

Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?

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SHOULD OLD TESTAMENT prophecies regarding God's promise to restore the nation of Israel be taken literally? Must our eschatology allow for an age in the future in which these proph-

ecies are fulfilled? One of the major reasons why some insist on a future millennium where Jesus will reign as king over the nation of Israel is due to the belief that many Old Testament prophecies are not yet fulfilled.¹ In other words, a future reign of Jesus over the people of Israel (in fulfillment of OT prophecies) is one of the main reasons a millennial kingdom is needed.² For without such a kingdom, it is believed that God would have failed to deliver the promises given in His word. To spiritualize these promises, it is sometimes argued,

does not do justice to the specific nature of these promises. For example, Wayne Grudem explains that a characteristic of pretribulational (or dispensational) premillennialism "is its insistence on interpreting biblical prophecies 'literally where possible.' This especially applies to prophecies in the Old Testament concerning Israel."³

One such prophecy is found in Amos 9:11–15:

"In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," declares the LORD who does this. "Behold, the days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and

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they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the LORD your God.⁴

Does this prophecy refer to a time in the future when God will restore the nation of Israel and grant them unprecedented peace and prosperity? A time when their cities are restored, their enemies are defeated, and their lands yield abundant crops? Or, should this prophecy be interpreted symbolically referring to a time when God will bless his covenant people in ways that words cannot really describe. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that certain prophecies, especially Old Testament restoration prophecies regarding the nation of Israel, should be interpreted symbolically. The reasons for a symbol interpretation include (1) the true nature of biblical religion, (2) the unique genre of biblical prophecy, (3) the symbolic manner in which the New Testament interprets Old Testament prophecies, and (4) the central role of Jesus’ death and resurrection in salvation history.

THE TRUE NATURE OF BIBLICAL RELIGION

The Christian faith is a religion of the heart. It is not primarily external but internal. Mere outward, external religion is never the goal of our faith. God is primarily interested in the deeper, inner faith of His people. This is true not only for the New Testament but is also clearly seen in the Old Testament.

CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART

Circumcision was a significant part of both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. It was the outward sign that separated God’s chosen people from the other nations. And yet, according to the Old Testament, true circumcision was not the outward, physical act but the inward circumcision

of the heart:

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn (Deut 10:16).

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live (Deut 30:6).

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem (Jer 4:4a).

This emphasis on the inner circumcision of the heart is continued in the New Testament (Rom 2:25–29; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15; Phil 3:2–3; Col 2:11).

SACRIFICE OF AN OBEDIENT AND BROKEN HEART

In the Old Testament God required daily sacrifices from His people. These sacrifices usually required the shedding of an animal’s blood. But we know that such sacrifices were merely an outward sign that signified God’s perfect standard and the need for atonement. God was always more interested in heart-felt obedience than He was in the mere shedding of an animal’s blood.

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams (1 Sam 15:22b).

Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required (Psalm 40:6).

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17).

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

A DIFFERENT KIND OF FASTING

The act of denying the body food or drink often signifies devotion to God. It demonstrates that God and His word are more important than satisfying the desires of the body. It is an outward act that reflects the inward commitment. But if the inward attitude does not accompany the external act, fasting becomes a mockery to God.

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress your workers.... Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? (Isa 58:3b, 5–7).

Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them (Jer 14:12a).

Even with all of its external rituals and requirements, the old covenant was essentially about the heart. In the new covenant, this inward focus becomes more evident as many of the outward elements are stripped away.

The above comments and Scripture references do not prove that certain Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel must be taken symbolically. God is interested in the physical aspect—even in heaven. For instance, the Bible clearly teaches that believers will be given a physical, resurrected body. My point is simply this: If the new covenant, with its focus on the spiritual, is the fulfillment of God's plan, why should we go back to the shadows and images? (Col 2:17; Heb 8:5). By returning to shadows and images, are we guilty of reversing God's plan of redemp-

tive history? The Jews of Jesus' day were expecting the Messiah to establish a tangible, earthly kingdom based on their (mis)understanding of the Old Testament. Thus, the messianic kingdom became primarily the political rule of Israel over all the nations—a time when there would be an abundance of wealth and prosperity. But they were mistaken. Could it be that we are guilty of the same? Could it be that we have mistaken the shell for the core?⁵ Is it really God's intention for the nation of Israel to restore its cities, for them to defeat their enemies, or for their land to yield abundant crops (Amos 9:11–15)? Or do these promises have an even greater significance? Could it be that the prophets used metaphorical language to describe the nature in which God would fulfill His promises?

