Thy Kingdom Come

A Conference on the Bible, Theology and the Future
Westminster, London, October 17-18, 2014

The Coming Kingdom and Biblical Interpretation

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KEYWORDS:

| Hermeneutics | Israel | Bible–Scripture | Supersessionalism | Speech-Act | Interpretation | Evangelical | Language | Definition | Promise |

ABSTRACT:

This paper, on the Coming Kingdom and Biblical Interpretation, describes the methods used to interpret the Bible. Initially this involves an analytical summary of the historical difference between literal and figurative approaches to Scripture and how an allegorical reading of the Bible was used to minimize the role played by the Jewish people in the plan of God. Typology is used today by a supersessionist approach to the Bible to reject the national and territorial promises of Israel and spiritualize them as being fulfilled in Jesus and thereby the Church. In conclusion we can demonstrate the weakness of this approach and argue for a holistic reading of the Bible in which all of God's promises, including those that speak of the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, are truly fulfilled.

This paper was originally published as 'Israel and Hermeneutics' in Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser, *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel: Israel and the Jewish People in the Plan of God*; our thanks and acknowledgement are to the Kregel Publications for permission to include it here:
http://store.kregel.com/productdetails.cfm?PC=3377

INTRODUCTION

Evangelical theologians basically divide into two camps on the question of the future of Israel: there are those who say that the Bible teaches a future for ethnic and national Israel and those who claim that it does not. Both sides appeal to the Bible in making their cases, which could be somewhat disconcerting. One might be tempted to dismiss the difference as "just a matter of interpretation," which in modern parlance often means a subjective decision on the order of a preference. However, this would be a mistake for two reasons. First, the subject—national and ethnic Israel—is not merely theoretical but a reality that is vitally important in our world today. Secondly, the question is not peripheral but central to the story line of the Bible. How one answers this question affects how one understands the story of the Bible from its beginning to its end. So, it is "a matter of interpretation," but one of such vital importance that we need to make sure we are interpreting correctly.

If this was a dispute on the football field or the basketball court, we would turn to the officials for a ruling. In the absence of officials, we would have to consult a rule book, which explains the game and how it is to be played. In our case, we are looking for "rules" of interpretation, and the place to find them is in the many books on hermeneutics, the disciplinary field that addresses the methods and practice

of interpretation.[11] In this chapter, we will look at some of the principles and guidelines for correct interpretation and see how they might resolve the dispute on how to correctly interpret what the Bible has to say about the future of Israel, its land and people.

TRADITIONAL CATEGORIES

Traditionally, the dispute has been characterized as a difference regarding the correct practice of *literal* and *spiritual* interpretation. Supersessionists, those who believe that the church has replaced ethnic and national Israel in the plan of God so that there is no future for the latter, argue that non-supersessionists, those who see a future for ethnic and national Israel in the divine plan, interpret parts of the Bible literally that are supposed to be understood spiritually. Non-supersessionists reply that supersessionists spiritualize parts of the Bible that should be interpreted literally.[2]

The problem is often compared to the difference between *literal* and *figurative* interpretation. Most people would know that Robert Burns' famous poem, "My Love is Like a Red Red Rose," is a figurative description of the poet's sweetheart. It would be a mistake, a misinterpretation, to think he was speaking of a bush. On the other hand, if I receive a text from my wife asking me to pick up some potatoes at the grocery store on my way home, and I interpret it figuratively as a request that I stop by the bookstore and purchase a book on hermeneutics for my light reading, that would be a mistake. Knowing when to interpret literally and when to interpret figuratively is somewhat intuitive, but mistakes can be made, and that's when one needs to clarify the "rules" of hermeneutics. This has led to an identification of various figures of speech and figurative genre (types of literature), their customary uses, and ways to recognize them.

The difference between *literal* and *spiritual* biblical hermeneutics has also been compared to the difference between *literal* and *allegorical* interpretation. Allegory is a particular kind of literary figure. It is a story in which the literal elements of the narrative are symbolic of philosophical, religious, or other ideas. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a good example of allegory. Its real meaning, intended by the

1. For an introduction to biblical hermeneutics, see William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993); Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991); G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980). On aspects of literary hermeneutics, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981; rev. ed. 2011); idem, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985; rev. ed. 2011); Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); V. Phillips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). On the broader field of hermeneutics, including philosophical hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980); idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). For a recent symposium covering different aspects of the field, see Stanley E. Porter and Beth M. Stovell, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012).

