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COVENANT CONDITIONALITY AND A FUTURE FOR ISRAEL

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Dispensationalists have argued consistently for an ethnic, national future for Israel based on the premise that the covenants established with Abraham and David, in contrast to that made with Israel as a nation through Moses,[1] were unconditional.[2] They reason (1) that God has promised Israel a land and kingdom without conditions, (2) that his promise has not yet been fully realized in Israel's history, and therefore (3) that one should expect to see such an event yet in the future.[3] Sometimes this

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[1] Although the phrase "Mosaic covenant" is commonly accepted, Moses is not the recipient of that covenant in the same manner that Abraham and David were of the covenants made with them Neither do the terms "Palestinian" and "Sinaitic" focus on the personal recipients Instead, they emphasize the land element in the covenant In fact, it is precisely the nation of Israel that is in view here, which is the pertinent issue in relation to our discussion Thus the nonconventional phrase is used

[2] The foundational work by E Kutsch (*Verheissung und Gesetz Untersuchungen zum sogen nanten "Bund" im Alten Testament* [BZAW, Berlin Walter de Gruyter, 1973]), M Weinfeld ("Berith—Covenant vs Obligation," *Bib* 56 [1975] 123–124, "*Bĕrît*," *TDOT* 2 255–256), and D N Freedman ("Divine Commitment and Human Obligation The Covenant Theme," *Int* 18 [1964] 420) has been elaborated on more recently by B K Waltke (*Israel's Apostasy and Restoration* [ed A Gileadi, Grand Rapids Baker, 1988] 123–140) Using established categories, his study suggests that the four OT covenants mentioned above are of the "class B" type, meaning that they are "conditional in the sense that the superior party [Yahweh] promises to reward or punish the inferior partner for obeying or disobeying the imposed obligations" (p 124) Though he brings some balance to the discussion, I take exception with him regarding his use of a conditional/unconditional model, especially as he applies it to Israel's future

[3] The *New Scofield Reference Bible* (ed C I Scofield, New York Oxford University, 1967 [1909]) 19, 365, popularized this interpretation, calling the Abrahamic covenant "unconditional" in the note at Gen 12 1 and implying the same regarding the Davidic covenant at 2 Sam 7 4–17 by using the phrase "certainty of fulfillment " Likewise C C Ryrie assumes this on the part of dispensational and covenant theologians alike in his discussion of OT prophecies, thus focusing his remarks only on the question of whether their fulfillment will be literal or not (*Dispensationalism Today* [Chicago Moody, 1973] 158–159) More recently J L Townsend ("Fulfillment of the Land Promise in the Old Testament," *BSac* [October–December 1985] 320–337) is representative of those who argue this point as it relates to modern land rights and the premillennial-amillennial debate Because he sees the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional, the question of whether the land was fully occupied under David and Solomon is a major focus of his study Finally, G Breshears argues that the doctrine of an unconditional covenant with Israel is the central focal point of dispensationalism in its most recent expression ("New Directions in Dispensationalism," plenary address to the Evangelical Theological Society [Kansas City, November 23, 1991])

approach even translates into political support for the modern state of Israel based on religious grounds.[4]

The present study finds such a premise unsupportable exegetically from the texts relating to the covenants[5] and therefore concludes that any hope for a national future for Israel must be supported otherwise. Further, the four major covenants (Abrahamic, Israelite, Davidic, new)[6] have at their core the same twofold character: (1) a sovereign choice by God of an individual or people followed by (2) a responsible covenant relationship.[7] The element of human responsibility, however, is expressed differently in each case.

With regard to the Abrahamic covenant the imperative-imperfect grammatical form is utilized ("You do this and I will do that"), then confirmed and clarified in retrospect: "Because you have done this, I will do that." In the Israelite covenant the traditional "If . . . then . . . " covenantal formula is common and is generally understood as expressing conditionality. In the Davidic covenant the latter also occurs, but with an important variation between the Samuel and Chronicles accounts. The study concludes with an examination of the new-covenant model presented by Jeremiah at the time of the exilic crisis, which serves as a point of reference for understanding Paul's hope in Romans 9–11 for a national future for Israel.

I. THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

No precursor in the text presents a rationale for the choice of Abraham. Instead God simply appears to the patriarch while he is in Haran already on his way to Canaan. Moreover it is Terah who initiates the move "from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan" (Gen 11:31). Though one might speculate regarding the role played by the character of Abraham as a person of faith (Romans 4; Hebrews 11), a strong case cannot be sustained in the light of God's dealings with Isaac and Jacob, who do not exemplify such qualities. All that can be concluded with certainty is that Yahweh makes a sovereign choice of one individual and not another. But once the choice is made, a responsible covenant relationship follows.

[4] Though he does not specifically argue to this end, the article by A Gileadi (*Israel's Apostasy* 157–163) leaves itself open to being used in this manner

[5] Including Genesis 11–26, Deuteronomy 7, 2 Samuel 7, 1 Kings 2, 2 Chronicles 7, Jeremiah 29–31, Daniel 9, Romans 9–11

[6] For a summary of the literature concerning Biblical covenants see E Nicholson, *God and His People Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford Oxford University, 1986), "Covenant in a Century of Study since Wellhausen," *OTS* 24 (1986) 54–69

[7] The phrases "sovereign choice" and "responsible covenant relationship" are employed here not in order to sidestep the question of conditionality but rather to reflect as accurately as possible the emphasis of the text, which is focused more on divine/human relationships than on a theological debate Covenant is not to be identified with promises or demands but rather refers to the relationship from which they will flow Cf W J Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Nashville Thomas Nelson, 1984) 77

From the outset Abraham is called to obey in order to know the blessing promised. This is stated in a command/promise format in the earlier stages of the relationship (Genesis 12, 17), then viewed in retrospect later in his life, providing a rationale for divine action (Genesis 22, 26).

1. *Command and promise (Genesis 12, 17).* The pronouncement in 12:1–3 can be outlined by reference to two commands (imperatives)[8] directed at Abraham, which are followed in each case by three promises (imperfects) describing the divine blessing: "Leave your country. . . . I will make you into a great nation. . . . I will bless you. . . . I will make your name great"; "Be a blessing. . . . I will bless those who bless you. . . . Whoever curses you I will curse. . . . All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

First, Abraham is challenged to leave homeland and relatives (a context in which he enjoyed a privileged status as firstborn) and journey to an unknown land that he will enter as a stranger. In response God will bless him by making of him a great and honored nation. Second, he is to be a blessing to others. In turn he will know divine blessing and honor, with his efforts to bless others bearing fruit in all the families of the earth. The point most often overlooked in this passage is that the promised blessing hinges upon the commands to "go" and "be a blessing." In the narrative that follows it is clear that any reception of a promise is conditioned upon the patriarch's obedience to the divine imperative. In other words, the covenant is not unconditional. In order to know God's blessing, Abraham had to leave Haran.

An important command/promise parallel is found in an event that occurs nearly twenty-five years later (17:1–14) when Yahweh once again appears, this time to announce the imminent arrival of Isaac, the firstfruits of the covenant: "Walk before me. . . . Be blameless. . . . I will confirm my covenant between me and you. . . . You will be the father of many nations. . . . Kings will come from you. . . . I will give the whole land of Canaan as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants. . . . Every male among you shall be circumcised. . . . You are to undergo circumcision. . . . It will be the sign of the covenant between me and you."

