

Israel and The Church

This document is the unpublished appendix
to the chapter on the "Doctrine of the End Times"
in Dr. Gilbert Bilezikian's book

Christianity 101

[Zondervan]

For a thorough understanding of "Israel and the Church," chapter 8 in *Christianity 101* should be read first.

In a fortune-telling oriented culture, sensationalist speculations find a wide appeal. They spawn specialized publications or various media outlets that flourish with every flare-up of an international crisis. But the predictions are always proven wrong, and the eschatological jig-saw puzzles must be rearranged for the next international outbreak.

Such attempts to outguess God's timing are specifically forbidden in Scripture. According to the New Testament, Christians are not to look and wait for signs but rather for the Lord Himself. The real purpose of prophecy is to encourage Christians to "watch and pray," to be distinctively counter-cultural persons "in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and earnestly desiring the day of God" (2 Peter 3:11). Consequently, Christians ought to steward and plan for ministry as if the *Parousia* [the coming or appearing of the Lord] were not to happen in a million years, but they should also watch and pray as if it were to happen today, because it could.

Since the link between current events and "prophetic truth" is sometimes made in connection with the biblical concept of Israel, it is appropriate to sketch a brief outline for the discussion of such teachings. The view that Israel, defined as an ethnic people, has an eschatological role to play is especially prominent in an approach called *Dispensationalism* or *Rapturism* (of the *Left Behind* fame). The foundation of this system of biblical interpretation was laid in the writings of a nineteenth century Plymouth Brethren leader from Britain named J.N. Darby. Those views have been ardently received and propagated by certain groups in North America, primarily in *fundamentalist* circles.

According to the Dictionary of Christianity in America (IVP), "Darby's Dispensationalism came to America in the 1870's. During a series of preaching tours, Darby won over a number of evangelical pastors and teachers . . . Dispensational views spread into conservative evangelicalism through the Bible and prophetic conference movement, the Bible schools, a number of influential journals and, most significantly, the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, revised 1967). Scofield identified seven dispensations (innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace and kingdom) and articulated what became the standard dispensational approach in the United States. Though rejected at first by many conservatives, by the 1920's it eclipsed other kinds of premillennialism and became closely identified with the fundamentalist movement."

Despite the fact that *Dispensationalism* "is the most common view of eschatology taught in fundamentalist schools and churches" in the USA, it remains a minority doctrine in the history of the church and among contemporary evangelical Bible scholars. During the last 150 years of being in existence, *Dispensationalism* has splintered into several schools of interpretation and, currently, the validity of some of its basic premises is being reexamined by some of its own adherents. However, the mainstream popular dispensational teaching remains very definable. Its dominant idea is that God pursues two separate redemptive plans in history, each with a distinct people. One is an earthly people, Israel, and the other is a heavenly people, the church.

Dispensationalism teaches that God's plan for Israel was revealed in Old Testament times through a series of covenants He made with Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David, all leading toward the establishment of "a glorious utopian reign on the earth in which the nation of Israel would have a prominent position." Thus, God's basic program revolved around the nation of Israel. But when Israel rejected its Messiah and had Him crucified, God suspended or "postponed" His program with Israel and instead turned to the Gentiles to take from among them a second people, the church. He interrupted His plan with Israel to open a "parenthesis" during which the *mystery* of the church will be completed. When this happens, the "parenthesis" for the Gentiles will be brought to a close. Jesus will then return and "rapture" the church out of this world into heaven. With the church gone, God will resume His program on earth with Israel. After a seven year period of tribulation and the rise of Antichrist, Jesus will return once more to bind Satan and to set up the promised kingdom where Jesus and Israel will rule the earth for a thousand years with Jerusalem as the center of the world.

If this scenario seems strange, it is basically because it transfers the privilege and the preeminence that the Bible gives to the church, a people from all nations, to Israel, a people from one nation, Israel. This script removes the church from the forefront of history and puts Israel in its place. The primacy, the centrality and the finality of the church in God's

purposes are replaced with a theory that puts Israel in the place of primacy, centrality and finality. The church is relegated to the status of second class entity, a contingency plan B, or a concubine that is conveniently "raptured" out of the way, while Israel is treated as if it were the bride of Christ in place of the church. However, the biblical teaching about the relationship of Israel to the church is quite clear. The following points are presented to affirm the integrity of God's plan for the church as the unique and overwhelming passion of Jesus Christ.

1) God made no covenant with Abraham that did not include as its end purpose the promise of a universal blessing. God's original call of Abraham moved from the promise of a personal blessing to the promise of a national blessing. God told him, "I will make you into a great nation." Then it moved to the promise of the universal blessing when God said, "and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3).

