

The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism

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[The Bible teaches that there is to be a “kingdom” in which God will rule over the earth. (Of course God has always ruled over all creation, but the biblical prophecies speak of a more direct “theocratic” rule.) This time, often referred to as the “millennium,” is described in both the Old and New Testaments as a discrete historical era, unlike any that precedes it, and therefore to be distinguished from all other history. Historically, the principle conception of this kingdom was *pre-millennial*—that Christ would personally return to earth (bodily) to establish His kingdom precisely in accordance with the normal/literal understanding of Bible prophecy. In the course of church history other conceptualizations arose. In the second through the fifth centuries amillennialism became the dominant theory of the kingdom. Amillennialism conceives of the kingdom as a “spiritual” rather than physical reality and employs a special interpretive method (allegorization) to reconcile the literal statements of Scripture to its nonliteral conception of the kingdom. The early post-reformation period gave rise to another view—postmillennialism—which takes a slightly more literal view of the kingdom, but like amillennialism substitutes the Church for Israel and also like amillennialism places the return of Christ at the end of the millennium rather than at the beginning. Covenant Theology, which denies any future for national Israel, arose in the early post-reformation period as support for amillennialism, and has also been used as support for postmillennialism. (For more information see the author’s article, *The Problem With Covenant Theology*, available online at www.BTR.biblicalreader.com.) The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the Bible, when allowed to speak for itself, (*i.e.*, when taken at face value) unquestionably teaches a premillennial view of the kingdom and of the return of Christ.]

The Bible uniformly teaches that Christ will personally return to establish and rule over His kingdom—that view is *pre-millennialism*, not *post-millennialism*. Every prophecy of the second coming in which a chronological relationship with the tribulation or the

millennium is given places the second coming of Christ immediately at the end of the tribulation (as its concluding event), and immediately prior to the beginning of the millennial kingdom (note especially Zech. 14:1-11, Matt. 24:29-31 and Rev. 19:11-20:6).

Christ Himself was very clear as to *when* (in relation to His coming) the millennium is going to take place, in Matthew 25:31-34 He says,

(25:31-34) But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. (32) And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as he shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; (33) and He will put the sheep on His right, the goats on the left. (34) Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." [NASB, underlines added]

The Lord clearly tells His listeners that He will sit on the throne of His kingdom "*when* [He] the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him." Note the clarity of the time reference; He will sit on the throne of His kingdom "*when*" He comes (Gr. *hotan*, indicating a specific point in the future, which is further specified as, "*then*" [Gr. *tote*, adverb of time, meaning "at that time"]). This is not a reference to some "mystical," or "spiritual" coming (as some covenantalists believe); Jesus had just described His literal second coming with His angels in great detail within the context of this discourse (24:3-31). He now associates the inauguration of His kingdom with that coming. The temporal structure of this passage is precise. Christ indicated that He will take His seat upon the throne of His kingdom "*when*" He comes; that describes the beginning of the millennium, not the conclusion. Although He is presently seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven, that seat is not the throne of His visible, earthly kingdom. Concerning the second coming of Christ, Zechariah says,

(Zech. 14:4-9) On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem, and the Mount of Olives will be split in two from east to west, forming a great valley, with half of the mountain moving north and half moving south. (5) You will flee by my mountain valley, for it will extend to Azel. You will flee as you fled from the earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah. Then the LORD my God will

come, and all the holy ones with him. (6) On that day there will be no light, no cold or frost. (7) It will be a unique day, without daytime or nighttime—a day known to the LORD. When evening comes, there will be light. (8) On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem, half to the eastern sea and half to the western sea, in summer and in winter. (9) The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and his name the only name. [NIV]

Notice the precise correspondence of this statement to the Lord's statement in Matthew 25:31-34. Messiah will come and His feet will rest upon the Mount of Olives (note the physical details—the mount will "split"); He will return with His "holy ones" (the angels) and the Lord, physically present, will be King over the whole earth (the description can only fit the millennium). The kingdom *follows* the advent of Christ, not the reverse as postmillennialism teaches. Also note John's description in Revelation 19:11-20:4.