THE UNIQUE GENRE OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

How do we know if a prophecy should be taken literally or symbolically? Certainly not all prophecy is symbolic or figurative. For example, the prophet Isaiah tells us that the Messiah would be born of a virgin (Isa 7:14) and Micah informs us that He would be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2). These prophecies were fulfilled literally—why not the rest?⁶ The answer to this question depends (1) on the nature of the prophecy and (2) the language used in the prophecy. Prophecy concerning the end of time or the coming of God's kingdom is often described using metaphorical language. The prophets often employed earthly imagery to describe a heavenly reality. The messianic kingdom was often pictured as a return from exile and often included a rebuilt temple (built on mount Zion which will become the highest mountain), resumed temple sacrifices, and wild animals dwelling together peacefully. The reason for this was simple. The prophets spoke and wrote in terms that both they and their audience would understand. They described the messianic kingdom in terms of concepts and imagery that was meaningful to the people of that day. Amos

describes the future in terms that communicate the highest blessings of God. Their cities would be rebuilt, their enemies would be conquered, their land would produce more than seemed possible, and they would dwell in the land forever.

The prophets often employed figurative or cosmic language to describe the great works of God in history. For example, the prophet Isaiah declares,

Behold, the day of the LORD comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it. For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.... Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger (Isa 13:9–10, 13).

At first glance one might surmise that this prophecy must pertain to the day of the great judgment of God. But the first verse of the chapter reads, “The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw” (Isa 13:1). In verse 19 we again read that this judgment prophecy relates to the nation of Babylon: “And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them.” It was common for the prophets to use figurative, cosmic language to describe God’s intervention in history and His sovereign rule of all nations. Robert Stein explains,

Such imagery was not meant to be interpreted literally. The sun was not actually going to be darkened; the moon would not stop giving its light; the stars would not stop showing their light. “What” the author willed to communicate by this imagery, that God was going to bring judgment upon Babylon, was to be understood “literally.” And that willed meaning, God’s judgment upon Babylon, did take place.... Babylon

had been judged just as the prophecy proclaimed, and it was God’s doing just as the cosmic imagery described. The imagery itself, however, was understood by the prophet and his audience as part of the stock terminology used in this kind of literature to describe God’s intervention into history.⁷

We also find examples of this type of metaphorical language in the New Testament. John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, a role that was foretold by the prophet Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Luke 3:3). Although both Matthew and Mark quote from Isa 40:3, only Luke adds verses 4 and 5 which state, “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” If we take these verses literally, then the landscape and geography of the land of Israel would have been dramatically altered. By quoting these verses Luke sees them as being fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist.⁸ Luke was not bothered by the fact that these events did not take place in a literal fashion. He understood that the meaning behind these verses was that God was going to sovereignly move in history by sending a prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah. “It is clear that Luke understood this imagery figuratively as referring to the humbling of the proud and the exaltation of the repentant through the preaching of John the Baptist.”⁹

We are not at liberty to change the meaning of the Bible according to our whims. We must base our exegesis and interpretation on sound principles. If a literal meaning was intended then we should simply trust God and follow a literal interpretation. But certain parts of the Bible (especially poetry, prophecy, and apocalyptic literature) are not meant to be interpreted literally.¹⁰ The prophets often communicated a divine message using earthly language. That is, the prophets used

earthly language to describe a more profound heavenly reality—a reality that finds its fulfillment in Christ. Graeme Goldsworthy correctly insists that we should not interpret prophecies literally “if by literal is meant that fulfilment must be in the precise terms of the promise, and that the reality is only a future repetition of the foreshadowing.”¹¹ He continues,

The New Testament knows nothing of this kind of literalism. It repeatedly maintains that Christ is the fulfilment of these terms, images, promises and foreshadowings in the Old Testament which were presented in a way that is different from the fulfilment. For the New Testament the interpretation of the Old Testament is not ‘literal’ but ‘Christological’. That is to say that the coming of the Christ transforms all the Kingdom terms of the Old Testament into gospel reality.¹²

THE SYMBOLIC MANNER IN WHICH THE NT INTERPRETS OT PROPHECIES

One of the principles of sound hermeneutics is that we should let Scripture interpret Scripture. We might be inclined to interpret a passage one way but we must give precedence to the wisdom of God. How do the New Testament writers interpret Old Testament prophecies and promises to the nation of Israel?