2. On Supersessionism, see Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville: B&H, 2010); Calvin L. Smith, ed. *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism* (Lampeter, UK: Kings Divinity Press, 2009); Barry Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville: B&H, 2008). As an example of the debate in terms of literal vs. spiritual hermeneutics, see the discussions of interpretation in John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959); J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958); and Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945).

author, lies on the allegorical, the symbolic level. Consequently, to interpret it correctly, one must read it *allegorically*. One would misinterpret *Pilgrim's Progress* if one thought that it was intended to be a literal narrative history of someone named Pilgrim.

Disputes arose in ancient times on the correct reading of the Greek epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These epics tell stories of the deeds of gods and men, and many of the ancients took them literally. However, some Greek philosophers, embarrassed by literal interpretations of Homer, suggested that the stories were to be read allegorically as teachings of philosophical ideas.

In the early centuries of the church, the question likewise arose as to whether the Bible should be read allegorically. On the one hand, Gnosticism taught that behind the façade of the literal narrative of Scripture lay a completely different symbolic world, construed according to the ideas of the particular Gnostic system. Gnosticism was clearly heretical on a number of points of Christian doctrine and Christian churches rejected the allegorical methods of various Gnosticisms as falsely imposing alien ideas upon the text. On the other hand, the church did accept forms of allegorical interpretation within clear doctrinal boundaries. Early Christian supersessionism used allegorical methods to interpret Israel in biblical narrative and prophecy as symbolic of a spiritual people, the church revealed in the New Testament. This way of reading the Bible became traditional in the church, but it came to be challenged in the last few centuries by non-supersessionists as a mistake. They argued that supersessionists *spiritualized* or *allegorized* what should be interpreted *literally*. The terms *spiritual* and *allegorical* were often used interchangeably in this critique.

CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTICS

Today, there is general agreement among Evangelical theologians and biblical scholars that *spiritual interpretation* as traditionally practiced is not acceptable. Evangelicals today are particularly sensitive to the problem of reading ideas into Scripture rather than receiving ideas from Scripture. One should not come to the Scripture and simply read into it what one wants.

In modern times the art and science of interpretation has come to be studied and articulated more carefully with the result that even the categories of *literal* versus *spiritual* are not as useful as they once seemed to be. It's not so much that they are wrong as that they are not sufficiently precise. It's like attempting to do surgery with flint knives in an age of scalpels and lasers.

So, what are the categories, principles, and methods that characterize evangelical biblical interpretation today? Generally, interpretation is described as a three-way relationship between the author, the text, and the reader. The author has formed the text as a communication to the reader(s). The reader needs to come to the text with a desire to understand what the author has said. Scripture is unique in that it has a Divine author, who superintended its composition. So, we seek to interpret Scripture properly so as to understand what the Author through and together with authors has communicated in the form of its text.

In order to do that, the reader needs to read the text in a manner that accords with its reality. This is often described as a *historical, grammatical, literary* interpretation of the Bible. However, there are a number of other terms that describe the approach. Each is

important in explaining an aspect or focus which interpretation needs to take into account. These terms are listed below.

The *historical* nature of interpretation recognizes that language doesn't just come out of the blue; the historical setting of the text provides its linguistic context. An author, a human author, writes within a specific historical setting and makes reference to things of that day and uses language within the vernacular of that day; we need to be aware of the historical situation of the text as we attempt to interpret it.

Interpretation is *lexical*, that is, it considers the definitions of words. The interpreter needs to be aware of all possible definitions, but the precise definition will be clear only in context. Consideration of context takes us first to the *grammatical* level where words are nuanced by grammar to combine in larger syntactical structures. Interpretation is then *syntactical*, recognizing that sentences and paragraphs are the primary level of meaning.

Interpretation must also take into account the *literary*/*formal* level of word and sentence combinations. At the literary level, we see how language is structured not just into sentences but into literature. Here one finds various *conventions* of word usage, such as various kinds of metaphor. But also, one notes the larger structural conventions that mark out different literary *genre*—the larger literary forms of poetry and prose. Most people recognize that a poem is a different kind of literature than a report, a letter, a narrative, or a chronicle. Larger works of literature often combine not just multiple words and sentences but multiple genre and multiple conventions. Interpretation of a text requires an understanding of the kind of literature in which a passage is located and the literary relationship it has to its surrounding context.

Interpretation needs to recognize the *performative* function of literary units—words, sentences, and genre. This is an aspect of interpretation that has come under discussion only in the past few decades. Performative studies reveal that words and sentences not only describe things, they also do things.

Thematic is an aspect of contextual interpretation that recognizes that themes weave their way through larger literary structures. Thematic connection in a larger literary work is a context just as important as, and maybe more than verbal proximity. In the Bible, this includes themes such as the "Kingdom of God" or the "Day of the Lord." How a theme develops through the canon of Scripture will be important to interpreting its appearance at various places in the text.