(Rev. 19:11-20:4) I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. (12) His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. (13) He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. (14) The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. (15) Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. (16) On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (17) And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, (18) so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great." (19) Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. (20) But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had

received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. (21) The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh. (20:1) And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. (2) He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. (3) He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. (4) I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. [NIV]

There is no question that this is a description of Christ's second coming. We see in this description, as in the others, that Christ returns with "the armies of Heaven" – a reference to the angels (*cf.* 19:17-18; 20:1-3; Matt. 24:29-31). He will personally strike down His enemies and rule the earth with an iron scepter. Satan will be bound and sealed in the Abyss, and the saints will be resurrected from their graves to rule with Christ for a thousand years (the millennium). There isn't even the slightest hint of wiggle-room in these passages for any view other than premillennialism. Notice the starting parameters of the kingdom: Christ's enemies are destroyed, Satan is bound and sealed in the Abyss, and the saints are resurrected to rule with Christ. This is the description of a premillennial advent, completely incompatible with either amillennialism or postmillennialism. This is really the defining truth: If premillennialism is taught in the Bible – and it is plainly taught in these passages – then all non-premillennial views *must* be wrong.

"Replacement Theology" Isn't Biblical: God Will Fulfill His Promises to Abraham, and to His Seed

Covenantalists characteristically confuse the various aspects of the kingdom of God, and worse they envision the Church as replacing Israel in the earthly aspect of the kingdom. At least three distinct aspects of the kingdom of God are referenced in Scripture, they are:

the *universal*, the *visible*, and the *invisible* aspects. God's sovereignty over all creation is often referred to as His "universal kingdom." This concept appears early in Israel's history and is a frequent theme in the Psalms (*cf.* 10:16; 29:10; 103:19-22; 145:10-13). The universal aspect of the kingdom of God encompasses all creation, and includes even the realm of the ungodly (both human and angelic), for they are also under the sovereign rule of God. David says of this aspect of God's kingdom,

(Psalm 103:19-22) The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all. (20) Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. (21) Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. (22) Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the LORD, O my soul. [NIV]

To the Hebrew mind the kingdom of God was equated with God's theocratic rule over the nation of Israel. Ultimately this rule was to have its fullest expression in the rule of God through His Messiah, at which time Israel would be vindicated and exalted, and experience the joy of profuse divine blessing and peace. This aspect can be referred to as the "visible" aspect of the kingdom, since it is to take a physical form. Only in the New Testament does the "millennial" aspect of the visible kingdom come into sharp focus, in contrast to the Old Testament, which made no distinction between the millennium and eternity—which are both part of the larger, visible kingdom concept (*cf.* Isa. 65:17-25). We learn from the Book of Revelation that the earthly kingdom rule will occur in two phases. The first phase is to occur on the present earth (before it is recreated) and is usually referred to as the "millennium" since it is indicated as lasting for approximately one-thousand years (Rev. 20:4-10) The second phase of the visible kingdom occurs in eternity with the creation of the new heavens and earth, and the arrival of the New Jerusalem to rest upon the newly recreated earth (Rev. 21:1-22:5).

Those who fail to recognize the differing aspects of the kingdom inevitably end up confusing one aspect for another. Perhaps the greatest, and most significant failure is in understanding the nature of the "invisible" aspect of the kingdom. The invisible aspect of the kingdom of God refers to God's rule in the hearts of those yielded to Him. This aspect, like the universal aspect, is a present reality. It

is largely developed in the gospels (*cf.* Matt. 6:33; 18:1-4; Mk. 9:1; Lk. 17:20-24; Jn. 18:36), but can be found elsewhere in the New Testament (*cf.* Col. 1:13). Covenantalists routinely confuse the visible and invisible aspects of the kingdom and incorrectly assign references to the invisible aspect as support for a “spiritualized” view of the millennium (whether amillennial or postmillennial). They do this because the “haze” of covenantal theology prevents them from seeing some of the finely grained distinctions in redemptive history; this leads to an inability to distinguish between the various aspects of the kingdom. Needless to say, this one flaw results in a catastrophic failure for Covenantalism at the foundational level of truth concerning the kingdom.

Why must there be a future earthly (literal) kingdom built around a regenerated nation of Israel? The Old Testament concept of an earthly kingdom emerges first from the covenant of promise made with Abraham and is then expanded in the Palestinian, Davidic and new covenants. These four covenants shape the Old Testament concept of the visible kingdom of God (which as we will see, is inseparably tied to Israel as a nation). Since these covenants define the kingdom program, it is important that we develop an understanding of what these covenants say.