The thrust of the passage is strikingly similar to the original command/promise encounter (12:1–3). Abraham is now to continue his already demonstrated walk of faith (15:1–6) by initiating the practice of circumcision as the covenant sign. Moreover he is to anticipate a yet unborn heir as the child of promise instead of Ishmael. Again a conditionality is perceptible

[8] Based on the parallels in Gen 17 1, Exod 24 12, 34 2, Judg 17 10, 18 19, there is no reason to emend the MT's imperative *whyh* to the perfect as does JB, NEB, or to read it as an imperfect, as in LXX, RSV, NASB, NIV (cf V Hamilton, *Genesis 1–17* (NICOT, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1990] 369, 373, F Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* [The Hague Mouton, 1974] 108) One must admit, however, that the placing of the MT verse-divider is a bit puzzling if the imperative is understood (see Dumbrell, *Covenant* 64–65) For a carefully reasoned argument to the contrary, cf W Yarchin, "Imperative and Promise in Genesis 12 1–3," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 10/2 (October 1980) 164–178

in the passage—that is, a lifestyle with integrity will result in God releasing his promised blessings.

Before considering the rationale for Yahweh's fulfillment of his promise to Abraham in Genesis 22 and 26, a word is in order concerning the well-known covenant scene in chap. 15. Although the passage has often been utilized to support the theory of unconditionality with regard to the Abrahamic covenant,[9] arguments to this end have generally been drawn from the silence of the text regarding the issue—that is, what it does not state regarding Abraham's actions. In short, I would follow R. Youngblood who argues convincingly that the Abrahamic covenant should be understood as conditional, even in this passage.[10]

2. *Rationale for promise (Genesis 22, 26).* Though it is done in retrospect, the conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant is most clearly set forth in the climactic sacrificial scene with Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22). In this context the patriarch meets his greatest test of faith and obedience, demonstrating the reason God would keep covenant with him. Just before the critical moment of sacrifice, Yahweh calls to Abraham declaring the reason for divine intervention and covenant fulfillment: "Because you have done this. . . . I will surely bless you. . . . I will make your descendants numerous. . . . Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies. . . . Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed. . . . because you have obeyed me."

It is instructive to notice here that the covenant is not linked with the patriarch's faith or Yahweh's sovereign choice but is established with Abraham and his descendants because he obeyed.

The same pattern of reasoning can be seen in the confirmation of the covenant with Isaac after Abraham's death (26:1–5, 24). Here, however, both command and rationale are included. In the face of famine and Philistine dependency, God assures Isaac that he will be the recipient of Abraham's covenant: "Stay in this land. . . . I will be with you and will bless you. . . . I will give all these lands to you and your descendants. . . . I will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham. . . . I will make your descendants numerous. . . . Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws. . . . I will bless you . . . for the sake of my servant Abraham."

In summary, the Abrahamic covenant is seen to have emphasized a response on the part of the patriarch from the initial encounter in Haran to the climactic events on Mount Moriah. Whether viewed from the dynamic of the moment or later in retrospect, an element of conditionality is sometimes explicitly stated, at other times implied, but always understood.

[9] Cf e g J Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1976)

[10] R Youngblood, "The Abrahamic Covenant Conditional or Unconditional?", *The Living and Active Word of God Studies in Honor of Samuel J Schultz* (ed M Inch and R Youngblood, Winona Lake Eisenbrauns, 1983) 31–46

II. THE ISRAELITE COVENANT

Because the element of conditionality is commonly recognized in the events of Mount Sinai, little attention needs to be given to it here.[11] It is enough to examine just one passage (Deut 7:7–11) where both elements of God's covenantal dealings with Israel as a people can be found.

Expressed in both negative and positive terms, the emphasis in the passage seems clear. It was not because of Israel's greatness that Yahweh attached himself to the nation in love. It was rather because he loved them and kept the oath sworn to their fathers (7:7–8). But why did God choose Jacob instead of Esau, or Isaac instead of Ishmael? As Paul puts it, God will have mercy and compassion on whom he has mercy and compassion (Rom 9:15). Sovereign choice is seldom stated more explicitly.