Even more specifically, the terms of the covenant God made with Abraham were that he would become the father of many nations, and that His everlasting covenant would apply to all his descendants in those nations (17:3-8). From the very beginning, God's covenant was not just with one people or only one nation, but with a multitude of nations. God's promise to bless Abraham and the people of Israel was only a part of His all-inclusive desire to bless the whole world through the emergence of the church -- God's people from all nations. (see *Christianity 101*, pp. 178-181, and 191-194). This objective was so paramount in God's designs for Abraham that it even affected his identity. His name was changed from Abram to Abraham, from 'father of one people' to 'father of many nations' (verses 4, 5).

This universal inclusiveness of God's covenant with Abraham is explicitly and abundantly confirmed in the New Testament. In the wake of the inauguration of the church on the day of Pentecost, Peter could address the "men of Israel" and tell them that the focus of the prophetic ministry of the old covenant had been directed toward the church age, and that the purpose for the covenant God had made with Abraham was the blessing of all peoples on earth, beginning with the people among Israel who would repent (Acts 3:12, 24-26). Likewise, the apostle Paul confirmed that God's promise was for Abraham and his offspring to inherit the world (Romans 4:13-18). But according to Paul, this promise to inherit the world applied to all believers, to believing Jews and to Gentiles who have faith like Abraham since he is the father of both (verse 16). Paul did not distinguish a temporal, racial Israel from a spiritual, heavenly people of God as inheritors of the promise. For Paul, all believers are descendants of Abraham and the promise is fulfilled to all of them as God's new chosen people. As descendants of Abraham, they form one people from many nations, including the nation of Israel. This is because Abraham was the father of both the Gentiles, who do not have circumcision but who believe, and of the Jews, who have circumcision but who must also become believers and accept Christ to be considered true descendants of Abraham (Romans 4: 11-12).

Moreover, when God gave the covenant to Abraham and promised His blessing to all nations, He was really preaching to Abraham the gospel of Gentile redemption, whereby all those who believe would become his children, without any distinction between older and younger children (Galatians 3:7-9). As a result, distinctions of race lose all their significance. God has only one people because all believers are one in Christ. Jewish believers and Gentile believers are bonded together in one organic entity in Christ. They are all equally

Abraham's offspring, and to all of them is fulfilled God's promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:28-29).

2) Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament makes a distinction between the descendants of Abraham as natural and spiritual seed. The promises to Abraham are said to apply to all his descendants who have faith like him. Completely absent from the Bible is the notion of two separate fulfillments of the promise of God to Abraham, one for Jewish believers and the other for Gentile believers. Like a benevolent parent who has both adoptive and natural children, God treats them all equally and fairly, as the members of one family, not two. The benefits of God's covenant with Abraham are always described in Scripture as the prerogative of all his descendants, believers from among both Jews and Gentiles. So strong was Abraham's solidarity with the church, his true descendants, that he waived his rights to the land that had been promised as a part of the covenant to all his descendants (Genesis 17:6-8; Hebrews 11:9). In the perspective of his faith, he saw the land as predicting a greater and better reality, a heavenly country and a city prepared by God where the "church of the firstborn" will dwell with "Jesus the mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 11:16; 12:23).

3) The Old Testament contains several predictions of an eventual restoration of a Davidic kingdom in which utopian conditions would prevail (e.g., Isaiah 11; Jeremiah 30-31; Ezekiel 37; Amos 9). Considered in isolation from the New Testament, such "oracles of deliverance" would seem to guarantee a special status for ethnic Israel apart from the Gentile church. However, when viewed in their totality, the Scriptures indicate that those predictions have already had a threefold fulfillment with no other fulfillment anticipated beyond these.

The first level of fulfillment occurred with the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile. In BC 536, a miraculous allowance was made for exiled Jews to return to Palestine, to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem, and to organize themselves as a nation. This providential turn of events was easily viewed as the fulfillment of prophecies that had been made before or during the Babylonian captivity. It was from this perspective that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah celebrated the restoration of their nation after the return from the Babylonian exile (Haggai 2; Zechariah 8).

A second level of fulfillment occurred with the ministry of Christ and the ensuing establishment of the church. As the document that tells the story of the launching of the church, the book of the Acts of the Apostles provides much information on this area of prophetic fulfillment. It refers to several Old Testament prophecies that predicted the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, and shows that they were fulfilled through Christ in the reality of the church.