That brings us to the *canonical* level of interpretation. The canonical level, the whole canon of Scripture is the ultimate context for anything within it. The canon is a collection of writings that demonstrate not only thematic but inter-textual literary connections. We see this when biblical authors reuse words and phrases from other biblical writings intending to evoke within the reader's mind those earlier contexts and associated patterns of meaning. This is similar to what sometimes happens when someone today quotes popular phrases from a movie or song. More may be intended than the mere repetition of a phrase. The quote may be intended to evoke images, ideas, or emotions associated with the original context of the quotation. We have come to see that connections like this occur in Scripture at the canonical level.

Finally, as we speak of the canonical level of interpretation, we need to note that such interpretation must be canonically *narratological*. Narrative is a literary genre.

But we need to note that at the canonical level—a level that contains multiple genres: legal literature, poetry, hymns, historical accounts, and several of other types of literature—the whole Scripture also presents a story. To interpret it correctly requires one to grasp the whole and discern the movement from beginning to end that connects and relates all the parts.

This list of categories, methods, and practices would generally be accepted by most evangelical biblical scholars, including supersessionists and non-supersessionists alike.

EVANGELICAL SUPERSESSIONIST HERMENEUTICS

The difference between evangelical supersessionists and nonsupersessionists is seen primarily at the canonical narratological level of interpretation. Supersessionists believe that a *reality shift* takes place in the overall story of the Bible when one moves from *promise* in the Old Testament to *fulfillment* in the New. In the Old Testament the story of the Bible unfolds with promises regarding Israel, the land, the people, and the nation. But as the story moves to the New Testament, fulfillment takes place in an alternate reality—a different kind of Israel, one that transcends the land, the people, and the nation. This reality shift is from the material, the earthly, the ethnic, to a heavenly, a spiritual, a non-ethnic reality. It moves from a political, national reality to a non-political, universal reality. It changes from a focus on the particular to a universal focus. When supersessionists say that the promises to Israel are fulfilled in Christ, the church, or the new creation, this kind of reality shift informs their view.

A clear example of this kind of interpretation can be found in W. D. Davies' book, *The Gospel and the Land*.[3] Davies acknowledges that the Old Testament covenant promise of land to Israel is clear and explicit. However, he argues that the New Testament shifts the substance of the promise from land to Christ. The territorial promise to Israel becomes "Christified" in its fulfillment.[4] More recent scholars such as N. T. Wright, Collin Chapman, Gary Burge, and Peter Walker have adopted Davies' view.[5] The reality shift from a particular territory to a universal new creation, from a particular ethnic people to a new universal people, takes place in Christ in whose person the promises are singularly realized and fulfilled.

This kind of reality shift in canonical narrative is promoted in Reformed biblical theology, as seen, for example, in the works of Geerhardus Vos and Palmer Robertson.[6] The influential writings of scholars mostly associated with Moore Theological College, such as those by Graeme Goldsworthy, William Dumbrell, and T. Desmond Alexander, feature this same supersessionism in their

3. W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. See also his *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism: With a Symposium and Further Reflections* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991.

4. *Ibid*., 368.

5. See for example, Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise? What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003); *idem*, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to 'Holy Land' Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); Philip Johnston and Peter Walker, eds. *The Land of Promise: Biblical, Theological, and Contemporary Perspectives* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); P. W. L. Walker, ed. *Jerusalem Past and Present in the Purposes of God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); P. W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City: New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

6. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1930); *idem*, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980).

Online ISSN: 2053–6763

presentations of the story of the Bible.[7]

These evangelical supersessionists generally argue that their perception of a reality shift in the canonical narrative is not due to any allegorization they have performed on the text. They do not claim to have read into the text meaning that is alien to it. Rather, they argue that this reality shift in the nature and substance of Old Testament promise is explicitly taught by the New Testament. It is not a matter of the interpreter allegorizing the text, they say, but a matter of the interpreter recognizing a typology embedded in the text.[8] This typology is a literary convention by which symbolism is recast. The text of the New Testament clarifies the working of this typology by explicitly recasting the symbolism of the Old Testament. The duty of the interpreter is to recognize this typology and incorporate it in the interpretation of the overall canonical narrative.

Let's look more closely at typology and how supersessionists see it functioning in the Bible. Types are essentially patterns that are repeated in the canonical narrative. Noticing these patterns in the canonical narrative may create something like a *déjà vu* experience in the reader. For example, after crossing the Red Sea, Israel comes up out of the water onto dry land (Ex. 14). But this pattern can be seen in Genesis 1, where God causes the land itself to come up out of the water. It can be seen in the flood narrative, where once again God causes the land to emerge from the water and brings Noah and his family onto the dry land. It can be seen in the Gospels where Jesus comes up out of the water in his baptism. And the pattern is seen in various psalms. This is a repetitive pattern, a narrative type.