(Genesis 12:6-7) Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. (7) The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. [NIV]

(Genesis 13:14-17) The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. (15) All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. (16) I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. (17) Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” [NIV]

(Genesis 17:1-14) When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. (2) I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your

numbers.” (3) Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, (4) “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. (5) No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. (6) I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. (7) I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. (8) The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.” (9) Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. (10) This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. (11) You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. (12) For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner—those who are not your offspring. (13) Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. (14) Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” [NIV]

(Genesis 22:15-18) The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time (16) and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, (17) I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, (18) and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” [NIV]

(Genesis 15:1-21) After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” (2) But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain

childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" (3) And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." (4) Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." (5) He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (6) Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (7) He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." (8) But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" (9) So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." (10) Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. (11) Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. (12) As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. (13) Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. (14) But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. (15) You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. (16) In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." (17) When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. (18) On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—(19) the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, (20) Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, (21) Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites." [NIV]

In these passages God made the following promises to Abraham personally: Abraham's name will be great (12:2); he would be the father of many nations (17:5); his descendants would be innumerable (13:16; 15:5; 22:17); kings would come from him (17:6); God would be his God (17:7); the one

who blesses Abraham would be blessed, and the one who curses Abraham would be cursed (12:3); the covenant is to be a perpetual (eternal) covenant (17:7).

In addition to the personal promises made to Abraham, God also made the following promises to his descendants: they would become a great nation (12:2); they would, at some time, come to possess the land forever (17:8); God would be their God (17:8); they would be victorious over their enemies (22:17); God's covenant would be established with them forever (17:7). The covenant also includes a blessing for the Gentiles, that they would be blessed through Abraham (12:3; 22:18). The Abrahamic covenant expressly promises that Abraham's descendants will come to possess the land which God showed to Abraham, and that they will live in that land as recipients of divine favor forever. The Abrahamic covenant (referred to as the "promise" or "promises" in the New Testament—I will often refer to it here as the "covenant of promise") is the controlling covenant of the Bible. The first eleven chapters of Genesis give the background leading up this covenant, and the rest of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) shows the outworking of this covenant (*i.e.*, how it will be fulfilled). The three subsequent unconditional covenants (the Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants) simply expand upon the provisions initially established in the original set of promises made to Abraham. The Mosaic covenant is an entirely different kind of covenant. It was a temporary measure designed to bridge the gap between the emergence of national Israel (a specific provision of the promise made to Abraham) and the sealing of the new covenant (at the Cross), which as stated previously, is a subcomponent of the covenant of promise. The Mosaic covenant, as a temporary measure, does not expand upon the original promises given to Abraham, nor is it an unconditional covenant as are the other four. A grasp of the meaning of these covenants is absolutely crucial to an understanding of the message of the Bible, because it is through these covenants (and the prophecies that illuminate them) that the divine plan for man's future is revealed. Now that we have an idea of the importance of the original covenant of promise, we turn our attention to its further development in the Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants.

The Palestinian covenant, so called because it was made with Israel upon their entrance into the Promised Land, is recorded in Deuteronomy 29:1-30:20. Moses indicated its connection to the Abrahamic covenant when he said:

(Deut. 29:12-13) You are standing here in order to enter into a covenant with the LORD your God, a covenant the LORD is making with you this day and sealing with an oath, (13) to confirm you this day as his people, that he may be your God as he promised you and as he swore to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. [NIV]

What God swore to Abraham in the covenant of promise and subsequently confirmed to Isaac and Jacob, He was prepared to implement as Abraham's children stood on the verge of their entrance into the land, over four hundred years later. The Palestinian covenant doesn't alter any of the original promises given to Abraham; it simply elaborates those promises more fully. The Palestinian covenant seems to have had two immediate purposes. The first was to ensure that the people understood that their inheritance of the land was the direct result of the promises previously made to Abraham (29:12-13). The second purpose was to clarify for the people the conditions under which they could expect to enter into the enjoyment of this promise—the condition being their continued obedience to God (29:16-29). One of the most interesting features of this covenant is found in 30:1-10, here God indicates (prophetically) that the children of Israel would rebel in the future and their rebellion would cost them the enjoyment of the covenant blessings such that they would be dispersed from the land, but the covenant itself would not be invalidated. Rather, the blessing would be reserved for a generation of their descendants who would call upon Him and to which God would respond by bringing them back into the land.

