

Israel as the People of the Covenant and Dispensationalism: A Biblical Evaluation

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Introduction

The covenant is one of the prominent themes in biblical theology¹ that highlights the relationship between God and His people. The people of Israel stand out as God's people in salvation history as recorded in the Bible. It begins with the establishment of a covenant with Abraham and continues with its codification and incorporation into the life of Israel at Sinai. There are records of apostasy from the covenant followed by covenant renewals to bring them back to God. In the NT the Church is established and at times appears to exist in antagonism to historical Israel. What is the relationship between the two?

The issue of the identity of God's people in relation to the covenant arises especially in the light of the theology of Dispensationalism. According to Dispensationalism, there are two separate people of God: Israel as God's earthly people and the Church as God's heavenly people.² This raises a number of questions. Is God's covenant with Israel separate from that of the Church? Or do both Israel and the Church constitute the people of God's covenant? What is the relationship between these two? Is the modern nation of Israel the people of the covenant of God?

¹ P. R. Williamson, "Covenant," *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Edited by T. D Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 419-420; Gary Herion "Covenant," *Eerdmans Dictionary Of The Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 292.

² Stephen Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 106.

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This article will attempt to answer these questions based on the Biblical context.³ It is divided into four sections. The first two will survey the biblical context of Israel as God's covenant people and its implications for the Gentiles in the OT and NT respectively. The third will briefly present the basic theology of Dispensationalism as it relates to Israel and the Church. The fourth will give a biblical evaluation of Dispensationalism's basic tenets and theology in the light of the covenant theme.

Israel as People of the Covenant in the OT

1. Covenant Background

The covenant concept was commonly used in the Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures, as well as the Bible. It was a means of establishing a wide range of interpersonal and international relationships. Examples of the types of covenants include a pact or pledge of mutuality between individuals in friendship (Gen 26:28; 31:44-54; Exod 21: 2-6; Ruth 1:16,17; 3:11-13; 1 Sam 18:3; 23:18), or marriage (Prov 2:17; Ezek 16:8; Mal 2:14), and agreements or treaties between political units and nations (Gen 14:13; 21:22-32; Josh 9:6, 11; 2 Sam 3:12-13; 5:3, 1 Kings 5:12, 26; 1 Kings 15:18-19).⁴

Every viable covenant needed basic elements such as the integrity of the partners, tangible commitment, honest accountability, trust, loyalty, selflessness and mutuality. These elements made the covenant ethical in nature since it became a means of controlling human behavior in the sphere of social and political life.⁵ It was also spiritual especially when oaths that invoked God/gods as witnesses to the covenant were involved.

Of more significance for the study of Israel as a covenant people are the suzerainty-vassal treaties that were prevalent in biblical times. These were

³ This study will not discuss Replacement Theology which sees the Church replacing Israel as the chosen people of God. While the approach taken entails the idea of the Church as the continuation of Israel, Replacement Theology envisages a radical break between Israel and the Church which this study does not condone.

⁴ Jeremiah Unterman, "Covenant," *The Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* rev. ed. Edited by Paul Achtemeier (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 208; Herion, 288-289; J. Arthur Thompson, "Covenant (OT)," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 1: 790-791; George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. Edited by George Arthur Buttrick. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962) 1: 716-717; John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: a Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988), 8-9.

⁵ Mendenhall, 714; Herion, 289.

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international treaties in which the superior nation (suzerain) went into agreement with the inferior nation (vassal). The suzerain gave stipulations which the vassal was required to keep in order to enjoy protection from the suzerain.⁶ Evidence for the existence of such treaties goes back to the mid-third millennium B.C. in Sumerian sources and Old Akkadian texts two centuries later. However, the most useful and extensive body of material comes from the Hittite Empire of the Late Bronze (ca. 1400-1200 B.C., just after the time of Moses) and the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 900-612 B.C., the time of the prophets).⁷

2. Origins and history of the covenant with Israel: The Abrahamic Covenant

The first recorded covenant in Genesis—the Noachic covenant (Gen. 8:20-9:17)—does not directly address Israel as the people of God but has more universal implications.⁸ Because of its universal nature and lack of linkage with Israel, we will not discuss it.

The story of the covenant with Abraham begins in Gen 12:1-3 when God calls him to leave his land and go where God would direct. In return, God promises to make him a great nation, a recurring theme throughout Abraham's life (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-18; 17:1-21 and 22:15-18) and the life of his descendants Isaac (Gen 22:18; 26:2-5) and Jacob (Gen 28:13, 14; 35:9-12). From Jacob, later renamed Israel (Gen 32:27, 28), come the twelve tribes which multiplied in Egypt to become a nation (Gen 49:28; Exod 1:1-7).

3. The Sinai Covenant

The identity of Israel as the people of the covenant took on a formal nature after their Exodus from Egypt. The Lord brought them out by a mighty deliverance in fulfillment of His covenant promises to the patriarchs

⁶ Mendenhall, 714-715.

⁷ Mendenhall, 714-715; Herion, 291; Untermann, 208; John Goldingay, "Covenant, OT and NT," *The New Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* 5 vols., edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006), 1: 773.

⁸ Murray, 13; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 121-123; Goldingay, 768. Apart from the Noachic covenant, Hosea 6:7 suggests that the very first covenant was the Adamic covenant between God and Adam. However, there are a variety of views on this text which this article does not intend to delve into.

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(Exod 1:8-22; 2:23-25).⁹ At Sinai the Lord made a covenant with Israel, the Sinaitic covenant, which involved the giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod 19:1-20:21), the ratification of the covenant by blood (Exod 24:1-18), a sanctuary and priesthood, and eventually an elaborate system of sacrifices (Exod 25-40; cf. Lev 1-7).¹⁰

Other laws were also given relating to health, economy, religion, and interpersonal, intertribal, and international relations.¹¹ This was the nature of ANE covenants especially covenants of suzerainty in which the suzerain gave his requirements to the lower party.¹² Therefore, in the Sinaitic Covenant, God officially makes a “proposal” to the nation of Israel to be His people, His special treasure—a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:5, 6). Their identity as His people was dependent on their obedience to His laws—on their faithfulness to His covenant (Exod 19:5).

4. The Deuteronomic Covenant

After forty years of wilderness wanderings which included events of apostasy, the Israelites gathered at the plains of Moab on the verge of going into the land of covenant promise, Canaan. There Moses reiterated Israel’s past (Deut 1:1-11:7) and reminded them that God’s choice of Israel was one of mercy and not based on their merits (Deut 7:6-8). He then charged them to remain obedient to the covenant, stating clearly the consequences, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience (Deut 28-29).¹³ The outline of Deuteronomy contains the main features of ANE vassal treaties: preamble (chs 1:1-5), historical prologue (chs 1:6-4:49), general stipulations (chs 5-11), specific stipulations (chs 12-26), blessings and curses (chs 27-28), and divine witnesses (chs 29-34).¹⁴ Therefore, in the Deuteronomic

⁹ Murray, 20; Hans LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 91.

¹⁰ A primary concern of the Sinaitic covenant was the maintenance of the unique divine-human relationship between Yahweh and Israel. Therefore, the sacrificial and sanctuary system was set up and formalized as a means of sustaining communion between a holy God and a sinful people, Williamson, 424.

¹¹ These laws of covenant uniqueness can be found in the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy of the Pentateuch.

¹² Unterman, 208.

¹³ David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 92.

¹⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (NICOT), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 22-24; J. J. Niehaus, “Deuteronomy, Theology of,” *New International Dictionary of OT Theology and Exegesis*.

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Covenant, God laid down a model for future national covenant renewal¹⁵ and a standard for continual reminders of Israel's agreement with God and its consequences.

5. The Davidic Covenant

In the time of the Judges, Israel repeatedly forsook the covenant and had idolatrous relations with the surrounding nations. But there were also calls to return to the covenant. These calls often came out during times of distress and foreign occupation (Deut 28:25; Jud 2:11-3:6; 1 Sam 4:1-11), but also through faithful leaders (Josh 24; Jud 2:1-6; 1 Sam 7:2-17). After the period of the Judges, the monarchy was established at the request of the Israelites with Saul as the first king (1 Sam 8:1-10:27; 11:15). However, because of his disobedience, he did not fulfill God's purpose and was rejected (1 Sam 15:10-35).