The New Testament occasionally uses the word "type" in referring to this kind of pattern. Israel was *baptized* in both the cloud and in the sea and these served as types and examples to us (1 Cor. 10:6). Adam is a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14). The flood is a type of baptism (1 Peter 3:21). But supersessionists see this typology as more than narrative patterns. They cite these passages to argue for a progression in the narrative away from earthly to heavenly realities.

Matthew's use of the word "fulfillment" is cited as evidence for this. For example in Hosea 11:1, the Lord says, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew applies the verse to the infant Jesus being taken to Egypt to escape Herod and then returning after Herod's death. Matthew says, "Thus it was *fulfilled*, "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (Matt. 2:15). In supersessionist thought, "fulfillment" brings about a shift in the reality of the referent of Hosea's language. It has shifted in a spiritual and Christological direction away from Israel to Christ.

The references to "shadows" in the book of Hebrews are thought to indicate this same typological progression. Hebrews says that the tabernacle was built according to a pattern, or type, from heaven (Heb. 8:5; cf 9:23–24). Moses was shown this pattern on the mountain, and he built the tabernacle according to that

7. William J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991); *idem*, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012); T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008); *idem*, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

8. See Richard Davidson, *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical TUPOS Structures*, Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1981). See also, Stephen J. Wellum, "Hermeneutical Issues in 'Putting Together' the Covenants," in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 81–126.

pattern. As a type, the tabernacle is also seen as a "shadow" because the heavenly is fixed, whereas the earthly, like a "shadow" passes away (Heb. 8:3–13; cf. 10:1). Hebrews is written in anticipation of the destruction of the Temple, and it speaks of the passing away of the things that were made. It is talking particularly about the things made with hands, as opposed to that which is heavenly (cf. Heb. 9:11). However, supersessionists often overlook the fact that Hebrews is not speaking simply of a vertical dualism between earthly and heavenly realities since the writer expects that those heavenly realities are coming here in the future (Heb. 2:5; 13:14). This future coming in Hebrews is consistent with eschatological expectation elsewhere in the New Testament of a future renewal of all things.

The fourth gospel is also cited as evidence of the typological progression. In John 4:21–24, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the time is coming "when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship" but "true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." Jesus also speaks of himself as the true bread come down from heaven in contrast to the manna that the fathers ate in the wilderness (John 6:31–58). This way of speaking and other imagery in John's Gospel is thought to show a progression from earthly, particularly Israelitish realities to a heavenly, spiritual reality in Christ.

EVALUATING EVANGELICAL SUPERSESSIONIST HERMENEUTICS

How does one evaluate supersessionist interpretation? If it were a matter of an individual passage of Scripture, the task would be relatively straightforward. One would offer an alternative interpretation of that passage taking into account the words, grammar, syntax, and conventions found there in conjunction with its larger literary context, giving attention to genre, thematic issues, and broader narratological concerns. However, supersessionism is primarily a conviction held at the canonical narratological level which then construes numerous passages of Scripture in light of its overall reading of the Scripture story. How does one evaluate a comprehensive system of interpretation like this?

In his book, *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief*, David Wolf offers four criteria for evaluating broad interpretive systems. These criteria are that a system of belief (or interpretation) must be *comprehensive, congruent, consistent, and coherent*.[9] An interpretive system is strong to the extent that it meets these criteria. It is weak to the extent that it fails to do so. *Comprehensive* means that the interpretive system must cover all the data to be interpreted. In this case, it must cover all Scripture. To the extent that it does not cover portions of Scripture, it is weak at best. *Congruent* means that it must also *fit* the text. If it does not actually fit, if it does not accord with, or is not correct with the text, then again it is weak at best. *Consistent* means that the interpretations produced by this overall reading are not in conflict with one another; they do not contradict one another. Finally, the system must be *coherent*, which is to say that it makes sense.

I believe that supersessionism, as a system of biblical interpretation, is not comprehensive, congruent, consistent, or coherent. The following will briefly illustrate why.

