new entity*, not that God has dropped Israel in favor of a totally distinctive church. Paul describes this in Eph 3:3 as a "mystery," which he defines in Eph 3:6 "that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." That God has saved and blessed Gentiles is not unexpected, for even the Old Testament anticipated this (Isa 45:22; 49:6; 52:10). What is somewhat unexpected is the way in which He did it: by expanding the scope of the New Covenant participants to include not only believing Israel but believing Gentiles as well. In this sense, the church has an alarming degree of continuity with the previous dispensation and with Israel as a nation (especially as regards the pouring out of the Spirit in fulfilment of the promises to Israel). Yet at the same time, something strikingly *new* has begun, such that the church is unique by virtue of her composition. Jew and Gentile are reconciled and part of the same work of God. Thus Paul writes in Eph 2:13-16:

*"But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of*

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<sup>19</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant: Part 2," 441ff.

*commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity."*

It was quite natural for God to make an initial fulfilment of the New Covenant with a remnant from Israel, for it was to Israel that the New Covenant was promised. With this aspect of the fulfilment, we see continuity with God's work in the previous dispensation with Israel. What is surprising, since the New Covenant had not been promised to those outside of Israel, is that God has expanded the scope of fulfilment to include Gentiles as well. This is the essence of the church being a mystery! This also explains why the record of the early church in the book of Acts witnesses astonishment and even scepticism by the apostles and church leaders at the influx of Gentiles (see especially Acts 10--11). Peter only reluctantly was willing to go to the house of Cornelius, and even then only after God had spoken to him through a vision (Acts 10:9ff.). As Peter preached, God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles who listened and even caused them to speak in tongues, so that it would be evident to the Jewish believers that the Gentiles, too, had received the Holy Spirit. Acts 10:44-46 records,

*"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God."*

It is amazing that the circumcised believers "were amazed," but this evidences just how radical a shift was taking place in God's providential working of fulfilling the New Covenant. Of course, the book of Ephesians had not been written yet, so this was *new stuff* for Peter and all those in the early church. It is only after this that the apostles and others in the early church began to understand the nature of the "mystery" of the body.

So, there is both continuity and discontinuity of the church with Israel. Does this mean that the church is some sort of "new Israel" . . . a "spiritual Israel" as is sometimes claimed?<sup>20</sup> I don't think so. The problem with that type of approach is that it tends to force all the Old Testament promises and predictions for Israel upon the church. The result is that you end up with an unwarranted spiritualizing of certain Old Testament passages that simply cannot be assumed by the church (e.g., the invasion of Judah and Jerusalem in Zechariah 12--14). Furthermore, there is really no warrant from the New Testament for viewing the church as the "new Israel," despite claims to the contrary.<sup>21</sup> A second approach has been to take the view that God has simply discarded Israel because of her covenant failure, and that there is no need to expect the promises and predictions given to her to be fulfilled. This, too, is an inadequate approach for at least three reasons: (1) it overlooks the explicit promise of Lev 26:40-45 that God is not going to break His covenant with Israel in spite of her covenant unfaithfulness; (2) it ignores the message of the Old Testament itself that God is going to work out His promises with a remnant of the nation and ultimately fulfill the New Covenant with them after regathering them from the nations (e.g., Ezek 11:17-21); and (3) it does not do justice to the clear teaching of Romans 11 that God in the future is going to do a remarkable work of bringing the bulk of one generation of Jewish people to Himself, namely, the generation that experiences the Tribulation and lives to see the return of Christ.

<sup>20</sup>Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology* (2:372-73), argued that ". . . the people of God before Christ constituted a Church, and that the Church has been one and the same under all dispensations."

<sup>21</sup>This has been adequately answered by Robert Saucy in his excellent chapter entitled "The People of God, Israel, and the Church," (pp. 187-218) in *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*. He discusses and evaluates the various claims for a "spiritual Israel," including the phrase "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16.

Therefore, as we examine the church in comparison with Israel, we must carefully differentiate the two while at the same time recognizing the continuity in God's work of carrying out His promises to Israel, particularly in the outworking of the New Covenant through a believing remnant of the nation. The church is not some "parenthesis" in history providing a temporary delay in God's program with Israel. It is indeed the carrying forward of God's program with Israel . . . first to the remnant and then expanding the blessing to Gentiles.

In the second article, I will go on to describe the complete fulfilment of the New Covenant promises to Israel as a nation and then examine the whole concept of the Messianic Kingdom of God in its various phases of fulfilment.