But as clearly as God's sovereignty can be discerned in Moses' words at Moab, it is equally clear that the resultant relationship involves responsibility. Israel is to know (command) that Yahweh is their God and that he is a God who keeps covenant and steadfast love (promise) "with those who love him and keep his commands. But those who hate him he will repay to their face" (condition). Therefore Israel is to "keep the commands, decrees and laws" (7:9–11).

E. Jacob captures a sense of balance regarding this passage when he explains that

> the covenant is due only to the initiative of Yahweh and is in no way the reward of Israel's merits. The free character of the covenant is the condition of its moral aspect, for the covenant is valid only if the people respond to it by obedience and faithfulness. . . . All the accounts of covenant-making between Yahweh and the people show three aspects. . . . (a) The covenant is a gift that Yahweh makes to his people; (b) by the covenant, God comes into relationship and creates with his people a bond of communion; (c) the covenant creates obligations which take concrete shape in the form of law.[12]

III. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

With the kingship of David one comes the closest to seeing a rationale for God's choice of the individual. He is said to have been "better than" Saul (1 Sam 15:28). He appears to be chosen because "Yahweh looks at the heart" (16:7) and because God found in David a man after his heart who would do all his will (Acts 13:22). On the other hand, it is ironic that of the three persons chosen as covenant recipients David was (from one perspective) the greatest failure in light of the later years of his life with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Samuel 11–12). It seems that again one is left with God's choice of an individual on whom he wishes to show mercy.

[11] See Waltke, *Israel's Apostasy* 132–133, for an argument that there were elements of unconditionality in this covenant arrangement; cf. also W. J. Dumbrell, "The Prospect of Unconditionality in the Sinaitic Covenant" (*Israel's Apostasy* 141–155).

[12] E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958) 211.

In order to assess the conditionality of God's covenant with David, several related events must be compared. First, it must be noted that in the original encounter (2 Sam 7:1–17) not a hint of responsibility is discernible. Moreover the opposite is implied in God's assurance that his steadfast love will not be taken away from David's son, even when he sins (7:14–15). It can be seen further in the promise that David's house, throne and kingdom would last "forever" (7:16). But is it accurate to say that the promise was therefore unconditional?

In order to answer that question it is helpful to compare the manner in which the aging shepherd interpreted the covenant (1 Kgs 2:1–4) with its restatement to Solomon at the dedication ceremony of the temple (2 Chr 7:17–22). In both instances a strong element of responsibility appears. On his deathbed David charges Solomon: "Be strong. . . . Show yourself a man. . . . Observe what the Lord your God requires. . . . Keep his decrees and commands, his laws and requirements, as written in the Law of Moses[13] . . . so that the Lord may keep his promise to me [David]: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel.'"

Likewise, at the great temple dedication Solomon is admonished: "If you walk before me as David your father did, and do all I command, and observe my decrees and laws, I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father when I said, 'You shall never fail to have a man to rule over Israel.' But if you [plural] turn away and forsake the decrees and commands I have given you [plural] . . . then I will uproot Israel from my land . . . and I will reject this temple."

In both passages the aspect of conditionality could hardly be stated more clearly, although the original covenant encounter with David made no reference to it.[14] At the least this points to an implied conditionality that was understood at the outset by David and that comes later as no surprise to Solomon. In addition it is important to notice that land and temple are directly linked with obedience on Israel's part at the national level. Although a covenant may appear unconditional on the surface, its continued fulfillment was understood to depend on responsible behavior by king and people.[15]

[13] That the fulfillment of David's covenant is linked directly with the Law of Moses should come as no surprise in that in a sense it renews or extends to a wider association the Israelite covenant (ibid 212)

[14] It should not be taken by modern readers as an unwarranted mistake to interpret David's covenant as unconditional Even the Psalmist struggles with this in Psalm 89

[15] The proposition that the covenant was unconditional for the nation but conditional for the individual is inconsistent with this passage Nor is there evidence that it was conditional for each generation, while its eventual fulfillment in the Messiah is certain For arguments to the contrary cf W Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1978) 110–111, 232–233, Townsend, "Fulfillment" 320–327, Waltke, *Israel's Apostasy* 130, 132