ACTS 2:14–21 (JOEL 2:28–32)

After the Spirit came at Pentecost, Jewish pilgrims from all over the world began to hear the disciples of Jesus speak their languages. Many were amazed at this phenomenon, but others mocked and said those speaking were merely drunk with wine. At this point, Peter stood up and declared to the large crowd that these people were not drunk but rather what was taking place was spoken through the prophet Joel: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17). Peter quoted from Joel 2 because he believed that with

the coming of the Spirit, this text was being fulfilled. Furthermore, he applied Joel’s vision not to the nation of Israel, but to the church. John Stott offers a powerful warning:

It is the unanimous conviction of the New Testament authors that Jesus inaugurated the last days or Messianic age, and that the final proof of this was the outpouring of the Spirit, since this was the Old Testament promise of promises for the end-time. This being so, we must be careful not to re-quote Joel’s prophecy as if we are still awaiting fulfilment, or even as if its fulfilment has been only partial, and we await some future and complete fulfilment. For this is not how Peter understood and applied the text.¹³

Another interesting feature is that this prophecy also includes cosmic language similar to other Old Testament apocalyptic prophecies. In Acts 2:19–20 Peter, quoting from Joel 2:30–31, states,

And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.

Some might respond by claiming that this prophecy clearly has not yet been fulfilled. The sun has not turned to darkness and the moon has not turned to blood. But we must be careful not to force the text to mean something it was never intended to mean. Peter (and Luke) had no difficulty in affirming that the prophecy given by Joel was fulfilled in the coming of the Spirit. Peter knew that such cosmic language should not be interpreted literally. Rather, he knew that such language meant that God would sovereignly intervene in history and do something miraculous. Stein rightly comments, “These cosmic signs did not literally take place at Pentecost, even though what the author willed to convey by those signs did.... The conventional cosmic imagery used

in this prophecy of Joel was understood by both Peter and Luke as being fulfilled in the events of Pentecost.”¹⁴ If we interpret this passage literally we are forced to say this text (and many other texts) has not yet been fulfilled. The text pointed to a literal reality (that God would miraculously intervene in history), but that reality was described using figurative language.

ACTS 15:16–17 (AMOS 9:11–12)

In Acts 15 Luke recounts the proceedings of the so-called Jerusalem Council. In seeking to refute the notion that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1), Peter declared his conviction that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas also related all that God had done among them with the Gentiles. Finally, James stood up and quoted Amos 9:11–12 as proof that God had made the Gentiles His own people, just as was foretold by the prophets.

After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old. (Acts 15:16–17)¹⁵

Interestingly, James does not apply this text to some future millennium kingdom when the people of Israel regain their independence and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Instead, it is used as justification for accepting the Gentiles into the people of God without needing to be circumcised. “James is saying that the wonderful thing which is now happening, namely, that the Gentiles are now coming into the fellowship of God’s people, is a fulfillment of the words of the prophet Amos about the building up again of the fallen tabernacle of David.”¹⁶ Some might respond by stating that James is not claiming this text is fulfilled but is merely drawing attention to the fact that Amos

mentions the Gentiles (or nations) seeking the Lord. But James could have simply quoted verse 12 and left out verse 11. The reason James includes verse 11 is that he sees the salvation of Gentiles as part of the restoration processes of Israel. The house of David is being rebuilt—not just out of physical Jews but also out of spiritual Jews. John Polhill rightly comments,

In the Gentiles, God was choosing a people for himself, a new *restored* people of God, Jew and Gentile in Christ, the true Israel. In the total message of Acts it is clear that the rebuilt house of David occurred in the Messiah. Christ was the scion of David who fulfilled the covenant of David and established a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam 7:12f.; cf. Acts 13:32–34). From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles.¹⁷

Based on the interpretation given by James and recorded by Luke, we have another clear example of the New Testament interpreting an Old Testament restoration passage in a nonliteral or symbolic manner.