After Saul's reign, the kingship of David brought a renewed emphasis on the covenant. God made a covenant with David and his house (Davidic covenant) and it was closely related to God's previous covenants (2 Sam 7:8-11). In God's choice of David, there is the implication of the creation of the dynasty of the true type of the Messiah leader who will eventually lead Israel to the ultimate fulfillment of His covenant purposes (2 Sam 7:16, 25-29). God's choice of David was a choice for His people to fulfill the covenant. In relation to the Abrahamic covenant, while the Sinaitic covenant guaranteed the preservation of Israel in the land until the arrival of Abraham's seed, the Davidic covenant identified the royal dynasty from which the anticipated victorious seed of Abraham would come.¹⁶ Therefore, through the Davidic covenant, God gave an example of the Messiah leader/shepherd who was to eventually lead His people to the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises.¹⁷

Beginning with Rehoboam, Solomon's son (1 Kings 12:16-24), Israel was split into two: Israel in the north with ten tribes, and Judah in the south with two tribes. The Divided Monarchy went through a "roller coaster" experience of apostasy especially in the north, followed by revival and reformation, more so in the south. God sent repeated calls for faithfulness

5 vols., edited by Willem Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 4: 538-539; Unterman, 208; Thompson, 790; Mendenhall, 719-720; Goldingay, 773.

¹⁵ Holwerda, 92.

¹⁶ Williamson, 424, 426.

¹⁷ Robertson, 229. The Davidic covenant promises were messianic in nature, Murray, 23.

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to the covenant through prophets to both Israel and Judah. Eventually both nations experienced captivity and exile, Israel by Assyria in 722 BC (2 Kings 15: 29-17:24), and Judah by Babylon in 586 BC (2 Kings 18:17-19:36; 2 Chronicles 36: 11-21; Dan 1:1-3).¹⁸

6. The New Covenant

The message of pre-exilic prophets was twofold: first, Israel and Judah will be taken to exile because of their unfaithfulness to the covenant; second, they will be restored and all the benefits of the covenant will be theirs again. Interspersed is a promise of a “new covenant” (e.g. Jer 31:31-34).¹⁹ This new covenant was future and visionary in character.²⁰ While addressed to Israel and Judah (Jer 31:36-40; 33:6-16; Ezek 36:24-38; 37:11-28),²¹ the promise was universal in scope extending to the ends of the earth and encompassing all nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:4-8; 66:18-24).²²

This new covenant contains strong elements of continuity with previous ones including the Torah (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27; Isa 42:1-4; 51:4-8), Abraham’s seed (Jer 31:36; Ezek 36:37; Isa 63:16), the royal seed (Jer 33:15-26; Ezek. 37:24-25; Isa 55:3) and the covenant formula (Jer 31:33; Ezek 37:23, 27).²³ But this new covenant went a step further in that it promised a complete removal of sin (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:29, 33) and an inner transformation of the heart (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26).²⁴ As such, the

¹⁸ Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prolegomena* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2003), 733; Williamson, 426.

¹⁹ Herion, 291; Unterman, 209; Goldingay, 774; Thompson, 792-793. The new covenant is not only mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34 but is also alluded to as the “everlasting covenant” (Jer 30-33; Ezek 34, 36-37; Isa 40-66), Williamson, 426.

²⁰ Williamson, 426.

²¹ Williamson, 426.

²² Williamson, 426.

²³ Williamson, 427.

²⁴ Williamson, 427; Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? : What the old and new Covenants reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2007), 29-30. The difference between the New and Old covenants is that the people under the new receive a new heart which is inclined to keep God’s laws. Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 143-144; Unterman, 209; Goldingay, 774. The change of heart was necessary because the only fault of the “old covenant” (as stated in Hebrews) was not the covenant itself but in those who failed to keep it. Williamson, 429. The new covenant is also spoken of in 2 Cor 3 in which there is a contrast between the old (with the law written on tables of stone) and the new covenant (with the law written on the tables of the heart), Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant:*

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new covenant was the climax and eternal fulfillment of all the key promises of all previous covenants—a physical inheritance, an everlasting dynasty, a divine-human relationship and blessings on a national and international scale.²⁵ Through the prophecies of the new covenant, God gave hope of the ultimate consummation of His covenant promises to His people.²⁶

While all these covenants appear to be separate and uniquely distinct covenants, this study in covenant theology encourages viewing them as phases of the one “everlasting covenant” that began with Israel through Abraham (Genesis 17: 13, 19; cf. Heb 13: 20).²⁷ The following table summarizes the key function of each covenant phase in the OT according to this study so far.

Name of Covenant Phase	Function of Covenant Phase
1. Abrahamic Covenant	Origin and the founding ancestor of the covenant with Israel
2. Sinaitic Covenant	The formal introduction of the covenant to the nation of Israel
3. Deuteronomic Covenant	The basis for continual national covenant renewal for the nation of Israel
4. Davidic Covenant	The identification of the royal ancestor in Israel who was the Messianic type for the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises
5. New Covenant	The antitype of all the phases of the covenant with Israel

the History of a Biblical Idea (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969), 183; John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Promise, God’s Plan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 151-153. The new covenant is better than the Sinaitic but does not contradict it. It fulfills it and reveals its deepest meaning, Hillers, 182. Therefore, the new covenant ministers the highest blessing in terms of relationship with God, Murray, 28.

²⁵ Williamson, 427.

²⁶ Williamson, 426; Murray, 31-32; Robertson, 272.

²⁷ See Peter M. van Bemmelen, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24/1 (2013): 92-106.

Israel as People of the Covenant in the NT

1. The Covenant People in the Gospels and the Acts

On this subject of Israel as the people of the covenant, there is a tension between heritage on the one hand and faith and praxis on the other. John the Baptist rebukes Jewish people who claim “Abraham as father” but do not produce fruits of repentance (Matt 3:7-10; Luke 3:7-9). In Jesus there is an emphasis on the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God. The NT narratives demonstrate that any Gentile who believed in Him was welcomed into the covenant.

Examples include the female non-Jewish ancestors of Christ (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, maybe even the wife of Uriah²⁸—Matt 1:3,5,6), the Magi (Matt 2:1-12), Jesus’ ministry in mainly Gentile Galilee (Matt. 4: 12-25; Luke 4:14,15), the centurion (Matt 8:5-9; Luke 7:1-10), the Gadarene demoniac (Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-39), the Syro-Phoenician(Canaanite) woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7: 24-30), the Samaritans (John 4:1-42), the Greeks (John 12:20-21), the nations present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-12), the baptism of the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 9), the baptism of Cornelius and his household (Acts 10), and Paul’s converts during his missionary journeys (Acts 13:6-12, 48; 16:15, 34; 17: 12, 34; 19:17-20; 28:28).

In the Gospel of John, there are incidents of conflict between Jesus and Jewish leaders who continually reject His claims (John 7:1-52; 8:1-53; 10:19-42; 11:45-57; 12:37-50). Jesus indicates that the true children of Abraham are only those who have the faith and do the works of Abraham (John 8:38-40).²⁹ The parables of the sons (Matt 21: 28-32), the tenants (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-10; Luke 20:9-18), the marriage feast (Matt 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24), and the vineyard (Luke 13:6-9), are examples of this theme. Jesus commends the faith of Gentiles (Matt 8:10-12; 15:21-28) and also points out that they will become citizens of God’s kingdom sitting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt 8:11-12).

At the close of Jesus’ ministry, He integrates the OT covenant theme in relation to His sacrificial death. At the Lord’s last supper, He presents His blood soon to be offered at Calvary as the ratification of the “new covenant”³⁰ during the Jewish Passover (Matt 26:27-29; Mark 14: 23-25;

²⁸ Holwerda, 34-35.

²⁹ Gullely, 731.

³⁰ Matt 26:29 and Mark 14:24 do not mention a “new covenant” but simply “covenant” indicating that they perceive the new covenant as the fulfillment or full realization of the Sinai covenant.

