

# A PRIMER ON PROPHECY

By George C. Stewart

For many who hold to a dispensational view of eschatology the year 2000 had significant meaning. Consequently, during the few years leading up to the end of the twentieth century there were an increasing number of “prophecies” concerning our Lord’s return. It is essential that Christians have a basic Biblical understanding of this issue in order not to be led astray into wild speculations: which blurs our focus on Christ, weakens our faith in God’s promises, and holds the church up for ridicule before the world.

It is the conviction of this writer that a fundamental error of dispensational eschatology is the same as made by the Judaizers of the first century: that the role of the physical nation of Israel continues “forever.”

## First Century Judaizers

The apostle Paul was constantly hounded by Jews who claimed to be converted to Christ but continued to maintain the preeminence of Judaism. A conference in Jerusalem was called to settle this matter (Acts 15). Unfortunately it was not settled in the minds of the 1st century Judaizers or the 20<sup>th</sup> century dispensationalists.

The Judaizers maintained that one must be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, the other Apostles, and the elders concluded that the Judaizers were wrong. The apostles clearly stated that God now makes *no* distinction between Jew and Gentile, and that all are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:7-11).

Even though God revealed to the New Testament writers that the role of national Israel was ended with the redemptive work of Christ, many of the first century Jews continued to maintain otherwise. And even though the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament prophecies concerning the glorious future of Israel as being fulfilled in Christ and His church, many Jews have continued to look for a future fulfillment. One such example is Pinchas Lapide, an orthodox Jewish professor, who authored a book titled, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*. Lapide, a Jewish specialist in the New Testament at Gottingen University (Germany), concludes that the resurrection is fact but also contends that Jesus was not the Messiah promised to the Jews (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*. May 5, 1984).

One might wonder how Lapide would maintain both of these seemingly conflicting conclusions. What is his reason for denying that the resurrected Jesus is the Messiah of the Old Testament? Because Orthodox Judaism holds that the Messiah’s coming will establish God’s reign of peace and justice for all—something that hasn’t happened through Jesus. Sounds like a reason given by Christian dispensationalists.

How does Orthodox Judaism interpret the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel’s future? In a way that ignores God’s temporary role for national Israel, the fact that God’s ultimate promise has been fulfilled in Christ, and the figurative language of prophecy. Just like Christian dispensationalists.

What then does Orthodox Judaism expect from its Messiah? The same as Christian dispensationalists—a physical reign over an earthly kingdom.

## Twentieth Century Dispensationalism

Christian dispensationalists—just like the Judaizers of the first century and the Orthodox Jews of today—contend that God’s promises to national Israel were irrevocable (forever). This is in spite of the clear conditional nature of those promises. As Israel was

preparing to enter Canaan God set forth a warning: “When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord your God so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but shall be utterly destroyed” (Deuteronomy 4:25-26; see also Exodus 19:5-6; Joshua 23:14-16).

And God said Israel “broke the everlasting covenant” (Isaiah 24:5; see also Matthew 21:43).

Dispensationalists, however, maintain that God must still honor the broken covenant with the nation Israel. They believe that the new nation established in 1948 is the beginning of that fulfillment. John Walvoord claims that God’s will is that “Israelites will be Israelites throughout eternity and Gentiles will be Gentiles as well” (John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy*, reprint 1988, p.170. Compare to Ephesians 2:11-22).

Dispensationalism teaches that Jesus came as a babe to set up an earthly kingdom over Israel. But the Jews rejected the King and the church has become God’s stopgap measure until Jesus comes a second time to establish His earthly rule.

Walvoord writes: “Christ who is introduced as the King of Israel, of the line of David, and of the seed of Abraham, is rejected by His own people.” Next, Walvoord says, “In the face of national rejection on the pan of Israel, He (Jesus) proclaims anew divine purpose, namely the formation of a new assembly to be delineated on spiritual rather than racial lines and without territorial or political characteristics.” Finally, Walvoord says, this planned Kingdom on earth will be established over national Israel when Jesus returns (Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy*, reprint 1988, pp. 21-25).

This view of the kingdom of God ignores the New Testament writers’ interpretation of Old Testament prophecies (see following section) and seriously minimizes the work of our Lord.

If this view is true then Christ failed in His mission and will have to try again. But what assurance is there in a second “try”? If this view is true then God is more interested in a nation than in His church. And if this view is true, the New Testament writers were wrong.

### **The Apostolic Interpretation**

The dispensational interpretation of Old Testament prophecies is in stark contrast to that of the New Testament writers. This is true in every facet of our Lord’s rule and return.

Because of their presupposition concerning national Israel they cannot accept Christ’s rule as being other than physical. Dwight Pentecost argues that the kingdom offered by Jesus was the same as foretold in the Old Testament, but was offered only to the Jews, and was dependent upon the repentance of the nation. The repentance didn’t happen and thus the kingdom was “postponed” (*Things to Come*, 1958, pp. 446-453).