(Deut. 30:1-10) When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, (2) and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, (3) then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. (4) Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. (5) He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you

more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (6) The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. (7) The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. (8) You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. (9) Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, (10) if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. [NIV]

It is important that the distinction between the “enjoyment of blessing” under the covenant, and the “validity” of the covenant be understood. On this issue covenantalists seem to be perpetually confused because they assume that if the Jews are cast out of the place of blessing that is an indication of the invalidation of the covenant itself. As is clearly indicated in this passage, nothing could be further from the truth. The promise is to a “people,” not to a particular generation. If a generation or many generations are unfaithful that does not invalidate the covenant, because the covenant is unconditional and based solely on the faithfulness of God. (Note Psalm 89:28-37, quoted below, concerning the perpetual validity of the Davidic covenant—another expansion on the covenant of promise).

The Palestinian covenant should be seen as a reaffirmation and amplification of the “land” promises previously made to Abraham, and its perpetual validity is apparent from the language of the covenant itself.

The Davidic covenant is found in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, in which God says to David,

(2 Sam. 7:12-16) “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. (13) He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.

(14) I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. (15) But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. (16) Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever." [NIV]

There are four key provisions of this covenant. First, David will have a son who will build the house of the Lord (v. 13), which was fulfilled in Solomon. Second, while God would correct David's son, He would never take the throne from him (vv. 14-15). Third, God promised that David's lineage would endure forever (v. 16). Fourth, God promised that the right to the throne of Israel would forever remain with David's line of descendants (v. 16). While the text of the covenant does not make reference to the Abrahamic covenant, the connection is apparent since the people that David's line will perpetually have the right to rule are the people of the promise under the Abrahamic covenant. The prophet Jeremiah later demonstrated a connection between these two covenants when he spoke the following prophecy:

(Jer. 33:25-26) . . . This is what the LORD says, "If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed laws of heaven and earth, (26) then I will reject the descendants of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his sons to rule over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them." [NIV]

The Davidic covenant expands upon the national/political aspect of the original covenant by stating that the right to the throne of Israel will forever remain with David's line. This is the reason the New Testament makes the point of establishing that Christ is both the natural descendant of David and legal heir to the throne of Israel [Luke 3:23-38 is Mary's genealogy showing her connection to David, but not through the regal (kingly) line. Matthew 1:1-16 records Joseph's genealogy through which the regal line passed. One might ask why Joseph's genealogy is included in the gospel record if he is not Jesus' biological father. The answer is that Joseph was Jesus' legal adoptive father and Jesus must inherit the right to the throne through the regal line. Interestingly, being born into the house of David through a non-regal branch and then inheriting the

right to the throne through adoption into the regal line was probably the only possible solution to avoiding the curse God placed upon the regal line in Jeremiah 22:24-30.]

The prophecy of the new covenant is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jeremiah prophesies,

(31:31-34) "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. (32) It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. (33) "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. (34) No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."
[NIV]

This is not the instituting of the covenant itself, but a prophecy in which God promised that He would someday establish a new covenant with Israel, a covenant by which He would write His laws on their hearts (v. 33)—a reference to the giving of the Spirit, indicative of regeneration and the personal presence of the Holy Spirit living within believers. The result will be that all Israel will know the Lord (v. 34). In this prophecy, God, by implication, declared the Law to be weak, ineffectual, and soon to pass away (*cf.* Heb. 8:13). [Theonomic postmillennialists reject observation and insist that the Law is an eternal covenant. They rationalize that moral righteousness is eternally the same; therefore the covenant of the Law must be eternal. What they fail to recognize is that in so saying they directly contradict Scripture. The eternal nature of righteousness has nothing to do with the validity of the covenant of the Law given to Israel. The Law was a light; a greater and brighter light has replaced it—that light is Christ. The Law was good and useful, but it has become obsolete with the inauguration of a new and better covenant. This doesn't mean that what was right under the Law isn't still "right;" it means that God has sent a more powerful means of exposing sin and producing righteousness—it is the

law written in the hearts of those who believe, by the presence of the regenerating and indwelling Holy Spirit.]