HEBREWS 8:8–12 (JEREMIAH 31:31–34)

In seeking to demonstrate that the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, the author of Hebrews quotes several verses from Jeremiah 31. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises, “I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Heb 8:8). The point to be made here is that this covenant is said to be made with people of Israel and Judah. Does this covenant include Gentile Christians? Or is this a special covenant made only with the Jewish people? Although it is true that this particular letter was written to a primarily (or perhaps even exclusively) Jewish audience, there is no New Testament evidence that God makes one covenant

with the Jews and then a separate covenant with the Gentiles. Rather, the mentioning of Israel and Judah indicates that God's people will again be reunited. "The promise of the reunion of Israel and Judah was symbolic of the healing of every human breach and the reconciliation of all nations and persons in Christ, the seed of Abraham in whom all the peoples of the earth are blessed and united."¹⁸ For, as we are taught in the New Testament, what makes someone a real Jew is not physical birth, but spiritual birth. Paul boldly declares, "For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God" (Rom 2:28–29). Abraham is the father of all believers, not just those from the physical people of Israel. He is also the father of those Gentiles who believe in the Messiah and, consequently, are grafted into the covenant that God made with Abraham (Rom 4:11; 11:17). In Galatians Paul affirms that "it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham" (Gal 3:7). Similarly, he later adds, "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29). He labels the churches in Galatia (which consisted of both Jews and Gentiles) "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16).

The new covenant is not a covenant that merely applies to those who are physical descendants of Abraham. It is offered to all those who place their trust and hope in the Messiah, who was a physical descendent of Abraham. To claim that the promises of Jeremiah 31:31–34 (or Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27) do not apply to the church, seems to ignore how the New Testament writers themselves applied such promises.¹⁹

1 PETER 2:9–10 (EXODUS 6:7; 19:5–6; ISAIAH 43:20–21)

To the elect exiles scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, the Apostle Peter writes,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:9–10).

These verses echo several Old Testament references describing the nation of Israel. Peter claims that Christians are a "chosen race" (Isa 43:20), a "royal priesthood" and a "holy nation" (Exod 19:6; cf. 23:22, LXX), "a people for his own possession" (Exod 19:5; Isa 43:21; Mal 3:17), and once they were "not a people" who had "not received mercy" but now they are "God's people" who have "received mercy" (Exod 6:7; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 37:23; Hos 1:6, 9; 2:1, 23). Originally, these verses signified God's covenant with the people of Israel. And yet, Peter applies these verses to the church. "Peter saw these promises as fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and God's elect nation is no longer coterminous with Israel but embraces the church of Jesus Christ, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles."²⁰

Some may argue that Peter was writing only to Jewish Christians so that these verses cannot be used as evidence. After all, it is thought, Peter was the apostle to the Jews. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that Peter's audience consisted primarily of Gentile Christians. In the first chapter Peter states, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance" (v. 14). Later in the same chapter he adds, "knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers" (v. 18). They formerly carried out the desires of the Gentiles (1 Pet 4:3–4) but now have been "called out of darkness" (1 Pet 2:9). These verses indicate that Peter is not writing to a Jewish audience.

What is crucial for our argument, then, is that Peter unashamedly applies the well-known Old Testament covenant terminology to the church.

Gentile believers are “being built up as a spiritual house”; they are God’s “holy” or “royal priesthood”; they are a “chosen race”; they are a “holy nation”; they are “God’s people” who have received mercy (1 Pet 2:5, 9–10). God has bestowed on the church the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament.

The New Testament writers do not seem to expect the Old Testament prophecies about the nation of Israel to be fulfilled literally. Some might object and claim that in Romans 11 Paul expects Israel as a nation to someday turn to Christ in faith. Although there is doubt as to whether Paul teaches a future mass conversion of the nation of Israel in Romans 11:26,²¹ Bavinck rightly notes that “even if Paul expected a national conversion of Israel at the end, he does not say a word about the return of the Jews to Palestine, about a rebuilding of the city and a temple, about a visible rule of Christ: in his picture of the future there simply is no room for all this.”²² A literal fulfillment was not expected but rather New Testament writers correctly saw fulfillment in Christ and in the gospel. They correctly understood John the Baptist to be Elijah (Mal 4:5–6; Matt 17:11–13). They correctly understood the promise to David—that his son would someday establish an eternal kingdom—was fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus (2 Sam 7:12–16; Acts 2:29–36; also see Acts 13:29–32). There was no hesitation to say Christians have already come to “Mount Zion,” which is also called “the heavenly Jerusalem” and “the city of the living God” (Heb 12:22). The main issue then is not how we think the Old Testament should be interpreted and consequently impose an overly literalistic hermeneutic on the texts. Rather, we must learn from how the New Testament writers themselves interpreted the Old Testament. When we do this, we will see that the Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel are fulfilled in Christ and in the gospel.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF JESUS’ DEATH AND RESURRECTION IN SALVATION HISTORY

