

Israel's Eschatological Destiny in the Catholic Interpretation of the Prophets

By André Villeneuve, Ph.D.

Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary, Denver

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Introduction: Supersessionism and *Nostra Aetate*

The Vatican II Declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was a watershed in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Echoing the words of St. Paul, *Nostra Aetate* asserted that “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.” From this affirmation of God’s faithfulness to the Jewish people, it followed that “although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures.”¹

With these words, *Nostra Aetate* became the first magisterial document to authoritatively reject replacement theology, or supersessionism. Supersessionism is the view that because the Jewish people failed to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah, God repudiated His election of them and their special role in salvation history came to an end. As a result, God scattered the Jews across the earth and transferred His promises and commitments to the Church, which is now the “true and new Israel,” the new chosen people of God.²

For the greater part of Church history, supersessionism was deeply ingrained in Christian thought. This situation had dire consequences on Catholic identity and mission: It led to the alienation of the Church from her Jewish roots and to a progressive deterioration of Jewish-Christian relations so that, as the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) acknowledges, “although Christianity sprang from Judaism... the gap dividing them was deepened more and more, to such an extent that Christian and Jew hardly knew each other.”³

In resolutely rejecting supersessionism and affirming the permanence of God’s gifts and calling to the Jewish people, *Nostra Aetate* brought about more than a revolution in Catholic-Jewish relations. The Church’s changed attitude towards Judaism not only initiated a mutual dialogue that has borne much good fruit since the Council; it also positively affected many other areas of Catholic theology in grounding the Church’s faith more deeply in her Jewish roots. Indeed, as the CRRJ recently stated: “Without her Jewish roots the Church would be in danger of losing its soteriological anchoring in salvation history and would slide into an ultimately unhistorical Gnosis.”⁴

¹ *Nostra Aetate* 4, cf. Rom 11:28-29.

² R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 13; Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “*The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*” (*Rom 11:29*): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations, 2015, 17.

³ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No. 4*, 1974, preamble

⁴ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, 13.

The aim of the present article is to consider the impact of *Nostra Aetate* in the field of biblical exegesis and hermeneutics. More specifically, I wish to examine the Catholic interpretation of the prophets in light of the Church's rejection of supersessionism and her affirmation of God's ongoing election of Israel. Now that Catholics routinely affirm the enduring nature of God's covenant with the Jewish people, how is this reality reflected in the Catholic interpretation of Scripture—and of the prophets in particular?

In order to answer this question, I will proceed as follows: First, in order to better understand the Church's position on supersessionism, I will distinguish between three types of supersessionism as formulated by R. Kendall Soulen. Second, I will consider more closely the Catholic view of Israel in light of this distinction: what type(s) of supersessionism do Magisterial documents reject, and what do these documents say about the nature of God's covenant with the Jews? Third, I will investigate to what extent Catholic exegetes have taken into account the Church's doctrinal stance on Israel in their interpretations of the prophets. Beginning with a brief consideration of ancient and modern principles of biblical exegesis, I will evaluate and compare ancient and modern Catholic commentaries on a few prophetic passages that pertain to Israel's identity. In order to assess how commentators view Israel *after* the coming of Christ, I will give particular attention to eschatological passages that speak of Israel's future role, mission and destiny. Finally, I will propose some ways to better integrate the Church's understanding of Israel into the task of Catholic exegesis, theology, and eschatology.

Supersessionism: Three Types

In order to better understand the Church's theological stance towards Israel and Judaism, it will be useful to begin by clarifying the nature of supersessionism. In his 1996 book *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Methodist theologian R. Kendall Soulen distinguished between three types of supersessionism, which could be summarized as follows:

a) “**Punitive supersessionism**” is the view that was introduced above, namely, the idea that God abrogated his covenant with the Jewish people because of their sin and unbelief, especially for rejecting Jesus and the Gospel. As Soulen says, “because the Jews obstinately reject God's action in Christ, God in turn angrily rejects and punishes the Jews.”⁵ In other words, the Jews lost their election and divine privileges as the consequence of their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah. This is the most anti-Judaic form of replacement theology, because it places all the blame on the Jews for the abrogation of God's covenant with them. It is through their own fault that they have been superseded by the Church.

b) “**Economic supersessionism**” is the idea that “carnal Israel” became obsolete after the coming of Christ, not because God punished the Jewish nation for rejecting Jesus, but because Israel's role in God's plan of salvation was transient and merely preparatory for Christ's coming. Soulen describes this form of replacement theology as follows:

Christ's advent brings about the obsolescence of carnal Israel and inaugurates the age of the spiritual church. Everything that characterized the economy of salvation in its

⁵ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 37.