It is important to recognize that the covenant of promise, and the other three covenants, are all unconditional. This does not mean that there is no condition to be met for them to be fulfilled, for in that sense, there is a condition—genuine faith. Rather, the unconditional nature of these covenants refers to the fact that Israel’s disobedience, both past and present, has not, indeed cannot, invalidate the promises made to them, because the validity of these promises was never linked to Israel’s faithfulness—only the “enjoyment” of the blessings was conditioned upon faith. Though generations of Abraham’s descendants have turned from their Messiah, yet God maintains His covenanted promises, ready to fulfill them to that elect generation that will turn to Christ. When the unconditional nature of these promises is understood it becomes apparent that whatever partial and temporary benefits Israel may have enjoyed in the past, in no sense have these promises been fulfilled. Thus if they cannot be invalidated and they have not been fulfilled and God intends see them fulfilled, their fulfillment must be in the future. The position of Covenant Theology, which generally sees no place for the fulfillment of these covenants to literal Israel in the future, is that their *validity* was conditioned upon Israel’s faith; and since Israel broke faith with God, manifested ultimately in the rejection of their Messiah, these covenants have been invalidated and the promised blessings transferred to the Church (sometimes referred to as “replacement theology”).

There are three reasons for believing that God has not abandoned His covenant with Abraham. The form of the covenant given in Genesis 15:9-21 is that of an unconditional, or unilateral covenant in which all of the responsibility for the fulfillment rests solely with one party, in this case *God*. The scene in Genesis 15:1-21, in which Abraham divided various animals, and God, depicted by a great smoking furnace, passed between the divided pieces, is a picture of the sealing of the Abrahamic covenant—equivalent to the formal signing of a treaty. The fact that only God passed between the divided pieces is significant. Normally, in this type of covenant, known as a “suzerainty-vassal” treaty, both parties would pass between the pieces together, indicating their mutual obligation to keep the conditions of the covenant. That the text makes the point that God alone passed between the pieces is highly significant and

indicative that the covenant obligations rest solely with Him. In other words, it was not up to Abraham or his descendants to do anything to insure the continued validity of this covenant. Of course no individual, nor the nation as a whole, could enter into the blessings of the covenant apart from faith (Gen. 17:13-14). Nevertheless, faithlessness on the part of an individual or an entire generation of individuals could not invalidate the covenant itself; it would merely exclude that individual or generation from the covenant blessings. The validity of the covenant, and its enjoyment are two entirely distinct issues. God rejected those who rejected the covenant relationship, but He did not reject the covenant itself, for it was *His* covenant, based upon His own faithfulness. If a generation of Abraham's descendants arises that will accept the covenant relationship, they will have the covenant fulfilled to them. Since the promises were made concerning a people they will be fulfilled when an elect generation of Jews turns to God through acceptance of Jesus Christ, their Messiah.

Even though Abraham's descendants were disobedient and fell into idolatry, subsequent statements made in the Scripture indicate that their disobedience had not invalidated the covenant. For example, the Abrahamic covenant is invoked in 1 Chronicles 16:16-18, a thousand years after it was made with Abraham. During much of that time, Israel had lived in idolatry, yet the covenant itself was not invalidated. The psalmist in Psalm 105:10-11 says,

(Psa. 105:10) He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac. He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant: (11) "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit." [NIV]

If disobedience, or lack of faith could invalidate the promises of God under the covenant of promise, it surely would not have survived the first one thousand years of Israel's history.

The subsequent Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants are also indicated as being unconditional, eternal covenants. When seen in light of their connection to the covenant of promise to Abraham, it becomes clear that they all share the same unconditional quality. Concerning the unconditional nature of the Davidic Covenant, God, through the psalmist, in Psalm 89 says:

(Psa. 89:28) “I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. (29) I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure. (30) If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, (31) if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, (32) I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; (33) but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness. (34) I will not violate my covenant or alter what my lips have uttered. (35) Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness and I will not lie to David (36) that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun; (37) it will be established forever like the moon, the faithful witness in the sky.” [NIV]

Almost four hundred years later, on the eve of Israel’s expulsion from the land because of rampant idolatry, God spoke these words through the prophet Jeremiah:

(Jer. 33:20) This is what the LORD says: “If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night no longer come at their appointed time, (21) then my covenant with David my servant—and my covenant with the Levites who are priests ministering before me—can be broken and David will no longer have a descendant to reign on his throne. (22) I will make the descendants of David my servant and the Levites who minister before me as countless as the stars of the sky and as measureless as the sand on the seashore.” [NIV]