Not Comprehensive

This criterion may seem idealistic. Is it

9. David L. Wolfe, E*pistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1982), 50–55.

really possible to cover all the data? Can an interpretative system actually address every passage, every verse in Scripture? Well, no, we don't really expect that any published work offering an interpretation of the whole story of the Bible will actually cite every passage of Scripture. But that is not what this criterion is saying. Comprehensiveness means that the interpretation does not leave out crucial data in the formulation of its interpretative system. By covering all crucial, or all relevant data, the system may plausibly be said to cover all data, since there would be nothing *left out* that could actually change or alter the interpretative system. Sometimes, however, supersessionist publications omit key texts that arguably challenge their system.

Consider for example, G. K. Beale's recently published *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*.[10] The book attempts to explain the theological teaching of the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Many passages of Scripture are addressed in his attempt to give an account of the overall biblical story line (the Scripture index alone is thirty-four pages with references in small font size). However, when he comes to Romans 11:25–26, he gives one paragraph complaining that "the passage is too problematic and controverted to receive adequate discussion within the limited space of this book."[11] The book is 1,047 pages long, plus twenty-four pages of front matter! One would think that *this passage* especially would require treatment in an overall interpretation that sees no future for Israel nationally or politically.

Another example can be seen in Michael E. Fuller's *The Restoration of Israel: Israel's Re-gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts*.[12] The book focuses especially on Luke's narrative concerning the restoration of Israel in both the Gospel and in Acts, examining passage after passage. However, he completely ignores Acts 3:17–26, a passage in which the word *restoration* appears linked to prophesy and covenant promise!

These examples, of course, could be dismissed as the oversights (although major ones) of individual publications. But they illustrate the point that any attempt to offer an overall interpretation of the story of the Bible must take into account crucial texts that speak to the fulfillment of the promises of God to Israel. Failure to address these texts is itself indication that the interpretation may be weak. When it is shown that these very texts refute a central conviction of supersessionist interpretation, that interpretation is seen not only to be weak but wrong.

Not Congruent

The "fit" or lack thereof of an interpretative system to individual texts can only be shown text by text. Evaluating a large comprehensive system of interpretation will necessarily entail the hermeneutical examination of many passages. However, one needs to note that with respect to a system of interpretation, each text does not have equal force. The system may be compared to a spider web, where the cross points of the web represent the interpretations

10. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

11. *Ibid*., 710

12. Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel's Re-gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006). A better book is edited by James Scott, *Restoration, Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2001). Although necessarily limited in the texts that it examines, it does feature studies on Romans 11:26 and Acts 1–3. The articles by Richard Baucham ["The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts," 435–87] and James Scott ["'And then all Israel will be saved' (Rom 11:26)," 489–527] on these texts are excellent.

of individual texts.[13] Showing that the system is not congruent to a particular text may be seen as cutting the web at that juncture. What will happen? It depends on where the web is cut. Some points can be cut with little damage to the web overall. Other points are crucial to the integrity of the web. They are deeply ingressed into the structure and if rendered unstable, the stability of the whole web is put in jeopardy. In the book you are reading, several chapters address passages of Scripture with respect to the theme of Israel, the land and the nation, and criticisms of supersessionist interpretation are offered therein. But here, I would like to note three problems that challenge the web of supersessionist interpretation at a deep structural level. The first two have to do with the *performative force* of key texts. The third has to do with a central assumption of the supersessionist notion of typological progression. Each problem entails multiple texts that the system must *fit* in order to be considered plausible.

Speech-Act Implications of Divine Promise

Performative language, or speech-act analysis is a relatively recent hermeneutical tool. The philosophers J. L. Austin and John Searle were the formative thinkers whose publications first appeared in the 1960s.[14] Since then, many have utilized and developed the insights both for hermeneutics and for language theory.[15] The key insight of speech-act analysis is that language has a performative force. By language, people not only refer to things, they also do things. And, the paradigmatic example of a speech-act, which Austin himself cited, is a promise.

A promise entails an obligation. When somebody makes a promise, they're not just stating something, they are doing something. They are forming a relationship and creating an expectation that carries moral obligation. Failure to complete a promise is a violation of one's word. It is a serious matter. Certainly, we can make promises with conditions. The language of promise will make that clear. But once the promise is made, a relationship has been enacted and an expectation has been grounded in personal integrity.

In Scripture, we see that God has made key promises to Abraham and Abraham's descendants. Not only have promises been made, but conventions are followed in order to reinforce the point. A speech-act occurs in God's communication to Abraham in Genesis 12—a promise concerning a land, a people, a nation, and blessing to all nations. In Genesis 15, Abraham questions God about the fulfillment of this promise of a land to his descendants, asking, "How shall I know that I will inherit it?" (Gen. 15:8). So God enacts a covenant with a ceremony, a very ancient ceremony, where God alone passes through the covenant pieces of the sacrifice and takes an obligation on Himself alone. This was so that Abraham would know that his descendants would inherit the Promised Land.