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Luke 22:17-18, 20).³¹ This appears to be the antitype of the ratification done at the Sinaitic covenant (Ex 24:6-7) and the beginning of the fulfillment of the “new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31:34).³² Paul points out to the largely, but not exclusively, Gentile Corinthian church³³ that Christ is the Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7) and that partaking of the symbol of His blood makes one a part of the new covenant (1 Cor 11:25-26).³⁴

2. The Covenant People in Other NT Literature

In Paul’s writings, a good amount of discussion on the theology of the covenant can be found, especially in Romans and Galatians, that deals with the true identity of God’s covenant people. In Rom 9-11, Paul addresses the election of Israel and its implication for Gentiles who are in Christ. Using the analogy of the olive tree and the branches, he explains that in addition to the natural branches (Israel–Rom 11:21), wild branches (Gentiles–Rom 11:17) have been grafted by faith into the olive tree. By contrast, some of the original branches were broken off because of unbelief. They may once again be grafted in but only through faith in Jesus (11:22-24).³⁵

In Galatians, Paul makes the same point by using the analogy of the two wives of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah, and their descendants. He stresses that those who follow Jesus by faith (Jews or Gentiles) are like the free children of Sarah while those who reject Jesus are like the bond/slave children of Hagar (4:21-31).³⁶ In a church where Jews claimed certain privileges over Gentiles believers because of their descent from Abraham, Paul insists that we are not saved by pedigree, or circumcision, but by the sacrifice of Jesus (Gal 2:16-21).

For Paul, the people of God’s new covenant are determined by faith. Christ has removed the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles, making them one new humanity (Eph 2:11-19). Therefore, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11), but all are

³¹ Mendenhall, 722; Williamson, 427; Unterman, 209; Goldingay, 775.

³² Williamson, 427; Murray, 27; Hillers, 186; Herion, 290, 291.

³³ S. J. Hafemann, “Corinthians, Letters to the,” *The IVP Dictionary of the NT: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*. Edited by Daniel G. Reid. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 235; Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

³⁴ Unterman, 209; Herion, 290; Mendenhall, 722.

³⁵ Stephen Sizer, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers: The Bible, Israel and the Church*. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 54, 55.

³⁶ Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 149, 150; Sizer, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers*, 61-62; Herion, 290; Mendenhall, 723.

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Abraham's offspring (Gal 3:29), the true circumcision (Phil 3:3), the one Israel of God (Gal 6:16). Therefore a true Israelite is not one of physical descent but the one circumcised in the heart (Rom 2:28-29), the one who serves God in the Spirit and has no confidence in the flesh (Phil 3:3), the one who is the child of Sarah, the free woman, born of supernatural promise and is a part of the covenant of grace with the heavenly Jerusalem as home (Gal 4:22-31).

Peter describes the church of Jews and Gentiles with terms similar to those used at the ratification of the covenant at Sinai (Exod 19: 5-6): a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own special people (1 Pet 2:9). Revelation describes God's people as kings and priests, loved and washed in the blood of Christ (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10).

The picture that emerges from this survey of biblical material related to the identity of the covenant people is one of inclusiveness. Physical ancestry does not play a prominent role. What seems of paramount importance is that people exemplify a saving faith in Jesus, foreshadowed in the faith of Abraham. Whoever fulfills this prerequisite is reckoned part of the covenant people of God, irrespective of physical ancestry. Moreover, while this openness to Gentiles is much more evident in the NT, it was also evident to a lesser extent in the OT.

Dispensationalism: Its Basic Tenets

1. Definition and Introduction

Dispensationalism is a system of biblical hermeneutics that has had considerable influence within conservative Christian circles³⁷ and has infiltrated almost every branch of Protestantism.³⁸ Its origins can be traced back to John Nelson Darby of Britain (1800-1882). It spread in the United States largely through the work of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921), and the famous Scofield Reference Bible, as well as conferences on biblical prophecy led by ministers from Dispensationalist Bible Institutes and books

³⁷ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1168.

³⁸ Oswald Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), 12-13; William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 1; Gerhard F. Hasel, "Israel in Bible Prophecy," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, 3/1(1992): 127; Norman Gulley, 719.

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written by Dispensationalist proponents such as John Walvoord, Hal Lindsey, Dwight Pentecost and Tim LaHaye among others.³⁹

Dispensationalism is a system of theology that divides history into dispensations,⁴⁰ periods of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of God.⁴¹ Each dispensation begins a new and distinct method of testing mankind and each ends in man's failure and judgment.⁴² There is no consensus on the exact number of dispensations,⁴³ but a common number is seven: (1) Innocence (2) Conscience (3) Human Government (4) Promise (5) Law (6) Grace (or Church) (7) Kingdom.⁴⁴

Dispensationalism emphasizes the consistent literal interpretation of Scripture, known as consistent literalism.⁴⁵ If the plain meaning makes

³⁹ Gulley, 720; Erickson, 1168; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 50-52, 74-77, 119; Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1965), 65-85; Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 64-99; Cox, 1, 6-16; Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995), 10-13; Jon Paulien, "How to Separate Prophetic Fact from Prophetic Fantasy" *Perspective Digest*. Edited by Roland Hegstad, vol.2, no. 3, 1997: 24-25; Dwight K. Nelson, *What "Left Behind" Left Behind* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2001), 39-40; Hasel, 127; Hans K LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 12; Charles C. Ryrie, "Update on Dispensationalism," *Issues in Dispensationalism*. Edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 16-20; N. Dickson, "Darby, John Nelson" *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Edited by Timothy Larsen (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2003), 178-181; B. Hankins, "Scofield, Cyrus Ingerson," *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Edited by Timothy Larsen. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2003), 589-591; S. R. Spencer, "Walvoord, John Flipse" *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Edited by Timothy Larsen. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2003), 696-698; D. K. Larsen, "LaHaye, Tim F." *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Edited by Timothy Larsen. (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2003), 356-358; D. K. Larsen, "Lindsey, Hal" *Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*. Edited by Timothy Larsen (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2003), 364-366.

⁴⁰ John H. Gerstner, *A Primer on Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982), 2, 5; Gulley, 721-723.

⁴¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 22; Bass, 19.

⁴² Cox, 17; Bass, 19-21.

⁴³ Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 109-115f; Gulley, 721, n.15-20.

⁴⁴ Ryrie, 57-64; Cox, 17; Gulley, 721; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 113,115.

⁴⁵ Ryrie, 86-109; Cox, 22, 23; Mathison, 6-8; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 11; Bass, 21-24; Thomas D. Ice, "Dispensational Hermeneutics" *Issues in Dispensationalism*. Edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 29-49.

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sense, one must not look further.⁴⁶ This is also applied to all prophecy often in considerable detail.⁴⁷ Dispensationalists claim that they are probably the only ones who use this consistent literal method in Biblical interpretation in opposition to non-Dispensationalists who tend to allegorize or spiritualize the plain meaning of Scripture especially in the area of prophecy.⁴⁸ For example, they maintain that the name "Israel" in prophecy always refers to the nation of Israel and to nothing else.⁴⁹

2. Dispensationalism: A Theology and Eschatology of Israel/Church Dichotomy

At the heart of Dispensationalist theology is an Israel/Church dichotomy.⁵⁰ God has two distinct people: Israel as His earthly people and the Church as His heavenly people.⁵¹ They are two separate entities and will remain so unto eternity.⁵² God's covenant promises to Israel were unconditional and not dependant on their faithfulness and obedience to His requirements.⁵³ These covenant promises and prophecies of restoration are not to be fulfilled in the church⁵⁴ since the church is supposedly not mentioned in the OT.⁵⁵

For Jews, God planned to set up an earthly kingdom, the "kingdom of heaven," the Davidic messianic kingdom,⁵⁶ through the first coming of Jesus Christ. But they rejected Him.⁵⁷ Therefore, this earthly kingdom was

⁴⁶ Erickson, 1168.

⁴⁷ Cox, 23-24; Erickson, 1168.

⁴⁸ Ryrie, 89-92; Cox, 23; Gerstner, 3; Gulley, 723, n. 33-36.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 1168.