IV. THE EXILIC CRISIS

1. *Old-covenant failure.* Hope for renewal of old-covenant relationship is expressed in the prediction of seventy years of captivity after which Yahweh would restore all that was lost in the crisis,[16] but only if his people would seek him with all their hearts.[17] Daniel, while reading a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon, traces the words of the prophet to their deuteronomic source and thus responds by underscoring the conditionality of the promise in terminology reminiscent of the earlier material:[18] "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands . . . , all Israel has transgressed your law. . . . Therefore the curses have been poured out on us. . . . Just as it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us."[19]

Two important facts must be noted here: (1) Israel's hope for restoration was conditioned upon national repentance (i.e. it was not guaranteed), and (2) such a repentance was realized only in a small portion of the remnant, not by the people at large.[20] This is made clear with regard to the community under the ministries of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi,[21] is commonly understood regarding the audience of Ezra and Nehemiah, and can even be seen in the story of Esther and Mordecai.[22] Though a return to Judah was witnessed after the fall of Babylon in 539 BC it included a fraction of the larger remnant then in exile.[23] Moreover the experience can hardly be termed a full restoration of that which was lost in captivity (Jer 29:14) when one considers the economic distress within the land, military oppression of local enemies, continued Gentile subjugation on a larger scale, absence of the ark of the covenant and the "*šěkînâ* glory" in the Holy of Holies, and the reality of a Persian-controlled governor from the cursed line of Jehoiachin[24] in place of a valid Davidic king on his own throne in Jerusalem.

[16] The question is not just whether a remnant has returned to the land, for such a group remained there even during the Babylonian captivity Instead it concerns the condition of the kingdom of God Prior to 586 BC, land and temple (with the ark) stood as visible symbols of kingdom autonomy and thus of a spiritual relationship with Yahweh Unless this is restored, their captivity has not been restored

[17] Jer 29 10–14, the theme is also central in 2 Chr 7 11–14, discussed above

[18] Cf Deut 7 7–11, 30 1–10

[19] Dan 9 4–5, 11, 13, cf K Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1971) 48–49

[20] R W Pierce, "Spiritual Failure, Postponement and Daniel 9," *Trinity Journal* 10 (1989) 211–222

[21] See R W Pierce, "Literary Connectors and a Haggai/Zechariah/Malachi Corpus," *JETS* 27/3 (1984) 277–289, and "A Thematic Development of the Haggai/Zechariah/Malachi Corpus," *JETS* 27/4 (1984) 401–411, for a discussion of this theory

[22] Cf R W Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai Courage or Compromise?", forthcoming, in which I maintain that the book of Esther portrays a secular remnant in the days of Persian domination

[23] Only 42,360 from the tribes of Levi and Judah are counted in Ezra 2 64

[24] See Jer 22 24–30 It seems better to interpret the offer in Hag 2 20–23 as being made in spite of Zerubbabel's background, not because of it

2. *New-covenant hope.* It is important to recognize that the well-known new-covenant message delivered by Jeremiah (31:31–37) appears historically in the context of the nation's captivity to Babylon. From a canonical perspective the so-called booklet of consolation (Jeremiah 30–33) begins with a mention of Yahweh's promise to restore all that was lost in captivity and return his people to the promised land (cf. 29:14). Moreover it is set between two references that point to Zedekiah's rule,[25] painting as its backdrop a portrait of the tragic end of Judah's existence as a kingdom.

In this setting Jeremiah delivers the promise of a new covenant, different from the previous one that is represented in the Exodus event. In describing this distinctiveness, the prophet speaks of Israel's failure thus far as a covenant partner, in contrast to an era when the law will be written on their hearts in a renewed relationship between God and people (31:32–33). Moreover he speaks of the permanence of the relationship with the nation under the new arrangement in language similar to that employed with David—that is, with conditionality understood but not overtly stated.[26] Thus the question must be asked again: "Is the promise unconditional?"