Compare this, for example, to the performative language of a wedding ceremony. As Richard Briggs has noted, when one says in a wedding ceremony "I do," there is no convention by which one can turn around an

13. The use of the web metaphor for logical systems can be found in W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper, 1961). See the discussion in Wolfe, Epistemology, 44–45.

14. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Univ. Press, 1962); John Searle, *Speech-Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1969).

15. See for example, Richard Briggs, *Words in Action* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001); Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*; Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

hour later and say "well, really, I didn't."[16] To say "I do" in the wedding ceremony is to accept formally the marriage relationship. By those words one forms a relationship with another person which has expectations and obligations. Similarly, when God takes the covenant upon Himself in Genesis 15, a relationship of expectation is grounded in the integrity of God Himself. Divine intention and resolve could not be more clear. Later, God adds to the ceremonially established promissory word the further convention of a solemn oath (Gen. 22:15–18). God swears that He will accomplish that which he promised. The writer to Hebrews, whose language of "shadows" and "types" (Heb. 8:5; 10:1) supersessionists like to quote, also says that "when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:17). The promise and the oath are referred to as "two unchangeable things" (Heb. 6:18). To the recipients, these speech acts function as "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (Heb. 6:19). God's word is certain, which means His people can confidently rely on what He promises.

God's promise, covenant, and oath to Abraham is not a peripheral element in the story of the Bible. It is a key structural component in the central plot line. It is repeated to the line of patriarchs and is the ground and basis for the covenant at Sinai and the promise and covenant made to David and his house. To postulate a "fulfillment" of these covenant promises by means of a reality shift in the thing promised overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise, violates the legitimate expectations of the recipients, and brings the integrity of God into question. Such an interpretation is not congruent to the textual string of divine promises, covenants, and oaths—a string of texts that lie at the heart of the canonical narrative.

16. Richard Briggs, "Speech-Act Theory," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 763.

Performative Force of Prophetic Reaffirmation

The second problem for supersessionist interpretation also has reference to performative language, namely the performative force of prophetic reaffirmation of these covenanted promises to Israel. Not only are the promises made early in the canonical narrative, but in the later narrative they are reinforced by prophetic speech acts of swearing, reaffirming, and emphatically restating God's resolve to fulfill them as promised. The resolve is further underscored in several texts by sweeping rhetorical features like posing impossible odds, unsurmountable obstacles only to dismiss them as trifles to the powerful Creator of all things, and by dramatic scenes, such as the anguish and sorrow of adultery or the pain of parental rejection which in spite of punishment, hurt, and suffering is nevertheless overcome by an unquenchable, triumphant love. The supersessionist reading of the canonical narrative in which Israel is replaced and God's promises are "Christified," spiritualized, or otherwise substantively changed is not congruent with this line of prophetic reaffirmation and restated divine resolve.

Particularism and Universalism in the Old Testament and New Testament

The third problem has to do with the way supersessionist interpretation typically construes the progression of the canonical narrative from particularism to universalism. In this view, the Old Testament tells a story about God's plan for and blessings to one particular

people, whereas the New Testament expands the plan and blessing to include all peoples. There is a progression from the particular to the universal, from an ethnic political Israel among the nations to a multi-ethnic, universal Israel inclusive of all nations!

Certainly, much of the Old Testament is taken up with God' promises to and dealings with the particular ethnic people and nation of Israel. And, certainly, we see in the New Testament a mission to the nations and the establishment of the church inclusive of peoples of all nations through faith in Christ. However, reading the canonical narrative as a progression from particularism to universalism is not congruent with either the Old or New Testaments. From the beginning of God's promise to Abraham, both the particular and the universal are present: "I will bless you . . . I will bless all peoples through you" (Gen. 12:2–3). God's promise to the David house was not just rulership over a particular nation. Rather, the Davidic king is invited in Psalm 2:8, "Ask of me, and I will give the nations as your inheritance." Many Psalms speak of blessing coming upon the nations as do the prophets. The dominion of the coming kingdom of God was predicted to be worldwide (Dan. 2:35), with all nations in their places and in peace (2 Sam. 7:10–11; Ezek. 37:26–28; Isa. 2:1–4). Isaiah foresaw the extension of the favored term "my people" to Gentile nations *in addition to not in substitution of or through redefinition of* Israel (Isa. 19:24–25). This is certainly compatible with John's vision in Revelation 21:3, where many manuscripts read, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be *his peoples*." Similarly, John foresees "*nations* . . . and kings of the earth" in the new creation walking by the light of the Jerusalem come down from heaven (Rev. 21:24). God's plan for Israel and the nations are not mutually exclusive or successive programs but complementary throughout the entire canonical narrative. It is not necessary to eliminate the particular in order to institute the universal nor is it necessary to expand the particular to become the universal, rather, the particular is both the means to the blessing of the universal as well as a central constitutive part of it. How the overall canonical narrative is read needs to be congruent with these and many other texts.