⁵⁰ Cox, 30; Mathison, 8, 17, 23, 109; Gerstner, 32; Erickson, 1169-1170; Hasel, 128; Bass, 25-29; Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," *Issues in Dispensationalism*. Edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1994), 113-130. Ecclesiology is the decisive test of Dispensationalism. La Rondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 98.

⁵¹ Cox, 30, 38; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 106; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 10. Other distinctions include Israel as the wife of Jehovah and the church as the bride of Jesus (or the mysterious body of Christ). Gerstner, 6-7; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 49; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 138.

⁵² LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 10; Gerstner, 8; Robertson, 213-214; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 138.

⁵³ Erickson, 1169.

⁵⁴ Mathison, 17; Hasel, 129; Erickson, 1169.

⁵⁵ Erickson, 1169. The OT believers are not included in the church, Mathison, 18.

⁵⁶ Erickson, 1169; Bass, 31.

⁵⁷ Cox, 31; Gerstner, 24; Erickson, 1169; Bass, 29ff.

postponed to the millennium.⁵⁸ After the rapture of the church, the conversion and gathering of the Jews to the Messiah will begin during the tribulation for seven years, after which God will establish the millennial kingdom on earth and literally fulfill all the covenant promises made to Israel.⁵⁹ Because the Jews will have finally accepted the Messiah, Jerusalem and the Jews will be central in this millennial reign with Christ on David's throne and the temple in the center.⁶⁰

As for the Church, God brought it into existence because of the rejection of Christ by the Jews.⁶¹ It is just an episode or parenthesis between the rejection and reinstitution of the earthly kingdom of the Jews⁶²—a mystery, possibly unforeseen by God.⁶³ The church began at Pentecost.⁶⁴ Since the church is God's heavenly people⁶⁵ ("the kingdom of God," angels and the saints of all ages),⁶⁶ they will be swept to heaven in the pre-tribulation rapture so as to give Israel the spotlight on earth again.⁶⁷ The rapture will be the end of the church.⁶⁸

The Covenant and Dispensationalism: A Biblical Evaluation

1. Israel and the Church as People of God: Two or One?

1.1 The Covenant as Imagery for Relationship

An initial study of biblical history in light of Dispensationalism gives the impression that there were many covenants between God and humankind with each distinct from the other. However, covenant was just a prevalent imagery God used to describe His relationship with His people.⁶⁹ Though several covenants are mentioned in the Bible, all are an

⁵⁸ Cox, 32; LaRondelle, 11; Bass, 31-33.

⁵⁹ Cox, 33; Gerstner, 33-34; Hasel, 129; LaRondelle, 11-12.

⁶⁰ Mathison, 123; Erickson, 1169-1170.

⁶¹ Cox, 38; Bass, 29.

⁶² Cox, 38, 42; Mathison, 18; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 11.

⁶³ Mathison, 17; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 98.

⁶⁴ Mathison, 18; Hasel, 129; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 98. Believers who died before the Pentecost are not part of the church, Mathison, 23.

⁶⁵ Cox, 38.

⁶⁶ Erickson, 1169; Bass, 31.

⁶⁷ Erickson, 1169; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 12; Sizer, *Christian Zionism*, 136.

⁶⁸ Mathison, 18; Hasel, 129, n.53.

⁶⁹ Unterman, 209; MacCarty, 1-3; Jiri Moskala, "The Message and Mission of the OT Church." A paper presented at Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies (AIIAS) Seminary Theological Forum on Adventist Ecclesiology: Biblical, Historical and Theological Foundations, October 26, 2007, 9. "From creation to consummation the

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unfolding of a new phase or a new emphasis in the one everlasting covenant⁷⁰ which basically has two participants: God and humanity. It can be said that the essence of the covenant is God's self-revelation to mankind.⁷¹ There is therefore no need to split God's people up into categories based on covenants or dispensations. The essence of God's one everlasting covenant is clear in the "covenant formula" used in both Old and NT: "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Deut 26:17-18; Jer 7:23; Ezek 11:20; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3).⁷²

1.2 Israel as a Symbol of Covenant Community

The name "Israel" first appears in Gen 32:28 as the new name given to Jacob, a symbol of his new spiritual relation to the Lord.⁷³ "Israel" is a reference to the covenant community regardless of biological ancestry. The OT records the exploits of many great men and women of faith who were either "Gentile" or of Gentile descent. Examples include Caleb (Kennizite), Tamar and Rahab (Canaanites), Ruth (Moabite), Uriah (Hittite), Ebed-melech (Ethiopian).⁷⁴ This shows that in the OT God's people lived in "covenant community" where the determining factor was not blood lines or ancestry but faith in God.⁷⁵

Not only individuals, but whole groups of foreign people joined the covenant. When Israel left Egypt a "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38; 18:1; Numbers 20:4),⁷⁶ joined her partaking fully of the covenant (Exod 20:8-10;

covenantal bond has determined the relation of God to his people. The extent of the divine covenants reaches from the beginning of the world to the end of the age," Robertson, 25. The covenant serves as the formalizing bond by which God's kingdom comes among His people, Robertson, 230.

⁷⁰ Walton, 25, 49-50; MacCarty, 7; Arthur Pink, *The Divine Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 8. "Obviously an element of freshness and newness will emerge each time the Lord God constitutes a distinctive relation to his people," Robertson, 27. "The cumulative evidence of the Scriptures points definitely toward the unified character of the biblical covenants. God's multiple bonds with His people ultimately unite into a single relationship. Particular details may vary. A definite line of progress may be noted. Yet the covenants of God are one," Robertson, 28. The Old and New covenants still comprise the covenant, Walton, 50.

⁷¹ Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the OT*. Translated by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 1:37ff; Walton, 24-45.

⁷² Moskala, 9; Robertson, 272-273; Walton, 25; Goldingay, 774.

⁷³ Hasel, 130-131; La Rondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 81-82; Hans K. La Rondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy" *Ministry*, June 1997, 6.

⁷⁴ Moskala, 18.

⁷⁵ Hasel, 132.

⁷⁶ Hasel, 131.

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22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:9-10, 33; Numbers 15:14-16, 26, 29-30; 35:15; Deut 5:14; 23:7-8). Canaanites not destroyed or expelled, were eventually integrated, with the Rechabites becoming especially respected for their fidelity to God (Jer 35:1-19). David's elite bodyguards were Philistines (1 Chron 18:17) who had presumably converted, for it is hard to imagine David's palace filled with pagans. Throughout the monarchy there were thousands of foreigners in Israel (e.g., 1 Chron 22:2; 2 Chron 30:25) whom the LXX calls *prosēlutoi*, converts.⁷⁷ In Solomon's time their number was 153,500 (2 Chron 2:17). Of pagans in the Persian Empire Esther 8:17 declares, "Then many of the people of the land became Jews," while Esther 9:27 indicates that people continued to join the faith after the momentous events described there. During the intertestamental period, John Hyrcanus converted the whole nation of the Idumeans (Edomites) to Judaism on the point of the sword.⁷⁸ Out of them came the notorious family of Herod.⁷⁹ It is evident that the name "Israel" was indicative of the religious unity of the covenant people of God, not of racial ancestry.⁸⁰

Conversely, the term "Israel" did not always apply to the entire nation of 12 tribes. The mention of a "remnant" was prominent especially in times of national apostasy. During the apostasy of Israel led by Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah and seven thousand others were the remnant of Israel—the true faithful Israel of God (1 Kings 19:18).⁸¹ This makes clear that within the nation of Israel, there were the faithful and the unfaithful. Not all who were born Israelites were God's people.⁸²

The covenant actually had stipulations for exit. To be "cut off" from the people was a punishment for a number of sins (e.g., Exod 30:33, 38; 31:14; Lev 7:20-21, 25, 27). To what extent this was carried out we do not know. But the provision was there. The word "apostasy," or "falling away from the faith" is not uncommon in the LXX to describe Israel's sometimes rebellious attitude towards God (e.g., Josh 22:22; 2 Chron 29:19). So while

⁷⁷ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1945), cv.