The key to the answer lies in the statement that the new covenant will result in a community of believers in which all will know Yahweh (31:34). In contrast to the old-covenant model in which entrance into the community was through physical birth, the new-covenant community will be formed by spiritual birth. To state it differently, in contrast to Old Testament Israel where the remnant is sometimes represented by only ten percent of the nation (e.g. Isa 6:13),[27] the new-covenant community will include only believers because that will be the criterion for entrance. As regards the new covenant having only a national focus because it is offered specifically to the houses of Israel and Judah (Jer 31:31, 33), we must remember two important facts. On the one hand, there are other places that show an age to come in which Israelites will be a minority in God's kingdom.[28] On the other hand, it must be remembered that Jesus' kingdom was offered first to Israel and only later included a significant number of Gentiles.[29] Nevertheless the path to the kingdom was new

[25] Jer 29 1–3 is set around 594 BC, shortly after Jeconiah's deportation in 597, while 32 1 ff portrays the final year of Jerusalem's siege in 587–586, cf J Bright, *Jeremiah* (AB 21, Garden City Doubleday, 1974) 210–211

[26] Cf Jer 31 36–37 with 2 Sam 7 15–16

[27] It is interesting to notice that S A Ellisen (*Who Owns the Land?* [Portland Multnomah, 1991] 155) estimates that today about "ten percent in Israel regard themselves as strictly religious "

[28] Cf e g Isa 19 24–25, where Egypt is referred to as "my [Yahweh's] people" and Assyria is called "the work of my hands " In contrast Israel, though called "my inheritance," plays only a "one-third" part in this age Or cf Hosea's reference to Yahweh's calling those who "are not my people" (Hos 1 10–11) into covenant fellowship Though it appears to be focused on Judah and Israel in the OT context it is used by Paul (Rom 9 19–29) to explain Gentile converts

[29] Cf Jesus' orders to his disciples not to go to the Gentiles but rather to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10 5–6) with Peter's vision that led him to Cornelius the Gentile (Acts 10) The contrast can also be seen in John's observation that although "his own [brethren] did not receive him" (implying that he came to them first), he granted adoption to those "born of God" who did receive him (John 1 11–13)

birth,[30] and his kingdom and ministry are linked inseparably with the new covenant by means of his death symbolized in the communion dinner (Luke 22:20). In that act the new-covenant era is inaugurated as an age of a kingdom that is "not of this world" (John 18:36).

If that connection is made, Jesus' sacrifice may be viewed as guaranteeing the establishment and effectiveness of the new covenant but not eliminating a responsible covenant relationship on the part of those with whom covenant is made. If Israel as a nation, or any individual Israelite (or Gentile), would enter the kingdom or in any way partake of the new covenant they must do so by way of personal response with obedience.

V. THE NEW COVENANT AND THE HOPE FOR RESTORATION

In Romans 9–11 Paul argues passionately for God's sustaining care and future plans for his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (9:3). For the sake of this study it is assumed that he is consistently referring to ethnic Israel throughout the section, especially in 11:26.[31] The question most relevant to the study concerns the nature of and rationale for God's work with them at a time yet future from Paul. As for the nature of God's plan for Israel's future, the apostle contrasts it with their transgression, failure and rejection (11:12, 15), expressing his hope in terms of fulfillment, acceptance and salvation (11:12, 15, 26). Consistent with new-covenant theology, the emphasis here should be understood as focusing on spiritual rebirth. Further, in the context of a letter written to the "church" at Rome (16:1, 5, 23) it is also important to notice that Israel's future hope is not presented as being realized separately from that of believing Gentiles.