Through the mouth of the prophet Nathan, God had promised to David that He would set one of his descendants on his throne and that He would establish His kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12). This promise was understood to have been given by God with the binding force of an oath made by God to David (Psalm 132:11). Much later, on the very day when the Holy Spirit inaugurated the life of the church, the apostle Peter referred publicly to God's oath to David, and announced that it had now been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus and in His exaltation at the right hand of God from when he had poured out the Holy Spirit who had launched the church (Acts 2:30-33). So the promise of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom

was seen as having been fulfilled with the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, and with the establishment of the church.

Peter provided additional explanations for this startling interpretation of prophetic fulfillment. He explained that the predictive ministry of all the old covenant prophets concerned the church: God's covenant with Abraham was being fulfilled "these days" for all the peoples on earth beginning with Jews who believed in Jesus (Acts 3:24-26). According to Peter, even Moses had anticipated the ministry of Christ to the church when he announced that only those Jews who would receive Christ would be part of the people of God. Those who would not listen to Him would "be completely cut off from among His people" (verses 22-23). The church that began at Pentecost will be brought to completion according to the predictions made by the prophets and by Moses. Christ will remain in heaven until that time. Then He will come again for the final restoration of everything promised by God (verses 18-21). Within this context, the restoration of everything can only refer to the fulfillment of God's purposes in the glorified church since, according to Peter, the church was the object of the prophetic ministry of the old covenant (verse 24; see also 1 Peter 1:10-12).

This theme of the fulfillment of the prophecies to Israel in the church is given emphasis in the preaching of Paul as reported in the Book of Acts. Paul announced "the good news" to Jews and to Gentiles (Acts 13:26, 32). The good news was that what God had promised to the fathers of the Jewish nation was now being fulfilled to believers through the resurrection of Jesus (verses 32-33). Paul left absolutely no doubt regarding the meaning of those ancient promises to Israel. They were the "everlasting covenant" made by God with Israel, the predictions of Israel's universal rule over the nations under the leadership of a restored Davidic kingdom (Isaiah 55:3-5). The explosive good news was that these "holy and sure blessings promised to David" by God were now fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus from the Dead (Acts 13:34; see Isaiah 55:3).

James, one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the half-brother of Jesus, also contributed his insight to this theme of the Davidic kingdom prophecies fulfilled in the church. He saw the Old Testament prophecies as establishing a link between God's promise that He would return to rebuild the fallen-down tent of David and the conversion of the Gentiles. The restoration of the house of David would result in the Gentiles seeking the Lord (Acts 15:16-18). God was doing "miraculous signs and wonders" among the Gentiles, and He was "taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself" (verses 12-14). For James, this Gentile conversion was proof that God had returned and rebuilt David's house. The ministry of Jesus, the son of David, made possible the conversion of the Gentiles. Therefore, said James, no hindrance should be put in the way of the Gentiles turning to God (verse 19). The argument of this passage is that the prophetic promises of the restoration of the house of David and the resulting salvation of the Gentiles were contemporaneous historical realities, not events yet to come in a distant future. Any reference to a yet future Davidic kingdom and to a future conversion of the Gentiles would have been totally irrelevant to James' argument and to the crisis at hand.

Finally, in his defense before King Agrippa, Paul claimed that he was on trial because of his commitment to what God had promised the fathers of the Jewish people. And this was the promise that the twelve tribes were hoping to see fulfilled (Acts 26:6-7). Yet, the Jews were accusing Paul because he considered those promises fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ (verse 8). The Jews had missed the fulfillment of the promises since they were waiting

for them to happen in an earthly triumphant manner, rather than being fulfilled in Christ's resurrection and in the ministry of the church as represented by Paul's vocation.

The bottom line of Paul's defense was that his message was consistent with "what the prophets and Moses said would happen." And the message of "the prophets and Moses" was that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead to proclaim light to the Jews and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:23-24). Again, it is the prophetic ministry of the Old Testament that was interpreted as pointing to the resurrection of Christ and to the ensuing ministry of the church. According to Paul, the prophets of the old covenant had announced only one plan for both Jews and Gentiles, based on Christ's death and resurrection. Paul made it a point to stress that this had been the message of the prophets, and that he added nothing to it (verse 23). Similar restraint must be exercised today.

The third line of fulfillment, proposed in the New Testament for the promises that had been made to Israel, happens in relation to a remnant of believing Jews during the church age. It is the present-day believing Jews, and not a future generation of Jews beyond the church age, who are the "heirs of the prophets and the covenant God made with [their] fathers" (Acts 3:25). They are the people to whom the risen Christ was sent first to bless and to turn from their wicked ways (verse 26). This ministry was the fulfillment of what "all the prophets from Samuel on" had foretold (verse 24). The inheritors of the covenant and of the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are the believing Jews of the present age.