⁷⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.9.1. See also Bernard M. Zlotowitz, "Sincere Conversion and Ulterior Motives," in *Conversion to Judaism in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, eds. (Pittsburgh, PA: Rodef Shalom, 1994), 67.

⁷⁹ E.g., Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.1.3.

⁸⁰ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 84.

⁸¹ Hasel, 134; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 85-86; T. R. Schreiner, "Election," *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Edited by Edited by T. D Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 451.

⁸²Schreiner, 451.

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the unfaithful ones in Elijah's time may not have been forcefully ejected from the covenant, the mention of a faithful remnant indicates that the rest, though nominally perhaps still part of the covenant, in reality lived in breach of it.

In some prophetic writings, there appears to be an understanding that the faithful remnant irrespective of ancestral background was indeed the true people of God.⁸³ Hosea calls the unfaithful Israel "Not my people" (Hos 1:9).⁸⁴ Amos differentiates the remnant of Israel from national apostate Israel (Amos 5:15).⁸⁵ Isaiah sees visions of Israel as a people who worship the Lord and have included among them Gentiles who join themselves to the assembly in faith and obedience to the Lord and enjoy full rights and benefits of the covenant (Isa 56:3-7).⁸⁶ Jeremiah speaks of Israel as a restored remnant people gathered from all the 12 tribes who obey God's law with an undivided heart as they experience the new covenant (Jer 31: 31-34; 32:38-40).⁸⁷ Ezekiel points out that God's main concern for Israel is spiritual restoration: a united worshipping spiritually cleansed theocratic people (Ezek 11:16-21).⁸⁸ Malachi states that those who fear the Lord and serve Him are His own treasured possession, the true Israelites (Mal 3:16-18).⁸⁹ Thus, it can be seen that from its inception, the name "Israel" was not descriptive of biological lineage, but signified people connected to God.⁹⁰ Faith and obedience were the determining factors.⁹¹

1.3 Election for Universal Salvation

The OT presents Israel as God's chosen. But was this to the exclusion of other people? No. God elected Israel to be an agent of salvation to other

⁸³ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 83. The remnant of Israel was the true Israel—a faithful religious community who worship Yahweh in truth and in spirit with a new covenant heart. This spiritual Israel will be recipient of God's covenant blessings and promises to Israel because they have been faithful and obedient to Yahweh and believe in His Messiah. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 90-91.

⁸⁴ Hasel, 134.

⁸⁵ Hasel, 134; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 85.

⁸⁶ LaRondelle, *Israel of God in Prophecy*, 86-88; Hasel, 134.

⁸⁷ LaRondelle, *Israel of God in Prophecy*, 88-89.

⁸⁸ LaRondelle, *Israel of God in Prophecy*, 89.

⁸⁹ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 90.

⁹⁰ Hasel, 131; LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 6.

⁹¹ Moskala, 9; Williamson, 426; Hasel, 148.

people;⁹² not over and against other nations but for their sake.⁹³ The mission of Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa 42:6; 60:1-9). In a sense, the Great Commission goes all the way back to Abraham (Gen 12:3).⁹⁴ This worldwide plan was repeated to Isaac (Gen 26:4), Jacob (Gen 28:13-15; 35:11-12; 46:3) and Moses (Exod 3:6-8; 6:2-8).⁹⁵ The inclusion of Gentiles can be clearly seen in the OT prophets. They saw all nations coming to the temple in Jerusalem to learn of the true God and worship Him (Isa 2:2-4; 56:2-8; 62:9-11; Jer 3:17; 33:9; Micah 4:1-2; Zech 8:23).⁹⁶ Interestingly, Isaiah states that Egypt and Assyria will be called God's people (Isa 19:23-25),⁹⁷ a theme repeated in Israel's hymnbook (Psalm 67:1-7; 96:2-9; 119:46; 145:11-12, 21).⁹⁸

This global plan of outreach was carried out in a variety of ways including God's judgment and intervention in the history of nations (Exod 7:5,17; 8:22; 14:4,18; Isa 13-23, 28-33; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Amos 1-2, 9:7; Joel 3; Jonah; Obad; Micah 4:3),⁹⁹ Israel as an object lesson (Josh 2:9-14; Isa 61:9-11; 62:2; Ezek 20:12; 36; 23; 38:23; 39:7, 27-29),¹⁰⁰ missions to other nations (Abraham, (Gen 12:7,8; 13:4,18; 22:9-13); Moses in Egypt (Exod 5-15); Israelite slave girl (2 Kings 5:1-19); Jeremiah (Jer 51:59-64); Daniel and friends (Dan 1:20-21; 3, 5-6); Esther (Esther 4:12-16); Nehemiah (Neh 2:1-10); Jonah (Jon 1-4)), and God's working with non-Israelites in His plan of salvation; Melchizedek (Gen 14:18-20); Jethro (Exod 18:1, 10-11); Balaam (Numbers 22-24); Rahab (Josh 2); Ruth (Ruth 1-4); Naaman (2 Kings 5); Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1-2, 4); Cyrus (Isa 45:1); Artaxerxes (Esther 1:1-9).¹⁰¹

⁹² Moskala, 13; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 91; Schreiner, 451.

⁹³ Moskala, 13. Israel's particular election is therefore organically one with God's universal salvation. Israel's election did not imply the rejection of the other peoples, but rather their inclusion. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 92.

⁹⁴ Moskala, 14, 15. See also Jiri Moskala, "The Mission of God's People in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society (JATS)* 19/1-2 (2008): 45.

⁹⁵ Moskala, 15; Moskala, *JATS*, 47.

⁹⁶ Moskala, 16. See also Jiri Moskala, *JATS*, 50-51. All the other nations are to be blessed if they acknowledged Israel's God (Ps 72:17; Jer 4:2; Isa 2:2-5). La Rondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 92.

⁹⁷ Moskala, 18; Moskala, *JATS*, 57.

⁹⁸ Moskala, 17; Moskala, *JATS*, 52.

⁹⁹ Walton, 32; Moskala, *JATS*, 56-57.

¹⁰⁰ Israel can be the light of the world only by walking in the way of righteousness. Holwerda, 58.

¹⁰¹ Moskala, 15-18; Moskala, *JATS*, 56-57.

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In that sense, God's plan included the Gentiles of all nations.¹⁰² Consequently, all who learn of, know and believe in God, become one united people of faith and obedience, not two separate peoples as Dispensationalism teaches.

1.4 The Church in the OT and NT as Type and Antitype

Dispensationalism claims that there was no prophecy of the church in the OT and that the OT believers are not part of the church; only those who believe from Pentecost till the rapture are.¹⁰³ Both testaments indicate otherwise.

Israel was a type of the Christian church to come.¹⁰⁴ Just as God chose Israel to bless the world and to be His witnesses (Gen 12:3; Deut 7:6-8; Isa 43:10-13), the church also has a mission to the world (Matt 28:19).¹⁰⁵ When Israel rejected Jesus, the church functionally continued where Israel left off.¹⁰⁶ It became the new avenue through which God was to work to win the world.¹⁰⁷ The mission continued even though the avenue changed.¹⁰⁸ There was a new Israel, a more global Israel than that of OT times.¹⁰⁹ This fulfilled Jesus' statement that true Israel would be a people from all races and nations—"east and west" (Matt 21:43; Luke 12:32; cf. Matt 8:10-12; Luke

¹⁰² MacCarty, 13-26. "As the people of God, Israel was always intended to be and to become a universal people, not limited by racial purity. . . . God decides who belongs to Israel," Holwerda, 35.

¹⁰³ Mathison, 18; Bass, 39-40.

¹⁰⁴ Cox, 50; Williamson, 426; Gerhard Pfandl, "Israel and the Church," *Journal of Adventist Theological Society*, 13/2 (2002): 28-29.

¹⁰⁵ Gulley, 731.

¹⁰⁶ Gulley, 737; Hans K. LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 7. Christ's first advent was the highest test of Israel as a nation in the covenant with God. Their rejection of Christ at His first advent gave way to the choosing and ordaining of the 12 disciples as a microcosm of the new Israel called the church. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 99,101; Holwerda, 48-53.

¹⁰⁷ Gulley, 738; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 51.