Not Consistent or Coherent

For brevity sake, these two criteria will be treated together. Consistency means freedom from contradiction, and coherence means that the assertions of the system make sense. Many interpretative systems seem to make sense. Usually the problems have to do with how they relate to the data they are interpreting. However, even apart from an examination of the facts, a sign of weakness in an interpretative system is a lack of internal consistency or coherence. Supersessionism is often thought to be a tight consistent, coherent reading of Scripture. However, the four matters cited below are just some examples that reveal internal problems with this viewpoint.

New Creation Eschatology

In the past couple of decades, many theologians, including some prominent evangelical supersessionists, have come to embrace what I call *new creation eschatology*.[17] New Creation

17. For the terminology of new creation eschatology in relation to what I call spiritual vision eschatology, see Craig A. Blaising, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 160–81. Some who have affirmed this type of eschatology include N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008); *idem*, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical*

Eschatology believes that the eternal state is not a heavenly, timeless, non-material reality but a new heavens and new earth. That's what Scripture says in passages like Isaiah 65, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21 and 22. The dwelling place of the redeemed in that new creation is not in heaven but on the new earth. Again, that is consistent with prophecies in Isaiah and Revelation. This new earth, like the old earth, has geographical particularity, which also fits with prophecies in Isaiah and Revelation as well as a number of other texts in Scripture. In fact, the imagery of refinement extending from Isaiah to 2 Peter is a basis for believing that the new earth is not an utterly new creation from nothing but a refinement and renovation of the present earth.[18] God's plan for his creation is not to destroy it and start over from nothing but to redeem, cleanse, and renew it. In light of this, it is clear that new creation eschatology envisions not a non-material eternity, but a redeemed earth and redeemed heavens fit for an everlasting (durative rather than static) glorious manifestation of the presence of God.

Now, given that the new earth has geographical particularity and that it is essentially this earth redeemed for an everlasting glory, is it not important to ask about the territorial promises to Israel? The land and nation promises to Israel were repeatedly stated to be everlasting. In Isaiah, the promise of the new earth is linked to the promise of a restored Jerusalem (Isaiah 65:18–25), the chief part of the land of promise. The blessings of the new earth parallel the promised blessings of the land of Israel in many texts so that the land becomes an example of what is intended for the whole earth.

Many supersessionist theologians have embraced new creation eschatology. N. T. Wright has celebrated his personal discovery of it and the change that has brought to his thinking.[19] The material particularity of new creationism is especially appealing in addressing environmental and creation-care concerns. However, Wright still finds no place in his eschatology for national and territorial Israel. For him, as for many others, the nation and the land become entirely "Christified."[20] Are these views consistent or coherent? So, let's just imagine traversing the new earth, crossing its various and particular geographical features, and coming to the Middle East. What do we find there? A void? A spatial anomaly? But then, where would the New Jerusalem be? Maintaining new creation eschatology while arguing that the territory of Israel has been spiritualized or "Christified" is not a consistent or coherent view.

Interconnection of Covenant Promises

Supersessionists typically affirm the progression argued in the book of Hebrews from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. But they read this progression as an abandonment of God's

Picture of the Christian Hope, Grove Biblical Series B11 (Cambridge: Grove Books, 1999); Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); J. Richard Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming); Donald Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Douglas Moo, "Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49 (2006): 449–88.

18. Paul's words on the future glory of the present creation in Romans 8 also point the a renovation of the present creation rather than an annihilation and re-creation *de novo*.

19. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*.

20. A redefinition of Israel lies at the heart of Wright's literary project. See for example, N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 29, 61–62, 240, 250; *idem*, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 457–58; *idem*, J*esus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 446, 471.

particular national and territorial promises to Israel. However, Hebrews explicitly quotes the Jeremiah 31 prophecy of the new covenant as a covenant that the Lord "will establish . . . with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Heb. 8:8). The implication of the last declaration quoted in Hebrews 8:12: "I will forgive *their* [Israel and Judah in context] iniquity and remember *their* sin no more" is explained in Jeremiah 31:35–37: Israel will be a nation forever before the Lord! It is not consistent or coherent to affirm the fulfillment of new covenant promises while denying a national future for Israel. The national and territorial promise to Israel is a constituent feature of covenant promise from Abraham to the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. There is no reason to exclude it from "the world to come" expected by the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 2:5). To include it would be the most consistent and coherent reading of that book together with the rest of the canon of Scripture.