This theme is developed at length in Romans 9-11. In these chapters, the definition of Israel is narrowed down from all Jews to the believing remnant from among them (or the believing minority). It is not the natural or racial descendants of Abraham who are regarded as his offspring but the "children of the promise" (Romans 9:6-8). About these Isaiah had said, "though the number of the Israelites be like the sand of the sea, only the remnant will be saved" (9:27). This reduction of true Israel to a believing minority happens only on the basis of their faith response (9:31-32; 10:16,21). As a result, "at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace" (11:5). They are the "elect" from among Israel (11:7). As for the others, "if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in [with the believing remnant], for God is able to graft them in again" (11:23). But God offers no guarantee that the hardened segment of Israel will ever be saved. To the contrary, God says concerning this part of Israel, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people" (10:21). And this hardening is so severe that God decreed through David, "Let their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and keep their backs bent forever" (11:10).

Does this mean that God has rejected His old covenant people? By no means! God has not rejected His people because there is a believing remnant at the present time, during the time of the church (11:5). This believing remnant comprised of saved Jews, like Paul himself, represents all Israel; therefore God has not rejected His people (11:1). If the select remnant portion is holy, "then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy so are the branches" (11:16). God's promise to the totality finds fulfillment even when the totality is reduced to a remnant minority who alone receives the fulfillment. Paul's proof that God has not rejected His people is that Paul himself, an Israelite and a descendant of Abraham, has been saved (11:1-5). The saved Israel is the real Israel. The only Israel that God recognizes as special is made of saved Jews and saved Gentiles joined together in His church, the true Israel of God.

What about the rest, the hardened segment of the Jews? According to Scripture, throughout the time of the church there will be side by side two categories of Jews: the

hardened Jews and the saved Jewish remnant. The hardened Jews will remain in their unbelief to the end because "only the remnant will be saved" (9:27). The unbelieving part of Israel will remain hardened "until the full number of Gentiles come in" (11:25). But fortunately, during the same period of time, there will also be the saved believing remnant. "And so all Israel will be saved" (11:26). "And so" [meaning, *in this manner*], through the continuous non-hardened remnant, says Paul, all Israel will be saved because believing Israel is the real Israel, and it will be until the End.

Some interpreters isolate the words "all Israel will be saved," and take them to predict a mass conversion of Jews at a later date, close to the End. However, several objections must be raised to this view on the basis of this section of Scripture (Romans 9-11). First, this sentence would represent the only text in the New Testament where the concept of a future conversion of a terminal generation of Jews would be taught. The controversy in biblical scholarship over the exact meaning of these words is such that it is imprudent to make a whole doctrine depend on a single controversial text. Indeed, the exact opposite result could be achieved if, instead of "all Israel will be saved," the sentence "only the remnant will be saved" were isolated and emphasized (11:26; 9:27). The intolerable contradiction that results from placing those two affirmations side by side can only be resolved with the recognition that "all Israel" is believing Israel, the totality of the Jewish remnant saved through the ages until the time of the Gentiles comes to an end.

The second objection is that the text does not state that all Israel will be saved *after* the full number of the Gentiles come in. It says that a part of Israel is hardened until the Gentiles come in, and so [kai outos], thus, or in this manner, all Israel will be saved. The text describes the process whereby all Israel will be saved. The language of the Greek New Testament has more than a dozen terms that express the idea of sequence (one thing following another). Any of them could have been used to state clearly that a general conversion of Israel would follow the fullness of the Gentiles, if that were the case. Those terms signifying *after* were all swept aside for the use of an adverb that clearly denotes the idea of *in this manner* or *in the way thus described*. The text does not say that the hardness will persist until the Gentiles come in, then all Israel will be saved. It says that the hardness will persist until the Gentiles come in and so all Israel will be saved.

The third objection has to do with the fact that one final generation of converted Jews at the end of history could never be "all Israel." A mass conversion of Jews at the end of history would represent only a tiny fraction of "all Israel" since most of the Jews who have lived through the ages would have died unredeemed. However, a steady stream of believing Jews joining the community of believers through the length of Christian history is much more representative of "all Israel" than a terminal generation of Jewish Christians. A continuous Jewish presence among Gentile believers will guarantee that each generation will have its contingent of saved Jews. Indeed, believing Jews, like Paul himself, were living evidence that God had not rejected His people and that the ancient promises were being fulfilled to all Israel through the believing remnant (Romans 11:1-7).