¹⁰⁸ Gulley, 745. God was not dependent on the Jewish nation for the fulfillment of His divine purpose for all men. His plan could not be thwarted or delayed by Israel's rejection of the Messiah. The Day of Pentecost was a sign that God's plan to reach the world continued through the church after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 103-104.

¹⁰⁹ Gulley, 745; Hasel, 140.

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13:28-29).¹¹⁰ The church is the fulfillment and continuation of Israel¹¹¹ through which God's eternal purpose will be realized (Eph 3:10-11).¹¹²

Dispensationalists also state that there is no mention of the church in the OT.¹¹³ Acts counteracts by pointing to the prophets. The events of Pentecost are interpreted in the light of Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:16-17);¹¹⁴ the conversion of the Gentiles in light of Amos 9:11-12 (Acts 15:13-17).¹¹⁵ Peter brings the point to a climax by stating that all the OT prophets had spoken of the days of the church (Acts 3:24).¹¹⁶ With just these three examples it becomes very hard to say that the church is unspoken of or unforeseen in the OT. The church is appointed to fulfill the divine purpose of Israel's election: to be a saving light for the Gentiles.¹¹⁷

Stephen called Israel, the "church in the wilderness."¹¹⁸ Moreover, in the LXX the noun *ekklēsia*, the very word used in the NT by the apostles for the Church, is used 77 times, almost exclusively for Israel. So it is very difficult to argue that the "church" was not mentioned in the OT. Rather, it can be said that the people of Israel were the Church in the OT and the Church the Israel of the NT (Gen 12:1-3; Acts 7:38; 1 Pet 2:9-10).

The Bible recognizes both believing Jews and Gentiles in unity as the people of God.¹¹⁹ To ignore this would be a major hermeneutical oversight. Paul declares that through Jesus Christ, the distinctions between the two

¹¹⁰ Mathison, 30; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 101; Hans K. LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 6; Holwerda, 55-56; Pfandl, 24.

¹¹¹ Cox, 51. "The people of God, Israel is still a flesh and blood historical reality although now a universal people and no longer a single, particular people in the OT." Holwerda, 179.

¹¹² Cox, 45.

¹¹³ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 98.

¹¹⁴ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 105; Mathison, 30; LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 7.

¹¹⁵ Mathison, 30; Fuller, 177-182; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 147-150; Holwerda, 181.

¹¹⁶ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 105; Mathison, 30; LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 7.

¹¹⁷ LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 5. The church is not the replacement for Israel but the continuity of the Israel of God. The church has replaced the Jewish nation as the people of God. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 210; Walton, 50, 126.

¹¹⁸ Acts 7:38 KJV. More modern translations use "assembly" (e.g., NIV) or "congregation" (e.g., NKJ, ESV, RSV). However, the original Greek reads *ekklēsia*, habitually translated "church," and there is no reason to deviate from this translation here.

¹¹⁹ Williamson, 428. The NT redefines the people of God, Walton, 123.

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have been removed (Eph 2:13-14) and the two have become “one man” (Eph 2:15), “one body” (Eph 3:6; 4:4) and one “holy temple” (Eph 2:21),¹²⁰ “one household,” (Eph 2:19).¹²¹

Paul’s outstanding illustration of the unity of God’s people is the Olive tree analogy (Rom 11:11-24). Israel is a divinely cultivated olive tree (cf. Jer 11:16; 17:4-6) chosen by God to bless the world.¹²² Unbelieving Israelites are broken off from the olive tree.¹²³ Believing Gentiles who are referred to as wild olive branches, are grafted into the tree to replace those broken off. Together, the two sets of branches represent the united people of God. There is one olive tree, not two.¹²⁴

Other NT depictions of the unity of the people of God include “one flock” (John 10:16), “one vine” (John 15), “one chosen people, one holy nation, one royal priesthood” (1 Pet 2:9), “one bride” (Rev 19:7)¹²⁵ and “one holy city” (Rev 21:12-14).¹²⁶ Heb 11, after enumerating a list of OT faithful, notes that these will not be made perfect apart from the NT saints (Heb 11:40).¹²⁷ It also declares that they waited for a heavenly city and reward, not earthly (11:16). Peter describes the Church using the same terms spoken by God at the ratification of the covenant at Sinai (1 Pet 2:9 cf. Exod. 19:5-6).¹²⁸ Revelation, describes all God’s people as a kingdom of kings and priests from every nation, tongue, tribe and people all bought with and washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 7:9). The above passages suggest an overall unity of God’s people, in both the Old and New Testaments.

¹²⁰ The temple is no longer a building but a community. It is a metaphor of unity, the unity of believers with one another in Christ that exists because of the indwelling presence of God in the Spirit (1 Cor 3:16f; 2 Cor 6:16-17:1; cf. Ezek 37:27; Eph 2:20-22). Amazingly, the house that God promised to build for David now turns out to be the house that David’s Son builds for God! The restored house of David (Acts 15:15ff) is the new temple and its cornerstone is Christ. All who believe in Christ, who is David’s Son and God’s Son, enter into David’s house and God’s house. And the promises are fulfilled,” Holwerda, 80, 82.

¹²¹ Gulley, 730; Hasel, 138-139; Mathison, 26, 31, 34; Cox, 44; Fuller, 175; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 111-114; Walton, 125; Pfandl, 28.

¹²² Mathison, 33.

¹²³ Mathison, 33; Hasel, 139.

¹²⁴ Mathison, 33; Hasel, 139.

¹²⁵ Both the Church and the New Jerusalem are called the bride of Christ, indicating that the members of the church and the citizens of that city are the same (2 Cor 11:2; Rev 21:2, 9; 22:17), Holwerda, 111.

¹²⁶ Gulley, 742; Mathison, 26, 35; La Rondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 210.

¹²⁷ Mathison, 34-35; Sizer, *Zion’s Christian Soldiers?*, 70-71; Holwerda, 109.

¹²⁸ Gulley, 731; La Rondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 105; Bass, 152-153.

2. God's Promises to Israel: Conditional or Unconditional?

2.1 Promises and Fulfillments

The Scriptures present a God who is faithful to His covenant promises. Dispensationalism claims God made unconditional covenant promises to Israel, therefore He must fulfill them. Is this true? In reality, for every promise God made, there were conditions.¹²⁹ While God's covenant promises and blessings were irrevocable, they were only to be fulfilled and enjoyed as long as the people were obedient to His covenant.¹³⁰

Before Abraham could receive the covenant blessings, he was to leave his father's house (Gen 12:1-3), live blamelessly (Gen 17:1), circumcise all male members of his household (Gen 17:9-14) and teach them God's ways (Gen 18:19; 26:2-5).¹³¹ In the Sinaitic covenant, God would make Israel His special treasure IF they kept the words of the covenant (Exod 19:5-6).¹³² In the Deuteronomic covenant renewal, the blessings and curses that would result from keeping or breaking the covenant were clearly stated (Deut 28-29).¹³³ In the Davidic covenant, the condition was also obedience and faithfulness to the covenant (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Kings 2:2-4; 3:6; 6:12; 8:25; 9:4-9; Ps 89:30-32; 132:11-12).¹³⁴ The new covenant also had the promise of empowerment to fulfill the condition of obedience to God's law through the Spirit (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-28).¹³⁵

Each of these covenants was in jeopardy if broken; most of them were. Abraham proved unfaithful on several occasions (Gen 12:10-20; 16: 1-4; 17:15-18; 20:1-18) until his obedience was confirmed in Genesis 22. The Israelites broke the Sinaitic covenant in the incident of the golden calf (Exod 32-33).¹³⁶ The Deuteronomic and Davidic covenants were broken when Israel and her kings turned from God to idols and, as a result, went into captivity: Israel in 722 BC (2 Kings 15: 29-17:24), and Judah in 586 BC (2 Kings 18:17-19, 36; Dan 1:1-3).¹³⁷

¹²⁹ This point is confirmed in the succeeding sentences of the paragraph.

¹³⁰ Murray, 18.

¹³¹ Williamson, 424; Robertson, 113-114; Pink, 108-109; Hasel, 142-143; Unterman, 208.

¹³² Williamson, 424; Murray, 21-22; Walton, 114.