Regarding a rationale for the hope that Israel will come to faith as a nation, the reader is told that it is (1) because of the fathers and (2) if Israel does not continue in unbelief (11:28–32). The tension created here is similar to that seen in God's blessing of Isaac (Gen 26:1–5, 24), one between sovereign choice and responsible relationship. As Shelton puts it:

> In the NT, Paul certainly sees the covenant promises as conditioned upon obedience. After recounting Israel's being "broken off" from the olive tree because of their unbelief (Rom. 11.17–20), he declares that only if they do not continue in their unbelief will they again be grafted in (Rom. 11:23).[32]

It seems best, therefore, to interpret Paul's hope as an expectation that God will offer once again to Israel an opportunity to enter into new-covenant fellowship. It does not excuse them from the responsibility of accepting or

[30] Cf his well-known response to Nicodemus in John 3 1–15

[31] With the possible exception of Rom 9 6 J Murray, though not a dispensationalist, asserts "It is exegetically impossible to give to 'Israel' in this verse any other denotation than that which belongs to the term throughout the chapter" (i e ethnic Israel, *Romans*, NICNT [Eerdmans Grand Rapids, 1968] 2 96)

[32] R L Shelton, "A Covenant Concept of Atonement," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19 (Spring 1984) 97

rejecting the offer, nor does it guarantee an outcome,[33] especially one realized in distinction from the Church. It only suggests that their rejection of the opportunity given them at the time of the Messiah's first coming did not bring an end to God's grace toward them as a nation. Another opportunity would come.

VI. THE MESSIAH'S OFFER AND MODERN ISRAEL

Though caution must be exercised when speculating on possible fulfillments of Biblical prophecy in the contemporary era,[34] it seems warranted to make some limited observations regarding what has happened thus far.

From Patriarchs to Palestinians

20th–10th centuries BC

Abrahamic covenant (promise to patriarchs)
Israelite covenant (exodus event; beginning a national entity)
Davidic covenant (kingdom's zenith; control of land promised to Abraham)

6th–5th centuries BC

Failure under old covenant leads to Babylonian captivity for 70 years
New-covenant model promises restoration of old-covenant blessings lost in exile
Return without repentance results in extension of Gentile domination from 70 to 490 years

2nd century BC–1st century AD

Rebirth of kingdom under Hasmoneans (Aristobulus I, 104 BC), first king since 586 BC
Failure under Alexander Jannaeus, falls to Rome in 64 BC (only 40 years a kingdom)
Fulness of times comes with birth of the Messiah
Rejection of Messiah results in destruction of temple (AD 70)
Israel is dispersed for nearly 2000 years; Gentiles occupy land of promise

20th century AD

Nation is reborn in 1948, occupies full state in 1967, celebrates 40 years in 1988
Modern state is primarily secular, founded by Zionists, opposed by orthodox Jews
Palestinian *intifada* results in talk of trading land for peace

1. *National failures follow offers of restoration.* Regarding the concept of failure leading to captivity, it should be noted that what starts as seventy years of Gentile domination of the land under Babylon is extended to

[33] Contra L Schiffman, who maintains that "Israel is assured of the power of true repentance" ("The Rabbinic Understanding of Covenant," *RevExp* 84 [Spring 1987] 289–298)

[34] G Friesen's article (*Moody Monthly* [May 1988] 30–31) criticizing H Lindsey's best seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1970), speaks precisely to this point

490 years (under Media, Persia and Greece), then to nearly two millennia under various dominations from western as well as eastern forces. In fact, each of the major offers by God to restore Israel as a nation is followed by failure on their part to receive the offer by faith. At first the offer to return and rebuild in 539 BC receives only a meager response. Then a brief period of autonomy, which is miraculously won by Judea against the Greeks, ends with the abominable desolations under Alexander Jannaeus and is replaced shortly thereafter with the kingdom of the Romans.[35] Next the kingdom is offered again, this time by the Messiah himself. Nevertheless his rejection by his own is followed shortly by the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. Finally, after another miraculous rebirth of a modern state in AD 1948, their existence once again hangs by a thread, though most recently as the result of a nonwar by another indigenous "people of the land" who threaten the well-being of Israel's statehood.