Finally, the biblical text suggests that the time when Israel receives mercy is now, alongside with God's mercy to the Gentiles (11:31). Nowhere does it relegate God's visitation upon the Jews to some distant time in the future. Just as God has mercy on "*all men*" (11:32), so "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). In neither case does it mean that *all* people, Jews and Gentiles, will be saved. This would be a universal salvation that the Bible does not teach. Only those who believe and who acknowledge the truth of the old

prophecies about the Deliverer, who was to come from Zion to take away their sins, will be the saved remnant that makes up "all Israel" (11:26b-27).

Beyond these three lines of prophetic fulfillment, the New Testament does not teach about additional prophetic fulfillments for racial Israel. In particular, there is no teaching in the New Testament about the establishment of an earthly, territorial Jewish state that would be a fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Such a teaching is completely absent. Since the first advent of Christ, the fate of all believing Jews has been integrated with the destiny of the church. Of course, this does not account for the physical fulfillment of the seemingly unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament. But since the New Testament does not assume responsibility for such prophecies, neither should we.

The Old Testament itself explains why God is not obligated to fulfill all of its predictions. Commissioned by God to do so, Jonah made the firm prediction: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:4). After forty days, Nineveh was not destroyed. This was in keeping with the principle laid down in Jeremiah's prophecy where God said, "If at any time I announce that a nation or a kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warn repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned" (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Likewise for the promises made by the prophets. They all remain conditional whether they were originally presented as such or not. "And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it" (verses 9-10). God is sovereign and obligated to no one. When He makes a threat or a promise, He factors into it considerations that are not necessarily stated. Undoubtedly, when those expectations known of God alone do not materialize, God reserves the right to leave those promises unfulfilled. Many of the unfulfilled promises of the Old Testament have to be thus understood. "God's gifts and His call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29), but this is not so for His conditional predictions and promises.

A classic example of this fact of history is the prediction God made to Abraham that He would give the land of Canaan to him and to his offspring "forever" (Genesis 13:15). Such a promise implies continuity and permanence. Yet, for most of history since Abraham, neither he nor his offspring have owned the land. It was occupied and ruled by Canaanites, Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Moslems, the Crusaders, the Marmelukes, the Ottomans and the British. These extended centuries of time without Israel owning the land contradict the "forever." Even marriage vows that are made with "forever" terms do not have off and on periods of binding commitment. However, in the case with Israel, the Scriptures do provide an explanation for the nondelivery of God's promise of the gift of the land: there were conditions attached to this promise. In Deuteronomy 11:20-23, Moses revealed that the promise to own the land was conditioned upon Israel loving the Lord and walking in His ways. This principle of silent conditions being attached to divine predictions provides an explanation for the non-fulfillment of many of the prophetic promises of hope found in the Old Testament.

Another reason for leaving Old Testament prophecies alone when they are not confirmed in the New Testament is that some of them were obviously not intended to be fulfilled literally. For example, in a passage which is celebrating the expected deliverance and the future glory of Zion, the prophet Isaiah inserted the prediction that the light from both the sun and the moon combined would become eight times as intense as the light presently

emitted by the sun (Isaiah 30:26). A literal fulfillment of this prophecy would render all the other prophecies irrelevant since such an increase in the sun's energy would incinerate the solar system.

Hermeneutical prudence (*i.e.*, a sane interpretive process for the Scriptures) requires that a believer base doctrine derived from the Old Testament only on that which is confirmed and explained in the New Testament. Many prophecies of the Old Testament are confirmed and explained in the New Testament. Many are not. We must admit that Old Testament prophecies that are not confirmed and explained in the New Testament may have had meanings and relevancies that escape us today. They may still provide us with rich insight and useful teaching, or be valuable inspirational resources. But forcing these passages into predictive modes not warranted and confirmed by the New Testament may expose the Scriptures to abuse, and the reader to erroneous speculations. Our natural desire is to want to understand and account for everything contained in the Bible. But the Bible does not confer exegetical omniscience upon its readers (*cf.* 2 Peter 3:16).

4) The ultimate purpose in God's election of Israel was to bless all the nations of the earth, and for Israel to be a light to all the nations. But this call to ministry was soon misunderstood as a privilege of favoritism so that by the time of the New Testament the Jews thought God had granted them a sort of "most favored nation" status in relationship to Himself. Unfortunately, the "postponement" theory found within *Dispensationalism* tends to perpetuate this false idea. According to the New Testament, God's response to the Jews' rejection of Christ was not a postponement of His plan for them, but the decisive repudiation of any notion of racial privilege. Some of the relevant teachings reported in the gospel of Matthew, in Acts and in the Epistles are listed here:

Matthew 3:9-10

According to John the Baptist, to claim Abraham as father offers no advantage and no protection for a Jew since every fruitless tree will be thrown in the fire. The predicted rejection is final and no racial pedigree can avail against it (see also John 8:37-47).