Both the nature of these covenants and subsequent biblical statements reflecting back on them indicate they were made unconditionally (and eternally), meaning they have not been invalidated by Israel’s past unbelief and that God intends to see them fulfilled through His sovereign election of a future generation of Abraham’s descendants (Jer. 31:31-37). The covenant God made with Abraham, along with the subsequent expansions and elucidation by prophetic pronouncements and descriptions (*e.g.*, Isa. 11:4-10; 35:5-10; 60:1-22; 65:17-25; Ezek. 34:25-31; Joel 2:21-27; 3:18-21) serve as the source material for our understanding of the earthly aspect of the kingdom of God. Any theology of the kingdom, if it is correct, must accurately reflect what is contained in these Scriptures.

The Palestinian covenant repeats the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant and expands upon the basis for Israel's enjoyment of this promise (faith and obedience). In this covenant, God foresaw Israel's disobedience and dispersion (Deut. 30:1-8) and promised their restoration upon a return to faith in Him. Of course, Israel's ultimate return to the Lord can only occur as a result of inward spiritual conversion. The Davidic covenant is an expansion upon the national aspect of the Abrahamic covenant in that it specifies that David's house is to have a perpetual right to the throne of Israel. The promise requires that when the kingdom prophecies are fulfilled, a member of David's house must rule over Israel. This will ultimately be fulfilled in the person of David's ideal Son, the Messiah (Isa. 9:6-7). The prophecy of the new covenant specifies how God intends to bring about the implementation of the promise he made to Abraham—by genuine spiritual renewal on the part of Abraham's descendants, not through the Law, but through inward transformation. Before God can fulfill His promises to Abraham He must raise up an elect generation of Jews that will respond to His offer of salvation and thus enter into the blessings of the covenant.

What is the millennial kingdom to be like? Scripture indicates that the millennium will be inaugurated shortly after the second coming of Christ (Zech. 14:1-9; Rev. 9:11-20:6). Revelation 20:3-6 indicates that a resurrection of believers will occur at the beginning of the millennium, not at the end as postmillennialists and amillennialists hold. The millennial kingdom will be global; however Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, will be the center of attention during the period, since it is from there that the Messiah will reign (Isa. 2:1-4), and Israel will occupy a special place of honor at the head of the nations (Isa. 60:1-22; 61:4-9; 62:1-12; Jer. 16:14-18; 30:18-22; Mic. 4:1-2; Zeph. 3:20); this will, of course, necessitate a full regathering of the Jewish people (Isa. 11:12; 49:8-26; 66:1-20; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 8:1-23). Isaiah describes Israel during the millennium in the following words.

(Isa. 60:1-22) "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. (2) See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. (3) Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (4) "Lift up your eyes and look about

you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. (5) Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. (6) Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. (7) All Kedars flocks will be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth will serve you; they will be accepted as offerings on my altar, and I will adorn my glorious temple. (8) Who are these that fly along like clouds, like doves to their nests? (9) Surely the islands look to me; in the lead are the ships of Tarshish, bringing your sons from afar, with their silver and gold, to the honor of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor. (10) Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you. Though in anger I struck you, in favor I will show you compassion. (11) Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations—their kings led in triumphal procession. (12) For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish; it will be utterly ruined.” (13) The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of my feet. (14) The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you; all who despise you will bow down at your feet and will call you the City of the LORD, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. (15) Although you have been forsaken and hated, with no one traveling through, I will make you the everlasting pride and the joy of all generations. (16) You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior, your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. (17) Instead of bronze I will bring you gold, and silver in place of iron. Instead of wood I will bring you bronze, and iron in place of stones. I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler. (18) No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise. (19) The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. (20) Your sun will

never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end. (21) Then will all your people be righteous and they will possess the land forever. They are the shoot I have planted, the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor. (22) The least of you will become a thousand, the smallest a mighty nation. I am the LORD; in its time I will do this swiftly." [NIV]

As the name implies, the "millennium" will last approximately one-thousand years (Rev. 20:2,3,4,6,7) as is evidenced by the fact that Satan's confinement, which begins immediately prior to the millennium, is to last for one thousand years, after which he will be released for a short time. His release will result in a rebellion and the deaths of those who follow him (Rev. 20:7-10). It may well be that the destruction of the rebellious invokes the dissolution of the present heavens and earth and prepares the way for the new heavens and earth (Rev. 20:7-21:8). Humanly, the millennium will be a period characterized by health, prosperity, satisfaction, and longevity (Isa. 65:18-25, *cf.* 35:3-7). Isaiah's description of the earthly kingdom (though he does not distinguish between the millennial and eternal phases) is one of the earliest in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament.