This presupposition requires a totally different interpretation of Old Testament prophecy from that of the Apostles. For example, Dwight Pentecost refers to Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:28-29) and concludes: “At the institution of the theocratic Kingdom the prophecy of Joel *will* be fulfilled” (Pentecost, *Ibid.* p. 486. Emphasis added). On the

other hand Peter announced that the events taking place at the establishment of the church were the beginning of the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:14-21).

Since the dispensational hermeneutic is locked into the idea of an earthly rule of Christ this theory maintains that the promise to David (2 Samuel 7:11-17) must be fulfilled by David himself literally sitting on an earthly throne. Consequently, David must be resurrected in the future to co-reign with Christ over the nation of Israel during a literal "millennium." Is that reincarnation? Peter, however, says that Christ began fulfilling that prophecy when He established His church (Acts 2:25-31).

When our risen Lord spoke to the two on the road to Emmaus He began "with Moses and with all the prophets and "explained to them things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Moses and the prophets were not looking forward to an earthly kingdom but rather to the Messiah. Jesus fulfilled what was foretold. And Peter proclaimed that "all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days" (Acts 3:24). To "prophecy" about some future earthly reign for national Israel is to deny the New Testament focus on Christ and His church.

It seems to this writer that the Judaizers of the first century and the dispensationalists of today—by their dogmatic insistence that the nation of Israel is God's chosen people forever—are blinded to the New Testament writer's affirmation that prophecy is fulfilled in Christ and His church.

A primary example of this observation is the way the dispensationalists interpret Acts 15. C. I. Scofield says, "Dispensationally, this is the most important passage of the New Testament." And, since he has already concluded that the prophet Amos is writing about some future kingdom for national Israel, he ignores James' application of Amos 9. (C. I. Scofield, *Notes on the New Testament*). John Walvoord also calls Acts 15:14-18 one of the important passages in the New Testament bearing on this subject" (the kingdom of God). Having the same mindset as Scofield, Walvoord concludes: "The normal and natural exegesis of these passages therefore requires a future restoration to Israel and a future fulfillment of the Kingdom promises" (Walvoord, *Israel In Prophecy*, reprint 1988, pp. 9 1-93).

Is this what Acts 15:14-18 is saying? No. In fact, the message is just the opposite.

After the apostles and elders discussed the issue of salvation for Jews and Gentiles they concluded that all are saved the same way—by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:11). There were three sources that helped them come to this decision. First was Peter's experience of God's directing him to understand that the gospel is for Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 15:7-11). Second was the experience of Barnabas and Paul as they saw God working through them to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). Third was the witness of the Old Testament prophets (Acts 15:15).

It is important to note that, while James quotes only a portion of Amos 9, he says the "Prophets (plural) agree." He simply chose Amos, just as Peter had earlier chosen Joel (Acts 2). Throughout the New Testament different prophets are quoted to communicate the same message—the fulfillment of prophecy is in Christ and His church.

When the context of Acts 15 is considered it seems obvious that James does not quote from Amos to project some future earthly reign of Christ over national Israel. That subject cannot be found in this chapter. Instead, just as Peter used Joel's prophecy at

Pentecost (Acts 2), James is quoting from Amos to show that the Old Testament prophets foretold what God would do in the 1st century: rebuild the tabernacle of David, composed of Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:16-18). In other words James is confirming that the tabernacle of David is the church!

Scores of examples could be used to show that dispensationalists interpret Old Testament prophecies differently from the New Testament writers. Dispensationalists insist—Like 1st century Judaizers and 20th century Jews—that God’s promises be fulfilled in national Israel. The New Testament writers, on the other hand, insist that God’s promises *are* fulfilled in Christ!

Not all Israel is Israel (Romans 9:6). It is the remnant— from among both Jews and Gentiles—that shall be saved (Romans 9:8, 23-27).

## **Conclusion**

The New Testament writers’ application of Old Testament prophecies must always be the final word. And when read objectively and in context, these writers consistently point to these prophecies as evidence for what God was already doing then—not to some period beyond the Christian era.

Besides this—in spite of dispensationalists’ misuse of Revelation 20—there are no New Testament prophecies of a future earthly reign of Christ over national Israel. If God had such plans it would seem that the New Testament would give us at least a hint. Instead, we are told that we “have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem,” and that we have received “a kingdom which cannot be shaken” (Hebrews 12:22, 28).

In this writer’s opinion, Dispensationalism minimizes the glorious work of Christ to atone for sins and to redeem for Himself a holy people. Dispensationalists claim that if the Jews had not rejected Jesus then Jesus would have established His earthly reign over them. But this raises a serious question: If the Jews *had* accepted Jesus as Messiah, and He had established an earthly reign, how would our redemption have been accomplished? To this question they have no satisfactory answer. For the Scripture says, “Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

But, thanks be to God, He has the answer! For “according to the promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus” who was “delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God” and “nailed to a cross,” but “God raised Him from the dead,” so now “God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is...written” (Acts 2:23; 13:23,30,33).

“To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever” (Romans 16:27).