Matthew 8:10-12

Gentiles receptive to Christ will sit in heaven with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, while the original sons of the kingdom will be thrown out for torment. Not only is this exclusion with out appeal but believing Gentiles have been substituted in heaven for the original Jewish heirs of the kingdom.

Matthew 10:5

The first wave of the Gospel mission launched by Jesus was aimed at reaching the Jews. This was not designed to exclude the Gentiles since Christ's mission was intended for them from the beginning (4:15-16, 24-25). But in historical sequence, the Gospel was to spread from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Chronologically, salvation began with the Jews because the Redeemer came among the Jews (John 4:22, 26). But Christ's salvation was intended for both Jews and Gentiles because "God does not show favoritism" (Romans 2:9-11).

Matthew 10:6, 15

When the "*lost* sheep of Israel" reject the Gospel, they will be treated more severely on the day of judgement than Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, the eternal finality of the rejection is emphasized.

Matthew 11:20-24

Israel's rejection of Christ results not in a "postponement" of God's plan but in eternal judgement and consignment to Hades.

Matthew 12:39-42

On Judgement Day, Gentiles who were receptive and repentant will rise and condemn unbelieving Jews.

Matthew 19:27-30

As representatives of the new community, the disciples of Jesus will participate in Christ's judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel when those who were first will become last (see also Luke 22:28-30).

Matthew 20:1-16

The prior call of racial Israel will be of no advantage in the kingdom of grace because those who were first will become last.

Matthew 21:33-45

The wicked tenants of the vineyard who killed the Son will be brought to "wretched end." They will be "broken to pieces" and "crushed" by the cornerstone they rejected. The kingdom of God will be taken away from them and given to another people or "nation" (the church is also called a "nation" in Romans 10:19 and 1 Peter 2:9-10). There is no postponement here, but instead a complete substitution as the kingdom is taken from Israel to become embodied in the church (see also Matthew 21:31-32; 24:14; Luke 12:32; 17:21; 22:29; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:28; Revelation 1:6,9; etc.)

Matthew 23:34-39

The people reject not only Jesus but also His messengers. As a result, their blood will be visited upon them and they will be left desolate. There will be no second chance, only a belated recognition of Christ being the Messiah at His coming [the *Parousia*].

Matthew 27:25

Not only the blood of the messengers but the blood of Christ Himself is invoked upon the whole people as a tragic self-disqualifying curse (see Luke 23:28-31).

Acts 13:46-48; 18:6; 28:25-28

The rejection of unbelieving racial Israel and the substitution of believing Gentiles is confirmed in Paul's ministry. The Old Testament Scriptures cited by Paul anticipated the shift of the kingdom from the Jews who would not listen (Isaiah 6:9-10) to the Gentiles who would be receptive (Isaiah 49:6). Despite repeated statement of rejection there is no hint given of any alleged reversal in the future; the shift is final.

Galatians 4:21-31

This amazingly bold allegory turns the tables on Israel as the people of the covenant from Sinai, as the Jerusalem enslaved to the law, and as the children of slavery who will "never" share in the promised inheritance. Over against the finality of this rejection, believers in Christ are the children of the free woman, therefore the children of the promise. The true children of Sarah are not Jews of a future generation, but present-day believers (verses 28, 31). Sarah is the mother of all believers during the church age. As children of the free woman, they belong to the heavenly Jerusalem, their mother church (verse 26). They are the only ones who will inherit the promise (verse 30).

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

The apostle Paul cannot be charged with being anti-Semitic. He was himself a Jew who valued his heritage and who loved his people (Romans 9:1-3; 10:1). In this exceptionally stern passage, he does not accuse but he deplores the fact that, because of their opposition to the Gospel, unbelieving Jews have irremediably ruled themselves out of the purposes of God. Jesus will rescue His followers from the wrath ready to come at the End (1 Thessalonians 1:10), but opponents of the Gospel are doomed to bear it. Hebrews 8:6-13

During the days of the old covenant, God became displeased with Israel, and through Jeremiah, He announced that He would make "a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (verse 8). Accordingly, Jesus brought about a new covenant far superior to the old covenant which became obsolete and was doomed to disappear (verses 6, 13). An outstanding teaching in this passage is that the participants in this new covenant predicted by Jeremiah are designated, both by Jeremiah and by the author of Hebrews, as "the house of Israel and the house of Judah," and more succinctly as "the house of Israel" (verse 20). Present day believers, both Jews and Gentiles, and believers from the old covenant are joined together into one body to form the true Israel of God, Christ's new covenant creation in the church (see Galatians 6:15-16).

Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 7:15

The Christians in the churches of ancient Asia, some of who suffered persecution at the hands of the Jews (2:9; 3:9), were told that Christ had made them "a kingdom and priests to serve God" (1:6). In the past those designations had belonged to the Israelites (Exodus 19:5-6). Here they become the prerogative of the church. The priestly calling of the multitude "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:10) was to serve God "day and night in His holy temple" (7:15). As for those who opposed the Christians, their claim to be Jews was false because the church was the object of God's love (2:9; 3:9). The real allegiance of the opposition belonged somewhere else (see also John 8:37-47).

Better than any postponement theory, the New Testament teaches that eternal salvation and not an earthly Jewish kingdom is God's supreme blessing to human beings. This salvation is available to all on the condition of faith without preferential treatment on the basis of race.

5) The theory of two separate peoples of God, Israel and the church, runs contrary to the New Testament's teaching about the oneness of God's people. There is only *one* body, not two bodies, because there is only *one* Spirit who builds one body. There is only *one* hope, not two different futures, and this hope is the same for all who receive God's call. There is only *one* Lord, not one for the Gentiles and another for the Jews. There is *one* faith, and its object is grace, not race. There is *one* baptism for both Gentiles and Jews. There is only *one* God and Father of us all; He is the unitive power above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6). This theme of the total inclusiveness of God's redemptive interaction with people within the Israel/Church continuum is amply documented in Scripture. Some of the New Testament texts where it is emphasized are cited here:

John 17

In this solemn prayer at the end of His ministry, the Lord looked back on what He had accomplished, and anticipated what lay ahead beyond His departure from the earth.

As a result, this last prayer is all inclusive. Because God has granted the Son "authority over all people," Jesus prays for all who the Father has given Him (verse 2). His prayer is for His disciples, each of them a Jew, and for all His future followers through the ages, Jews and Gentiles (verse 20). Without making any exclusion or exception on the basis of race, Jesus prays insistently that they all may be one because their oneness is grounded in the absolute, inviolable oneness that exists between the Father and the Son (verses 11, 21, 22, 23). Jesus does not only desire the unity of Christians though. He not only prays for the oneness of all those who will believe in Him, but also prays specifically that His followers not be taken out of (or *raptured from*) the world (verse 15). He prays that they remain in it to witness for Christ through their manifest oneness (verse 21).

Romans 11:17-24

There are two olive trees, one cultivated and the other wild. God tends only the cultivated tree. This good tree has three kinds of branches. The natural branches represent believing Jews. Secondly, there are also dead branches. These have been broken off and cast down. They are the unbelieving Jews. Thirdly, the broken-off branches have been replaced on the good tree by grafted-in branches imported from the wild olive tree. These are the believing Gentiles. Believing Jews and believing Gentiles are all part of the same cultivated tree, and they all "share in the nourishing sap from the olive root" (verse 17).

If and when unbelieving Jews "do not persist in unbelief" but repent, these cut-off branches can be grafted back on the same good tree (verse 12, 15, 23). God will neither create nor tend a separate tree for them. He can graft the revived natural branches onto their own olive tree (verse 24). As a result, believing Jews, believing Gentiles and spiritually revived Jews are all attached to the same cultivated tree, the covenant stock of Abraham, the father of all believers, both Jews and Gentiles. From the beginning to the end, God grows only one tree for the family of faith.

Ephesians 2:11-19

There were two peoples, one in the other out. The out people were the Gentiles, "excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (verse 12). But Christ "has made of the two one" (verse 14). He created "one new man out of the two" (verse 15) by bringing in the out people and by uniting them together "in this one body" (verse 16). Christ did not create a new entity, the church, to be separate from Israel. Rather, He integrated the believing Gentiles with the believing Jews to create the church.

Consequently, the Gentiles who were "foreigners to the covenants of the promise" (verse 12) are "no longer foreigners" (verse 19). Having "been brought near through the blood of Christ" (verse 13), the Gentiles have become "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (verse 19), equal participants in the covenants of the promise. "This mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 3:6).