(Isa. 65:18-25) "But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. (19) I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. (20) Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. (21) They will build houses and dwell in them; they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit. (22) No longer will they build houses and others live in them, or plant and others eat. For as the days of a tree, so will be the days of my people; my chosen ones will long enjoy the works of their hands. (23) They will not toil in vain or bear children doomed to misfortune; for they will be a people blessed by the LORD, they and their descendants with them. (24) Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear. (25) The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox, but dust

will be the serpent's food. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the LORD. [NIV]

Governmentally the millennium will be a theocratic kingdom with Christ ruling the world from Jerusalem, which will serve as both the religious and political center of the world (*cf.* Isa. 9:6; Rev. 20:6). Concerning this, Micah prophesied,

(Micah 4:4) In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. (2) Many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. (3) He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (4) He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore." [NIV]

There will continue to be nations during the millennial period, and each nation will continue to have a significant measure of freedom in governing itself (Isa. 2:2-5). Apparently some of the civil laws of the nations will originate from Zion. The presence of people in their unglorified state, including an increasing number of unregenerate people, especially toward the end, will naturally result in problems. Disputes between nations will still occur, but with far less frequency and certainly with less intensity, since Christ will be present to mediate. Apparently it will be necessary on occasion for Christ to remind some nations of their obligations to Him (both spiritual and political) by depriving them of blessings, such as rain (Zech. 14:16-19); clearly, the millennium is not a perfect age. Economically the millennium will represent a time of unparalleled prosperity (Joel 2:21-27; Amos 9:13-15). Amos prophesies:

(Amos 9:13) "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills." [NIV]

The amelioration of the effects of the curse placed upon the earth (*cf.* Isa. 11:6-9; Rom. 8:18-24) after the fall of man will undoubtedly

account for much of the prosperity; however, the presence of Christ and the influence of godliness in business, government, social institutions, and the sciences will certainly have great effect, not to mention the positive economic impact brought about by the elimination of armed conflict. (Isa. 2:4). Socially the millennium will be characterized as a time of unprecedented peace, world harmony, and justice (Isa. 9:1-7). The presence of Christ and the absence of Satan's influence, at least until the end of the period, will affect the world in such a positive way that even with an ever increasing population of unredeemed people, the world will experience unparalleled harmony both in the natural and human realms not seen since before the fall of man.

It should be clear that Covenant Theology's allegorized concept of the kingdom (whether amillennial or postmillennial) bears little resemblance to the picture presented in Scripture. Contrary to what Covenantalism says, God did not abandon His plans for the true descendants of Abraham; that is, those who are His children both through birth and faith, (Rom. 9:6-9). He has every intention of fulfilling His promises to Israel (*cf.* Psa. 105:8-11; Jer. 33:20-26; Rom. 11:1-36), and this is the basis for belief in a literal, earthly kingdom beginning at the second coming of Christ and extending into eternity. The fact that Israel as a nation rejected their Messiah, and God from both Jew and Gentile forged a new entity – the Church – did not nullify God's program for Israel. It merely postponed it until Israel responds to God's grace. In fact, one of the primary purposes of the coming "tribulation" period spoken of in Matthew 24 and Revelation 5-19 is to bring a remnant of Israel to faith in Christ.

It is true that Church-age saints share in the distinction of being designated "children of Abraham." Abraham is, metaphorically speaking, the father of all who believe (Gal. 3:6-9,29 *cf.* Gen. 12:3). The blessings that the Church enjoys have their roots in the promises made to Abraham and sealed as a covenant (Gal. 3:8-9). However, it would be incorrect to interpret this to mean that Israel and the Church are the same, or that the Church is a replacement for Israel. While church-age believers are called "children of Abraham," the Church is never called "Israel," and Israel is never designated as "the Body of Christ." Although Galatians 6:16 is sometimes cited as an example of the Church being referred to as "Israel," the Church is not mentioned in this passage; Paul is merely drawing a distinction between those who were outwardly Israelites, by birth and tradition, and those who were "the Israel of

God," by birth and faith (*i.e.*, saved Jews). In saying this, he nullified the argument of the Judaizers that one must be circumcised to be right with God—since even Jews could only be saved by faith! The presence of saved Jews in the Church (referred to as "the Israel of God") does not equate the Church with Israel; the duality of these two entities is strictly maintained in the New Testament. In Romans 11:1-36 where Paul gives the analogy of the root and the branches it is worth noting that he never pictures both the Church and Israel as the same, or even attached to the root (the source of blessing) at the same time.