¹³³ Gulley, 730; Walton, 114.

¹³⁴ Williamson, 425; Murray, 23; Walton, 115; Hasel, 144-145; Unterman, 208; Goldingay, 776.

¹³⁵ Williamson, 427; Fuller, 143-144; Unterman, 209; Goldingay, 774; MacCarty, 29-30.

¹³⁶ Williamson, 424.

¹³⁷ Gulley, 733, 745; Williamson, 426; Schreiner, 451.

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It should also be noted that the fulfillments of covenant promises did take place. Gen 12:1-3 is the over-all programmatic covenant. In it God promised posterity and land. When Israel as a nation was born through God's divine deliverance from Egyptian bondage, it was a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant promise of nationhood (Exod 2:23-24; 3:7-8, 16-22; 6:4-6; 13:5, 11).¹³⁸ The conquest and possession of Canaan fulfilled the promise of land. During the reigns of David and Solomon, these two promises reached an apogee (1 Kings 4:20-21; 1 Chron 27:23; 2 Chron 1:9).¹³⁹ After the exile, the promises of return were also fulfilled (Ezra 2:1ff; 8: 1, 31-32; Neh 7:4ff).

Beyond the literal fulfillment, the NT gives a Christological dimension to the covenant promises.¹⁴⁰ The Abrahamic covenant becomes the programmatic basis for the fulfillment of the Messianic promise since the heart of that covenant was "the seed of Abraham" that would bless all the nations of the world (Gen 12:3).¹⁴¹ All subsequent covenants were connected to the Abrahamic. While the Sinaitic covenant guaranteed the preservation of Israel in the land until the arrival of Abraham's seed, the Davidic covenant identified the royal dynasty from which the anticipated victorious seed of Abraham would come.¹⁴² The New covenant would be fulfilled when the promised seed arrived making this covenant the expansion and ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.¹⁴³

Matthew, begins his genealogy of Jesus with Abraham to show that through Jesus, God's promise of blessing for the nations is fulfilled (Matt 1:1, 17 cf. Gen 12:3).¹⁴⁴ He also connects Jesus' genealogy with David bringing to mind the Davidic covenant and proving that Jesus was the

¹³⁸ Williamson, 424.

¹³⁹ Mathison, 26-27.

¹⁴⁰ Gulley, 729; LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 18. The OT prophets prophesied in types—pointing to antitypes that transcended the types—a greater Exodus from Assyria-Babylon (Isa 43:16-19; 51:10-11; 52; 11:15), a new Melchizedek (Ps 110), a new Moses (Deut 18:15-19); a new Elijah (Mal 4:5), a Davidic Messiah greater than David (Isa 9:1-7; 11:1-9; 55:1-5; Jer 23: 5-6; 30:9; 33:14-18; Ezek 34:23-31; 37:24-28), a new temple (Ezek 41-48), a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34), a new people (Ezek 36:26; 37:11-14). These OT prophetic types foreshadowed a higher, greater, universal, more transcendent fulfillment. The typological correlation of type and antitype is considered part of OT prophecy. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 52-55.

¹⁴¹ LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 18.

¹⁴² Williamson, 424, 426.

¹⁴³ Murray, 27.

¹⁴⁴ Holwerda, 32, 33, 36; Williamson, 427; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 65-66; Schreiner, 451.

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fulfillment of it, the promised Son of David, the Messiah King of Israel (1:1).¹⁴⁵ Matthew shows that Jesus recapitulated Israel's history and succeeded where Israel failed. He fulfilled the Law of the Sinaitic Covenant (5:17-48).¹⁴⁶ He was greater than David (12:1-4), Solomon (12:42), Jonah (12:41), and the temple (12:6).¹⁴⁷ In Him, the blessings of the new covenant (cleansing, forgiveness and salvation) are experienced (1:21; 8:1-4, 17; 9:1-8; 11:2-5).¹⁴⁸ In this sense, Jesus was the true Israel¹⁴⁹ along with all who believed in Him regardless of their racial ancestry.¹⁵⁰

Acts also points to Jesus as the Messiah of OT prophecy and "the promises made to the fathers" (Acts 2:30, 39; 3:25; 7:52; 13:16-19, 32-34; 15:14-17; 26:6, 23).¹⁵¹ Paul points to Jesus as the "seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:16) and therefore all who believe in Jesus are also children of Abraham (Gal 3: 26-29).¹⁵² According to Hebrews, Christ represents a better ministry (Heb 8:6), a better sacrifice (Heb 10:11-12), a better covenant, and better promises (Heb 8:6) than OT types.¹⁵³ This confirms that all OT types were fulfilled in Jesus. All sacrificial lambs pointed to the Lamb of God (John 1:29; Rev 5:12-13; 13:8).¹⁵⁴ All prophets, priests and kings of the OT pointed to the Christ's prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministries fulfilled in

¹⁴⁵ John Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (London: SCM, 1977), 197; Holwerda, 33-34, 36; Schreiner, 451.

¹⁴⁶ Williamson, 427.

¹⁴⁷ Gulley, 729.

¹⁴⁸ Williamson, 427.

¹⁴⁹ "Israel as the people of God in search of its destiny finds its answer in the One who is both true Israel and Israel's king, the Son of Abraham and the Son of David." Holwerda, 34, 44, 56.

¹⁵⁰ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 64-65. Holwerda emphasizes that Israel is not established by birthright or racial purity. This is evidenced by the inclusion of the names of four foreign women in Jesus' family tree—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Holwerda, 34, 35.

¹⁵¹ Gulley, 729; Williamson, 428; LaRondelle, "Understanding Israel in Prophecy," 18.

¹⁵² Gulley, 729; Mathison, 27; Williamson, 428; Bass, 151-152.

¹⁵³ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 18; Williamson, 429; Murray, 28-29; Gulley, 729; Fuller, 165; Hillers, 179. The book of Hebrews contains the most developed new covenant theology in the NT. It repeatedly refers to the new covenant (Heb 7:22; 8:6-10:31; 12:18-24; 13:20) and directly quotes twice from Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Heb 8:8-12; 10:16-17). Williamson, 429; Walton, 153-154; Unterman, 209; Mendenhall, 723; Goldingay, 775. The book of Hebrews also sees the church as the fulfillment of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 114-121.

¹⁵⁴ Gulley, 729.

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Jesus.¹⁵⁵ In Jesus all the covenant promises are “Yes” and “Amen,” ultimately fulfilled (2 Cor 1:20).¹⁵⁶

Since Jesus Christ fulfills all covenant promises, all who believe in Him, regardless of biological descent and ancestry, are Abraham’s seed and co-heirs of the promises (Gal 3:7, 26-29).¹⁵⁷ Those who are united to Jesus by faith, like Abraham, are called the Church.¹⁵⁸ The Church thus becomes the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant through the gospel,¹⁵⁹ the means through which the nations are being blessed.¹⁶⁰ True Israel is defined only in relation to Jesus¹⁶¹ and all who believe in Him not by biological or racial descent.¹⁶²

2.2 Eschatology and Typology

The eschatology of Dispensationalism has a futuristic mosaic of events all related to consistent literalism and the Israel/Church dichotomy.¹⁶³ The destiny of Israel and the church have been described above. Here we will deal with two aspects of Dispensationalist eschatology: the covenant promise of the land of Canaan for national Israel and Israel’s millennial reign with Christ on earth.

¹⁵⁵ Gulley, 729.

¹⁵⁶ Gulley, 726, 731, 738, 742; Mathison, 29; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 18, 96. In Christ, the Abrahamic covenant (which reveals God’s faithfulness), the Sinaitic/Mosaic (which reveals God’s holiness), the Davidic (which reveals God’s sovereignty) and the new covenant (which reveals God’s universal salvation) are all fulfilled, Walton, 52.

¹⁵⁷ Mathison, 27; Williamson, 428; Morna D. Hooker, *New Wine in Old Bottles: A Discussion of Continuity and Discontinuity in Relation to Judaism and the Gospel*. (University of London, 1984), 9; Gulley, 731; Walton, 124. “Abraham’s family is a universal family defined in its essence by Christ and the promised inheritance belongs to Christ and those who are his,” Holwerda, 180.

