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Israel and Fulfillment theology

in [Commentary](#) ^[1]

While most born-again Christians today are supportive of Israel, there is a growing movement among Evangelicals which is sympathetic to Palestinian suffering and claims to statehood. Yet to provide a biblical basis for their position, they are generally uncomfortable with being identified with classical Replacement theology, due to its malevolent fruit – namely the pogroms, Inquisitions, Expulsions and right up to the Holocaust.

So instead, these Christians are turning to the trendy new answer of Fulfillment theology. This is a biblical outlook which does give natural Israel some credit for having been chosen by God for redemptive purposes. But this calling is seen as having been already “fulfilled” with the coming of Christ and the birth of the Church. Thus it ends up at the same place as Replacement theology in concluding that God is finished with Israel, albeit with less inherent hostility towards the Jews.

Adherents to this view place much emphasis on the ever-expanding “inclusiveness” of God’s salvation plan as it culminated in the Gospel being preached to all nations.

Now the universal nature of God’s intended family is such an elemental truth of Scripture, no Christian can rightly contest it. Yet some are presenting this as if it were a deep new revelation in the Bible. But when God first called Abraham into redemptive service, He was not exactly ‘hiding the ball’ when he stated quite clearly that His ultimate purpose was to “bless all the families of the earth.” (Genesis 12:3)

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul tells us there is a certain enduring “mystery” about natural Israel that has survived into New Testament times. That is, there is still something about Israel’s calling that has yet to be fulfilled. To unlock this mystery first requires a basic understanding of the alternative view of Covenant theology.

Covenant Theology – The Story of Salvation

The great covenants of the Bible actually tell the story of God’s salvation plan. In the Abrahamic covenant, God first offers His grace and salvation to “all the families of the earth” through faith in Him. But the world did not know it was in need of redemption, so in the Mosaic covenant the Ten Commandments were given to tell us we are sinners and in need of a Redeemer. Thus, Paul says, “the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ.” (Galatians 3:24)

Under the Davidic covenant, we are then assured of a King from David’s lineage who one day will be the Righteous Judge of the whole earth, applying the grace and law of God justly.

In the New Covenant, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus enables Gentiles to be “adopted” in as “sons of Abraham” and “heirs of the promise” of blessing (salvation) made to him (Romans 4:1-16; Galatians 3:6-14, 29).

The sinless life of Jesus also satisfied the just requirements of the Mosaic law (Romans 2:29; 8:1-4; Colossians 2:11). His perfect obedience to the Father, even to the point of a cursed death on a tree, earned Him the right to ascend to the throne of David as Judge of the whole earth (Psalm 110; Ephesians 1:15-23; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 5:5-10).

Israel's Calling – Custodian of World Redemption

Now notice that all of this was accomplished in and through natural Israel. In fact, Paul describes this phenomenon using words that denote possession or ownership.

In Romans 9:3-5, for instance, he explains that the covenants “pertain to” or “belong to” his fellow Israelites in the flesh. Earlier in Romans 3:1-4, he insists that the very oracles of God were “committed” or “entrusted” to natural Israel.

In addition, we can note the words of Jesus himself, who told the Samaritan woman that “salvation is of the Jews.” (John 4:22)

These are all possessive terms used to describe the unique covenant relationship which God established with ancient Israel. They were entrusted with the means by which the world would come to salvation. God called Israel into a special trust relationship, with the beneficiary being the world. Even title to the Land of Israel was vested in Abraham's progeny in the nature of a trust so that Israel could become a nation which over time might birth into the world all the things we need for salvation.

Yet in serving this unique birthing role, the people of Israel were called to be suffering servants, even to the point of being hardened by God towards their own promised Messiah. Paul tells us that this was all for the sake of the Gentiles, with the expectation that we should be grateful for it (Romans 11).

So God called natural Israel in order to birth spiritual Israel – that is, the one, ever-expanding household of the redeemed. We Gentile believers do not replace natural Israel, we enlarge spiritual Israel (Galatians 6:16).

To accomplish this end, God established each of the great biblical covenants with natural Israel. He has thus always worked out his salvation plan for the world through natural Israel, using their belief and their unbelief in equal measure to produce the one family of the redeemed from the earth.

It may come as a surprise to some Gentile Christians, but this is even true for the “new covenant,” which was established by Jesus with twelve Jewish disciples gathered for the Last Supper. Recall that God had promised to “make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 31:31, cited in Hebrews 8) Further, even the New Testament Church was birthed when the Holy Spirit fell on 120 Jews in the flesh gathered on the Day of Pentecost in that same Upper Room.

Thus, Paul bases his “mystery” in Romans 11:25 upon this understanding of natural Israel's irrevocable covenant relationship with God, which is still working out His redemptive plan in the earth even through their unbelief. What he essentially says there is that so long as natural Israel rejects their Messiah, there is still time for Gentiles to get saved.

Fulfilment Theology and the Davidic Covenant

Besides Paul's defense of natural Israel's enduring election in Romans 9-11, we also have the preaching of Peter in Acts 3:17-21. Here he declares that all the prophecies concerning the things Messiah must suffer have indeed been fulfilled, but that there are still many other things spoken by the mouths of the prophets concerning the “restoration” which are still to come. He adds that Jesus is “received” – or more accurately “retained” – in heaven until all this takes place.

For any Jew hearing this message in first century Jerusalem, “restoration” had one meaning and one meaning only! It refers to the future restoration of Israel in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, when the promised “Son of David” will take up his throne in Jerusalem, to rule over all the earth in righteousness and peace. And since the covenants were entrusted to natural Israel and always find

their outworking through them, this means that the Jewish people still have a redemptive role to fulfill for the benefit of the world.

Plainly stated, the modern-day restoration of Israel is destined to birth the world into the Messianic Age in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. In this regard, Israel is promised a physical restoration to the Land in unbelief and then a spiritual restoration to God and His Messiah in the last days (see e.g., Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36).

Jesus as well alludes to this future “regeneration” of natural Israel in Matthew 19:28, when his disciples will “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (See also Luke 13:35; Luke 21:24)

In this process, natural Israel will be merged with spiritual Israel and will finally enter the rest and peace in the Land that was promised to her by God.

This may frustrate some Christians, as it takes certain matters out of our hands. We Evangelicals think that if we will only preach the Gospel in all nations, then “the end will come.” (Matthew 24:14)

This is true, but it is equally true that natural Israel still has a redemptive role to play. We need to understand and identify the out-workings of this redemptive process and to pray that it be hastened in our day. In the meantime, this demands that we show respect for natural Israel as still elect of God, even in their unbelief (Romans 11:1, 11, 29).

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