Galatians 3:28-29

In this passage, Paul clearly defines who the real descendants of Abraham are, the inheritors of the promises given to him by God. Separately, Paul establishes that not all the physical descendants of Abraham belong to Israel (Romans 9:6-9). This means that

God does not recognize as children of Abraham all his physical descendants. "In other words, it is not the natural children [of Abraham] who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Romans 9:8). The line of the promise to Abraham began with His son Isaac, and according to Galatians, it led to "one person, who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). This then clearly defines who "the children of the promise" are, namely, anyone who belongs to Christ. Consequently, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (3:29). The promises that the natural descendants of Abraham cannot obtain because of their unbelief are inherited by those who "belong to Christ," both Jews and Gentiles - - and no one may separate them because they are inalterably "all one in Christ Jesus" (verse 28).

1 Peter 2:9-10

When the Israelites entered the Desert of Sinai, Moses went up on the mountain and God revealed to him the advantages of the covenant that He was offering Israel on the basis of His relationship with them. God was making of Israel His "treasured possession," "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (see Exodus 19:1-6). Eventually this nation rejected Christ, and those who disobeyed His message stumbled (1 Peter 2:4, 8). But strangers, who until then "were not a people" and who "had not received mercy," were "called out of darkness into His wonderful light" (verses 9-10). As a result, the church was formed and it was declared to be "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (verse 9). The same distinctive attributes of God's people that had been conferred on Israel in the old covenant were now extended to the church, God's people of the new covenant. Consequently, Christians became *the* people of God as Peter declared to the churches, "now you are the people of God" (verse 10).

There is no indication in this text or in any other biblical text that God has or that He will have two peoples, one earthly and the other heavenly. He has only one people made of believers throughout the ages, a people that has both an earthly calling and a heavenly destiny. This text provides another evidence of the continuity and oneness that exists between believing old covenant Israel and the church, whereby the national and spiritual attributes of ancient Israel are transferred to the church, the new "chosen people" of God, in its totality. For precisely this reason, Peter could state that the predictive ministry of the ancient prophets was not intended to serve the Israel of the old covenant, but the church, God's ultimate community (1 Peter 1:10-12).

The doctrine of the identity and of the oneness of believing Israel and believing Gentiles is a consistent theme in Scripture. Completely absent in the New Testament is any text that teaches the future restoration on earth of Israel as a national political entity. To the contrary, the survey above highlights the dominant themes of the redemptive inclusiveness and of the finality of the church in God's purposes.

Consequently, the temptation to interpret Scripture in the light of current events is to be resisted. The State of Israel that has been established in Palestine since World War II is a modern political and military fact whose significance is historical rather than biblical or theological. It represents one instance among many of the world-wide resurgence of ancient

nationalism in the twentieth century. Attributing eschatological [End Time] significance to such a phenomenon raises theological, ethical and political issues that may become tragically counterproductive. Christians who insist on attributing a special status to Israel are not doing the Jews a favor. The claim of divine privilege for Israel can easily be turned against the Jewish people in destructive ways. The holocaust, persecutions, pogroms and genocidal attempts directed at Jews during the twentieth century have shown the danger of singling them out as a special people. Jews have every right to resent being used as agenda items for the promotion of Christian apocalyptic speculations. Appreciation for God's continued solicitude or attention for the Jews is not well served by theories of a future dominance by the Jews over the world. God's consistent concern for them is better demonstrated by Paul's affirmation that he was seeking to win them to Christ as a part of the body of Christ, the church. The best service that may be rendered to the Jewish people by well-meaning Christians would be to treat them like any other people, and to recognize that they matter to God no less and no more than anyone else since God does not play favorites, since He does not discriminate on the basis of race and since he loves each child, woman and man equally, as if each one were His last lost sheep on planet earth.

The biblical teaching about the relationship of Israel and the church may be thus summarized:

<u>Racial Israel</u>	{	unbelieving Jews	
		believing Jews	
		believing Gentiles	} <u>Real Israel</u> = the church universal

Both in the Old and New Testaments, God's covenants, His promises, His kingdom and His redemption apply exclusively to "real Israel." In real Israel, both Jewish believers and Gentile believers have always been regarded as the true descendants of Abraham, as full partners in God's kingdom. During the old covenant period, the living expression of God's people was predominantly Jewish with believing Israelites in majority and with a minority of believing Gentiles such as Rahab and Ruth, both ancestors of Jesus Christ. In the new covenant, the living expression of God's people is the church with a majority of believing Gentiles and with the consistent presence of a minority of Jewish believers such as Paul himself. Real Israel, first as believing Israel and then as the church, forms one pilgrim people that marches on through the length of history in order to attain at the *Parousia* its ultimate destiny as God's eternal community.