One of the problems with interpreting Old Testament prophecies regarding the nation of Israel in a literal manner is that it tends to minimize the work of Christ, especially His suffering, death, and resurrection. How is this so? The New Testament teaches that the death and resurrection of Christ are the climax of God’s work in redemptive history. But if we interpret the many Old Testament restoration prophecies regarding the nation of Israel literally, then we are forced to say that such prophecies do not find their fulfillment in God’s greatest work. Instead, the first coming of Christ becomes ignored and all attention shifts to Christ’s second coming and the millennial kingdom.²³

Another problem with a literal interpretation is that the Old Testament consistently pictures a messianic kingdom that includes the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and the temple sacrifices. Bavinck explains, “All the prophets, with equal vigor and force, announce not only the conversion of Israel and the nations but also the return to Palestine, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and sacrificial worship.”²⁴ If we maintain that the prophet’s picture of the future must be literal, then we must take all the aspects literally.²⁵ In other words, if we insist that the nation of Israel will someday return to the Promised Land, rebuild the cities of Israel, and have Christ rule as their King, then we are also forced to include the notion that the Jews will again have a priesthood and offer sacrifices in the temple.²⁶

Listen to how the prophet Isaiah describes the restoration of Israel:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings

and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isa 56:6–7)

All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall come up with acceptance on my altar, and I will beautify my beautiful house. (Isa 60:7)

And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, just as the Israelites bring their grain offering in a clean vessel to the house of the LORD. And some of them also I will take for priests and for Levites, says the LORD. For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain. (Isa 66:20–22)

A similar picture is given by Jeremiah (3:16–17; 30:18; 31:21, 38), Ezekiel (36:28–38; 37:21–28; 39:25–29; chs. 40–48), Joel (3:17–20), Amos (9:11–15), Obadiah (17, 21), Micah (4:1–2; 7:11), Haggai (2:6–10), and Zechariah (1:17; 2:1–5; 3:1–8; 6:9–15; 8:3–23).

Yet, couched in the midst of these prophecies is also the expectation that what awaits Israel will be something that far exceeds any earthly fulfillment. There will be no need for the ark of the covenant because “Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD” (Jer 3:17). There will be no sin, sickness, or death: “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth” (Isa 25:8). There will be a new heaven and a new earth (Isa 65:17; 66:22) which have no need for the sun or the moon because the Lord himself will be the everlasting light (Isa 60:19–20). Thus, “although it is true that Old Testament prophecy cannot conceive the future kingdom of God without a temple and sacrifice, over and over it *transcends* all national and earthly conditions.”²⁷

If we insist on an overly literal interpretation we end up with Jewish believers who return to Jerusalem and reinstate the Old Testament sacrificial system as Christ reigns over them. Instead, we must see the prophets as using earthly language to describe a greater reality. At times, the prophets are forced to picture the future kingdom in terms that transcend the earthly or physical. Therefore, we must not interpret their earthly, physical descriptions in a literal manner. To do so minimizes the work of Christ. Christ is the only true prophet, priest, and king. His sacrifice was alone able to make atonement for the sins of the world. He is the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament predicted. To still be looking for the fulfillment of those Old Testament prophecies is to minimize the significance of the Messiah. All the benefits of our salvation that were promised and foreshadowed in the Old Testament have become a reality in Christ. Or, as Paul put it, all the promises of God are “yes” and “amen” in Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

CONCLUSION

The Old Testament presents a vivid and detailed picture of Israel’s future restoration. We have seen, however, that these descriptions are not meant to be taken literally. Although it is true that these predictions and promises have a real meaning, the meaning is not expressed *in* the actual language, but *through* the actual language. By insisting on a literal interpretation, we are in danger of forcing the text to mean something that God did not intend. The new covenant is characterized by the inner transformation of a person. This core was found in the old covenant but it was wrapped in an external shell. Now that the external shell has been shed, is it really God’s plan to reinstitute it? In addition, a literal interpretation does not do justice to the genre of biblical prophecy. There is no virtue in claiming to consistently apply a literal interpretation to texts that were not designed to be interpreted as such. The Old Testament prophets used metaphorical language to describe truths that otherwise would not

have been intelligible to their audience. Furthermore, the New Testament itself teaches us that we should not insist on a literal interpretation. There are abundant examples where New Testament authors offer a symbolic interpretation of Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel. Finally, affirming that the restored people of Israel will rebuild the temple, reinstate the priesthood, and restore animal sacrifices, minimizes the complete and perfect work of Christ. His death and resurrection is the focal point of God's great work in redemptive history. To go back to the shadows and images of the Old Testament is to neglect the centrality of Christ's finished work on the cross.