¹⁵⁸ E.g., Matt 8:12; 13:12-14; 21:43; 23:37-39 cf. Lk 16:19-31; 19:42-44. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 102-103; Williamson, 427; Holwerda, 55.

¹⁵⁹ The gospel of Jesus Christ is the new covenant (2 Cor 4:3-6), Williamson, 427.

¹⁶⁰ Mathison, 28; Williamson, 428.

¹⁶¹ Holwerda, 36; Williamson, 428.

¹⁶² Williamson, 428; Gulley, 731; Holwerda, 57; Schreiner, 451. The ecclesiological fulfillment completely removes any ancestral and national restrictions of Israel’s OT covenant. The new covenant people is no longer characterized by the bonds of race or country but exclusively by faith in Christ—as a “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9), the Israel of God (Gal 6:16), heirs to Israel’s covenant promises (Gal 3:29). LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 106.

¹⁶³ This includes the Rapture, the Tribulation and the millennial reign of Christ on earth, Bass, 38-46.

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Based on the hermeneutics of consistent literalism, Dispensationalism teaches that all promises concerning the land of Canaan will be fulfilled to the modern-day Jews.¹⁶⁴ The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the wars in 1956 and 1967, and the territorial expansions of the state (West Bank settlements) are seen as fulfillments of God's promises to Israel.¹⁶⁵

As noted earlier, the promises made to Abraham were already fulfilled in the time of Joshua and beyond (Josh 21:45; 1 Kings 4:20-21; 1 Chron 27:23, cf. Gen 15:5; 2 Chron 1:9, cf. Gen 13:16).¹⁶⁶ When Israel went into exile, their return was dependent on their faithfulness.¹⁶⁷ While the return of Israel to Palestine in 1948 is an event of major historical significance, it cannot be considered a fulfilment of prophetic promises because it is not based on faithfulness to the covenant, and the covenant's Messiah, Jesus.¹⁶⁸

As discussed earlier, the OT types and promises are expanded to their antitypes on a universal scale in the NT. When the Israelites eventually experienced and enjoyed the rest in the Promised Land, it marked the beginning of the ultimate consummation of the covenant promise of land.¹⁶⁹ The land of Canaan was a type of the heavenly land which was to come. The land promised to Abraham has been expanded to include the entire world (Rom 4:13).¹⁷⁰ In Jesus Christ, the true Israel inherits the whole earth (Matt 5:5).¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁴ Hasel, 141. According to Dispensationalism, the final destiny of Israel is Palestine (during the millennium) and for the church, it is heaven. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 135. Of course, the concept of literal, physical descendants is a difficult one. Jews consider Judaism primarily a religion, not an entity of biological ancestry. Thus, anyone from any background who converts to Judaism, is considered a Jew. This can be seen in the very racial makeup of modern Judaism and Israel. Conversely, Jews who abandon their faith and espouse, say, Christianity, are no longer considered Jews.

¹⁶⁵ Hasel, 141.

¹⁶⁶ LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 139.

¹⁶⁷ Gulley, 735. Israel cannot possess the land without Yahweh. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 137.

¹⁶⁸ Gulley, 734-735. Entrance into the land was denied to those who lacked faith, and Moses himself was denied entrance because of Israel's disobedience (Deut 4:21). Holwerda, 90.

¹⁶⁹ Williamson, 426.

¹⁷⁰ Mathison, 27-28; Williamson, 428; Holwerda, 103; Hasel, 146.

¹⁷¹ Mathison, 28; Holwerda, 103; Hasel, 146. All promises to Israel are fulfilled and personalized in Christ. Territory was insignificant and place does not matter. All that is significant is "in Christ." The promises have been "de-territorialized," Holwerda, 101.

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The NT is clear that Palestine was not the ultimate goal of Abraham and his descendants of faith.¹⁷² Rather they waited for the heavenly kingdom (2 Timothy 4:18; 1 Pet 1:4), the heavenly Canaan, the heavenly New Jerusalem, the new heavens and earth whose builder and maker is God (Heb 11:9-10, 13-16; 12:22, 24; 13:14; 2 Pet 3:13).¹⁷³ Dispensationalism ignores this typological escalation. The new heavens and new earth will be the inheritance of the true Israel and not a return of national racial Israel to Palestine during the millennium.¹⁷⁴

In addition, the immediate context of Rev 20 indicates that the millennium will be celebrated in heaven not on earth.¹⁷⁵ Consequently, according to Biblical evidence, the nation of Israel's establishment in Palestine is not a fulfillment of God's land promise in the OT nor will it inherit and reign on the earth in the millennium. On the contrary, the true Israel in Christ will enjoy the whole new earth as its inheritance. It is worth noting that the New Jerusalem is described with features from the OT tribes and the NT apostles showing that both make up the one united community of God's redeemed people.¹⁷⁶ This city will be the capital of the New Earth and God Himself will live there (Rev 21:3, 4).

¹⁷² Gulley, 736.

¹⁷³ Gulley, 731, 736; LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 138-140, 143-145; Robertson, 215; Holwerda, 105, 109-112; Hasel, 147-148.

¹⁷⁴ Gulley, 742.

¹⁷⁵ Gulley, 743. Revelation 20 points out that the saints will reign with Jesus Christ on thrones (Rev 20:4-6). However, there is debate over where these thrones are located. In the book of Revelation, There are 47 references to the word "throne." Apart from 11 verses which mention "throne" in reference to other beings (the Lamb, 24 elders, the saints, the beast and Satan), 36 of them refer to God individually (1:4; 3:21; 4:2(2x), 3, 4, 5(2x), 6(3x), 9, 10; 5:1, 6, 7, 11, 13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 11(2x), 15(2x), 17; 8:3; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4, 5; 20:11, 12; 21:3, 5). See Laslo Gallusz, "Thrones in the book of Revelation Part 1: Throne of God," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 23/2 (2013): 30-31. This implies that most of the references to thrones in Revelation are located in heaven especially in reference to God and His throne in the heavenly sanctuary. In addition, the literary structure of Revelation 20:1-10 (from the perspective of geographical location) can be seen as follows: earthly (1-3) to heavenly (4-6) and to earthly again (7-10). This is according to these two sources: William H. Shea, "The Parallel Structure of Rev 12 and 20," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 (1985): 47-49; Michel Gourgès, "The Thousand Year Reign (Rev 20:1-6): Terrestrial or Celestial?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985): 681. Since the thrones in Revelation are mostly in heaven in reference to God and the saints reign with Christ as mentioned in Rev 20:4, 6 which fall into the heavenly location, it can be said that the millennial reign of the saints with Christ mentioned in Rev 20:4-6 will take place in heaven not on earth.

¹⁷⁶ Sizer, *Zion's Christian Soldiers*, 72.

Conclusion

This study has given an overview of Israel as a people of the covenant especially on the identity of the people and its implications for Gentiles both in the Old and New Testaments. It has also presented the basic tenets of Dispensationalism on the Israel-Church dichotomy of the people of the covenant. The major arguments were evaluated based on biblical texts and principles to determine their consistency and validity within the biblical context of salvation history.

The covenant theme can be traced throughout the Bible and it emphasizes God's relationship with His people. However, the Dispensationalist system of theology states that God has two distinct people who remain separate through time and eternity: Israel and the Church. A careful study of the Biblical theme of the people of God's covenant shows that there has always been only one people of God through all of Scripture: those who accept and obey God, and, ultimately, His Son Jesus.

Dispensationalism does not seem to fit well with the biblical evidence presented in this article. It imposes divisions on the flow of salvation history. Consequently it wrongly divides the people of God and in essence, "puts asunder what God has joined together (in the OT and NT Church)."¹⁷⁷ This leads to inconsistency and a partitioning of the one whole united truth of God's work for humankind in the redemptive history of the Bible as it is in Jesus. Its hermeneutics stand as an obstacle to the main aim of the Covenant which God states clearly at the end of the Great Controversy: "I will be their God and they will be My people" (Rev 21:3)—One people of God not two.

¹⁷⁷ Gerstner, 8.

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