2. *Full restoration is conditioned upon spiritual obedience.* What is similar about each of the returns mentioned above is that none is accompanied by a nationwide, spiritual revival. Instead, each is essentially secular at its core. From a human perspective, self-determination is their strength. The last revival that swept Israel came under Hezekiah in the eighth century BC (2 Chronicles 29–32) at the preaching of the prophet Micah (cf. Mic 3:5–12; Jer 26:18–19) and resulted in God miraculously sparing them from the Assyrians. Since then the returns have lacked that essential spiritual component and thus have fallen short of full restoration. It is as if the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel 37) took on flesh but not breath and life. Instead the corpse only appeared to be alive.

What is unusual about the latest return (modern Zionism) is that it is not followed by a new prophetic word regarding God's intent for the future. If Paul's words to the church at Rome pointed toward a then-future offer of national blessing to God's chosen people, they may have already found a fulfillment in AD 1948—though not in the sense of true restoration but rather in the same kind of aborted returns that have characterized the apostle's kinsmen from even before the captivity.[36]

In short, the offer has been made and a positive national response has not yet come. Moreover there has been a specific, negative reaction against the new-covenant message in recent developments in the state of Israel concerning Jews who believe that Jesus in the Messiah. What was once tolerated by Judaism is now discriminated against, with the result that Messianic Jews have no inheritance in the land founded as a refuge

[35] Cf Pierce, "Spiritual Failure" 215–218, for a development of the theory that the period of extended captivity described in Dan 9 24–27 begins with the first deportation (605 BC) and continues until the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty under Aristobulus I (104 BC), then concludes with the devastating rule of Alexander Jannaeus (94–88 BC)

[36] Jeremiah describes this kind of pseudo-repentance as it relates to Judah as making their sins worse than that of their prostitute sister Israel (Jer 3 6–11)

for them just a generation ago.[37] Will God graciously offer again? He may—but he is not obligated to do so.[38]

VII. CONCLUSION

Dispensationalism has been defined by a particular hermeneutic, usually as it relates to a distinct national future for Israel. Traditionally an understanding of unconditionality has also accompanied this regarding the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, guaranteeing Israel's future as a nation and often leading to blind support of modern Israeli politics primarily on religious grounds.

The present study suggests two cautions regarding this approach. (1) The promises for covenantal blessing cannot be construed as simply unconditional. If responsible covenant behavior is not forthcoming, the promised blessing should not be expected. (2) Predictions regarding Israel's national future beyond AD 1948 should be avoided. Paul's words need not lead us further than the offer witnessed during the last forty years. Does this mean that Yahweh is finished with his chosen people, those for whom Paul would have traded his salvation (Rom 9:1–5)? It seems best to join the apostle in his prayer for their salvation (10:1) but to base a future hope on the established pattern of God's grace, offered and reoffered to Israel in special ways despite their failure, rather than on the notion of an unconditional covenant. Though this does not yield the degree of certainty desired of most who gaze into the eschatological future (after all, gracious offers of salvation will someday end), it has two advantages. On the one hand, it better represents the actual character of Yahweh's covenantal dealings throughout sacred history. On the other, it emphasizes responsible covenant behavior in the face of the end times (2 Pet 3:8–18), rather than date setting, unfruitful speculation and even bad politics.

[37] The Law of Return first allowed anyone "born Jewish" (1950), then was changed to exclude one who was "a member of another religion" (1970), and finally has been focused squarely on Christian Jews by maintaining that they "do not belong to the Jewish nation and have no right to force themselves on it" (1989) See Ellisen, *Who Owns the Land?* 174

[38] Cf the end of those who were graciously given the privilege of keeping the master's vineyard in Jesus' parable in Matt 21 33–46, Mark 12 1–12, Luke 20 9–19