ENDNOTES

¹Grenz explains one of the major tenets of dispensationalism: "The millennium is the occasion for God to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies to bless the nation" (Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992], 99).

²Ryrie states, "The literal interpretation of Scripture leads naturally to ... the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. If the yet unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament made in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are to be literally fulfilled, there must be a future period, the Millennium, in which they can be fulfilled, for the church is not now fulfilling them. In other words, the literal picture of Old Testament prophecies demands either a future fulfillment or a nonliteral fulfillment. If they are to be fulfilled in the future, then the only time left for that fulfillment is the Millennium" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* [rev. and exp.; Chicago: Moody, 1995], 147).

³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1113–14.

⁴All Scripture texts are from the English Standard Version.

⁵I am borrowing this terminology from Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand

Rapids: Baker, 1996), 90. He writes, "In Jesus' day Israel expected a tangible, earthly, messianic kingdom whose conditions were depicted in the forms and images of the Old Testament prophecy. But now these forms and images were taken literally. The shell was mistaken for the core, the image of it for the thing itself, and the form for the essence. The messianic kingdom became the political rule of Israel over the nations—a period of external prosperity and growth."

⁶Ryrie, for example, argues that a literal interpretation should always be used because "the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ—His birth, His rearing, His ministry, His death, His resurrection—were all fulfilled literally" (*Dispensationalism*, 81).

⁷Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 92.

⁸Marshall notes that Luke's introductory "as" (Greek, *hōs*; "As it is written...") "suggests that a prophecy here finds its deliberate fulfillment rather than that a general pattern is being followed" (I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [New International Greek Testament Commentary; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978], 136).

⁹Stein, *Basic Guide*, 95. Bock likewise suggests that the reference to the physical geography has ethical overtones. He states that "the way is cleared for a humble and righteous people; the imagery has ethical dimensions" (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, [Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 293). He later adds, "The images call the hearer of John's message to realize that God is coming in judgment and that only the humble who rely on him will be spared.... The point is ... that this leveling imagery has ethical overtones. The physical imagery conveys ethical realities" (294).

¹⁰For example, all must admit that Amos 9:11–15 uses nonliteral language when the prophet says, "the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it" (v. 13). Figurative language is used to communicate a reality: God will abundantly bless

His people by supplying all their needs. The issue, then, is whether the physical blessing is as a metaphor for the greater spiritual blessings we receive in Christ and His kingdom.

¹¹Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 88. Also see his more recent work *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 169–71.

¹²Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 88.

¹³John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994) 73.

¹⁴Stein, *Basic Guide*, 93.

¹⁵There are notable differences between the Masoretic text and the LXX (which was recorded by Luke). The former speaks of Israel regaining its own land and possessing “the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name.” The LXX speaks of the remnant of “mankind” seeking the Lord.

¹⁶Anthony A. Hoekema, “An Amillennial Response,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977], 110). He continues, “In other words, the fallen tabernacle of David is being built up not in a material way (by means of a restored earthly kingdom) but in a spiritual way (as Gentiles are coming into the kingdom of God).” Grenz likewise comments, “The prophet anticipated an eschatological re-emergence of Israel as a dominant nation under the reign of David’s greater son, the Messiah. But the leader of the Jerusalem church claimed that the fulfillment of this text was the coming of the Gentiles to faith in Jesus” (*Millennial Maze*, 109).

¹⁷John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 330. I. Howard Marshall suggests that “the rebuilding of the tabernacle is to be understood as a reference to the raising up of the church as the new place of divine worship which replaced the temple” (*Acts* [Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 252). John Stott maintains that Christians see this passage “as a prophecy of the resurrection

and exaltation of Christ, the seed of David, and the establishment of his people” (*The Message of Acts*, 247). This is also the position of Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard who state that in Acts 15:16–17, “James says the fulfillment of Amos 9 is the admission of non-Jewish believers to the company of Jesus’ followers. He does so by interpreting Amos’ prediction of David’s future political rule as representing Christ’s spiritual rule over non-Jewish Christians” (William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Dallas: Word, 1993], 308).