False Hermeneutical Dichotomy

As noted earlier, a key assumption of many supersessionist readings of Scripture is a dichotomy between the particular and universal in the plan of God. The universal must replace the particular. Really? Is a whole a *replacement* of a part—such that the part disappears and its place is taken by a whole? Is that coherent? What is a whole if it is not the total collection of parts? The part *must* be present and remain for a whole to be complete. The universal does not replace the particular in the story of the Bible. Rather the story of the Bible encompasses an interaction among parts, individuals and nations, until a whole with all its constitutive parts is completed. This is why Romans 11 is so important for understanding the main story line of the canonical narrative.

Theological Consistency and Coherence

Briefly, let us return to an implication of the discussion of performative language above. By virtue of the performative nature of a promise (not to mention the additional conventions which underscore its resolve), to argue that the Lord "Christifies," spiritualizes, or revises *so as to essentially discard* the national and territorial promises to Israel in the fulfillment of the plot line of Scripture is to call into question the integrity of God. It is particularly inconsistent for Evangelical theologians, who affirm the inerrancy of Scripture, to make such claims. Typically, the doctrine of inerrancy is rooted in the integrity of God which extends to the integrity of His Word. How can His word in general be considered trustworthy if in its most paradigmatic trust-engendering form it is found untrustworthy? But even more, failure here extends to the very being of God as revealed by His Name. Ezekiel 37:26–28 and 39:25–29 speak of the resolution of the theological problem of Israel's exile from the land, a problem repeatedly voiced in Ezekiel. God's Name, God's very character as God, is tied to the fulfillment of His covenant promises to Israel. The constitution of Israel as a nation among the nations in the eschatological kingdom is coordinate with true theology ("*they will know* that I Am the Lord," Ezek. 39:28). To factor national and territorial Israel out will not produce a coherent theology—certainly not the theology that was prophesied in Scripture.

HERMENEUTICAL IMPORTANCE OF A HOLISTIC ESCHATOLOGY

In conclusion, how one perceives the end of a story will affect one's estimate of the story as a whole—the significance of its various parts and their relevance in the story line.

Online ISSN: 2053–6763

Supersessionism, the belief that Israel has been replaced, or redefined, in the story line of the Bible, is first of all an eschatological view—one in which there is no place for *Israel* as it was created, defined, and made the object of everlasting promises in Scripture. This necessarily impacts how one estimates various elements of the biblical story line not just as narrative but in terms of their ultimate theological importance. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the excision (considered by some to be a *revision*) of Israel from eschatological fulfillment is often coordinate with a reduction of theological concern regarding earthly, material realities. But it also impacts many areas of theology, such as Christology, ecclesiology, anthropology, even theology proper.[21] In contrast to supersessionism, I would recommend a *holistic eschatology* in which "all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20). This includes promises regarding Israel. And, it extends to promises regarding the nations. It includes God's plans and purpose for the earth as well as the heavens. It envisions human beings not only as individuals but in their various corporate connections from their ethnic identities to their political and social organizations. In a holistic eschatology, the kingdom of God is a robust rather than thin concept. And, the person of Christ, rather than being a mystical reductive principle, as in notions of "Christification," is seen instead in the full reality of his holistic kingdom, bringing to completion the rich fullness of an inheritance that has been planned, promised, and proclaimed throughout the amazing story of Scripture.

21. Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (2001): 435–50, republished in *To the Jew First: A Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 102–21.

Study Questions

1. How can we know when to interpret a text literally or figuratively?
2. Give some examples of misinterpretation from everyday life. Can you identify the problem in each example?
3. When is allegory a legitimate—or an illegitimate—method of interpretation?
4. List the categories, principles, and methods that characterize evangelical biblical interpretation today. Can you detect a movement from individual words to larger levels of context in these methods?
5. How do supersessionists read the movement from promise to fulfillment in the biblical story?
6. Explain briefly the four criteria for evaluating broad interpretative systems.
7. What must an interpretative system do to claim to be comprehensive? What are some texts that should not be ignored in considering how God's promises to Israel will be fulfilled?
8. How does performative language, or speech-act analysis help to evaluate the congruence of supersessionist and non-supersessionist approaches to Scripture?
9. What is a common mistake in reading the relation between God's purpose for Israel and God's purpose for all people in the movement from Old Testament to New Testament? How should that mistake be corrected?
10. What are some problems of consistency and coherence with supersessionist readings of Scripture? How does a holistic reading of Scripture answer these problems?

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