(Romans 11:1-36) I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. (2) God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: (3) "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me?" (4) And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (5) So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. (6) And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. (7) What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, (8) as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." (9) And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. (10) May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." (11) Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. (12) But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! (13) I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry (14) in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. (15) For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (16) If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is

holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. (17) If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, (18) do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. (19) You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." (20) Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. (22) Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. (23) And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. (24) After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (25) I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. (26) And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. (27) And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (28) As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, (29) for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. (30) Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, (31) so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. (32) For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (33) Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! (34) Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? (35) Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? (36) For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen. [NIV]

The “root” in this passage represents the rich blessings that flow from the promises made to Abraham. Israel was attached to the root at one time, but because of their unbelief they were broken off, and a new entity—the Church—was grafted in. At some point in the future when Israel responds in faith to their Messiah (Zech. 13:7-9), they will be grafted back in again (vv. 11-24); this conceptualization negates the idea that the Church could be a replacement for Israel. In fact, this entire analogy can make sense only if Israel and the Church are distinct entities. While it is true that Israel and the Church share a common heritage in the faith of Abraham and God’s promises to him, they are nonetheless distinct; just as two children may have the same parent and be loved equally, but be born at different times, have different names, and have different expectations made of them by that same parent. The Bible does not view the Church as an extension of or replacement for Israel, rather the church-age represents a divinely intended parenthetical age both for the great benefit of the Gentiles and to provoke Israel to desire to be in right relationship to God and again experience His blessing (Rom. 11:11-24). This present parenthetical age does not represent a change of plans, nor is it “plan B,” it is the plan God designed to bring about his work both in the lives of the His elect nation and the Gentiles—a plan laid in eternity.

Nowhere is the critical distinction between Israel and the Church more significant than in the study of prophecy. The reason is that both the Church and Israel occupy unique places in the overall prophetic program. God’s promises to Israel as embodied in the Old Testament promises and prophecies are for a land, a nation, an earthly kingdom—with Messiah on the throne—and a special and perpetual relationship with God. The fountainhead of these promises is the covenant of promise made with Abraham. On the other hand, the Church is nowhere promised a land, descendants, a nation (or kingdom on earth) though it does share in the promise of a special relationship with God and a heavenly home (1 Jn. 1:3; 3:3; Jn. 14:1-3).

The Church is a unique body, distinct from Israel; it did not exist prior to the commencement of Spirit baptism on the day of Pentecost A.D. 33. The biblical basis for this assertion is as follows. The Church is “the Body of Christ” (Col. 1:18,24), and Spirit baptism is the operation that makes a person a member of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). Since the Spirit’s ministry of baptism did not begin

until Pentecost A.D. 33, it is not possible that believers who died prior to that time could be included as a part of the Church. The disciples recognized that Pentecost marked the beginning of the Church (Acts 11:15-16). Jesus Himself indicated the Church to be a future reality from the standpoint of His earthly ministry (*cf.* Matt. 16:18, note the future tense, "I will build my church"). Also, the nature of the church age as a parenthetical age, distinct from God's program for Israel, is reinforced by its complete absence from Old Testament prophecy, which delineates God's program for Israel in minute detail. This concept is again reinforced by the observation that a number of Old Testament passages mention events of both advents of Christ with no indication of a break or dislocation of time (*e.g.*, Isa. 61:1-3). Thus, it should be apparent from the reasons given above that the church age is parenthetical, rather than a replacement, to God's program for Israel.

Conclusions

Based upon the Abrahamic covenant of promise, and the other expansions upon that covenant (the Palestinian, the Davidic, and the new covenants), God's unconditional and unalterable promise to Israel is for a literal earthly kingdom with Messiah ruling, in which the regenerated descendants of Abraham will live in fellowship with God, in a state of perpetual blessing. The blessings to the Gentile world will result from the overflow of God's blessings to Israel (Rom. 11:18). This picture is compatible only with a premillennial view of the return of Christ.