¹⁸Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 300. Similarly, Kistemaker suggests that “because the ten tribes of Israel failed to return after the exile, the phrases ought to be understood in a more universalistic sense to include both Jews and Gentiles” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 225). Also see Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Biblical Interpretation*, 308.

¹⁹Interestingly, the promises of the new covenant often include restoration promises for Israel. For example, after Jeremiah describes the blessings of the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34), he states, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when the city shall be rebuilt for the LORD from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate” (Jer 31:38; also see Ezek 36:26–38). If the new covenant is given to the church, then the restoration promises to Israel should also be seen as being fulfilled in the church.

²⁰Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman), 114.

²¹See my earlier article, Ben L. Merkle, “Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 709–21.

²²Bavinck, *Last Things*, 107. Similarly, Berkhof comments, “It is remarkable that the New Testament, which is the fulfillment of the Old, contains no indication whatsoever of the re-establishment of the Old Testament theocracy by Jesus, nor a single undisputed positive prediction of its restoration, while it does contain abundant indications of the spiritual

fulfilment of the promises given to Israel (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941], 713). Along the same lines, Goldsworthy notes, “Many people in effect regard the second coming of Christ as involving a whole new work of God. This conclusion is forced upon them because they do not accept that all promise is fulfilled in the gospel. Thus, despite the scriptural evidence ... to the contrary, they see the return of Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple, the restoration of Davidic kingship as unrelated to the gospel and requiring separate fulfilment on some future occasion.” (*Gospel and Kingdom*, 95). He later writes, “The New Testament seems to be completely indifferent to the restoration referred to [in the Old Testament]” (*Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 170). Also see Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard who state that “the NT assumes that such prophecies have already achieved literal fulfillment through Christ and the Church. It leaves no reason to anticipate a second, later fulfillment” (*Biblical Interpretation*, 308).

²³Bavinck affirms that a literal interpretation “attributes a temporary, passing value to Christianity, the historical person of Christ, and his suffering and death, and only first expects real salvation from Christ’s second coming, his appearance in glory” (*Last Things*, 98). Perhaps Goldsworthy is even stronger: “I want to assert categorically that ALL prophecy was fulfilled in the gospel event at the first coming of Jesus.... There is a tendency to try to differentiate Old Testament prophecies of the end into two groups, those applying to the first coming and those applying to the second coming. This is a mistake. A more biblical perspective is one that recognizes that the distinction between the first and second coming is not what happens but in how it happens. Nothing will happen at the return of Christ that has not already happened in him at his first coming” (Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 93).

²⁴Ibid., 94.

²⁵In Bavinck’s words, “[I]t is nothing but caprice to take one feature of this picture literally and another ‘spiritually’” (ibid.).

²⁶Hoyt, for example, insists that the restoration of Israel will be a literal kingdom: “The actual place of its central location will be Jerusalem and vicinity (Obad. 12–21). A real King will sit on a material throne (Is. 33:17). Nations of mankind will participate in its ministry of welfare and deliverance (Is. 52:10). The wicked kingdoms of this world will be brought to a sudden and catastrophic end at the coming of Christ, and his kingdom will supplant them (Dan. 2:31–45). This kingdom will be a revival and continuation of the historical Davidic kingdom (Amos 9:11; see Acts 15:16–18). A faithful and regenerated remnant of Israel will be restored and made the nucleus of this kingdom, and thus the covenant with David will be fulfilled (Mic. 4:7–8; Jer. 33:15–22; Ps. 89:3–4, 34–37). Jerusalem will become the capital city of the great King, from which he will govern the world (Is. 2:3; 24:23)” (Herman A. Hoyt, “Dispensational Premillennialism” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977], 78–79). Hoyt seems intentionally to ignore the prophetic references of restoration of the priesthood and the temple sacrifices. Some maintain that the temple sacrifices will resume but not for purpose of atonement. Rather, they will serve as a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice. But are such sacrifices appropriate? Has not God already given His people a memorial in the Lord’s Supper?

²⁷Bavinck, *Last Things*, 95.