Israelite form becomes obsolete and is replaced by its ecclesial equivalent. The written law of Moses is replaced by the spiritual law of Christ, circumcision by baptism, natural descent by faith as criterion of membership in the people of God, and so forth. As a result, *carnal Israel becomes obsolete*. This understanding of supersessionism can be called *economic* because the ultimate obsolescence of carnal Israel is an essential feature of God's one overarching economy of redemption for the world. [...] According to economic supersessionism, Israel is transient not because it happens to be sinful but because Israel's essential role in the economy of redemption is to prepare for salvation in its spiritual and universal form.⁶

In other words, God always intended Israel's role in His plan of salvation to be merely temporary; it would come to an end with Christ's advent and his institution of the universal Church. Since God always planned to revoke his covenant with Israel (not because of their sin or unbelief), this form of supersessionism is less hostile to the Jews, but its theological effect is the same: Israel no longer has any active part to play in God's plan of salvation after Christ.

c) “**Structural supersessionism**” is the most subtle, pervasive and influential form of replacement theology because it sins by omission. Although it does not explicitly assert or argue that God has rejected the Jewish people, this form of supersessionism simply *ignores* Israel (and especially *post-Christic* Israel), leaving it out of theological reflection and discourse altogether. Fr. Peter Hocken describes structural supersessionism as follows:

Structural supersessionism is the form of theology that leaves Israel, its election and history, out of its presentation of Christian faith. Christian theology has been massively affected by structural supersessionism: when its presentation of salvation jumps from Genesis 3 to Matthew 1; when it hardly mentions that Jesus is a Jew, or that the Twelve were Jews; when there is no difference between evangelizing Jews and evangelizing pagans; when Jerusalem is treated just as any other city or as a holy city of the three main monotheistic religions [...] This form of replacement thinking, the absence of Israel and the Jewish people, is harder to combat. It is not obviously anti-Semitic; it is not saying bad things about the Jewish people. It is simply ignoring them.⁷

In other words, the problem with structural supersessionism is not so much that it holds a derogatory attitude towards the Jews and Israel or explicitly negates God's covenant with them. Structural supersessionism simply *ignores* Israel, granting it only a preparatory role up to Christ's coming, after which the nation virtually disappears from the theological map and ceases to play any meaningful role in God's plan of salvation.

We will keep these three types of supersessionism in mind as we examine the Church's position on Israel as expressed in Magisterial statements and in Catholic commentaries on the prophets.

⁶ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 36. Emphasis in the original.

⁷ Peter Hocken, “Confronting Past Injustice: The Catholic Church and Toward Jerusalem Council II,” *Catholics for Israel*, July 17, 2015, <http://www.catholicsforisrael.com/articles/israel-and-the-church/227-confronting-past-injustice>. Cf. Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 38.

God's Enduring Covenant with the Jews in Magisterial Documents

Several ecclesial documents and papal statements have followed *Nostra Aetate* in rejecting supersessionism and affirming the enduring nature of God's covenant with Israel. As we shall see, these statements published from 1965 to 2015 affirm the permanence of God's covenant with the Jewish people in increasingly strong terms, in a sort of theological crescendo.

Nostra Aetate explicitly rejected punitive supersessionism when it stated that "what happened in [Christ's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews without distinction," and therefore they "should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God". The declaration also repudiated economic supersessionism by asserting that "God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues." *Nostra Aetate* thus affirmed the irrevocable nature of "God's gifts and calling" to the Jewish people (Rom 11:29), but it did not explain in what these "gifts and calling" consist.

The next major ecclesial statement on the Jews, the 1974 "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (n. 4)" is vaguer in regard to God's covenant with Israel. It states: "An effort will be made to acquire a better understanding of whatever in the Old Testament retains its own perpetual value, since that has not been cancelled by the later interpretation of the New Testament."⁸ The statement does not address God's covenant with Israel as such; it only implies that *parts* of the OT retain a "perpetual value" and therefore have not been abrogated by the NT.

In 1980, Pope John Paul II went further when he referred to the entire Jewish people as "the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God."⁹ In asserting that God's covenant with the Jews was "never revoked by God," the pontiff implicitly rejected both punitive and economic supersessionism.

In 1985, the "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" closed the door to economic supersessionism in affirming that the permanence of Israel, who "remains a chosen people," is part of "God's design." It also explicitly rejected punitive supersessionism in the strongest terms yet:

The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design. We must in any case rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people *punished*, preserved as a *living argument* for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people, "the pure olive on which were grafted the branches of the wild olive which are the gentiles."¹⁰

⁸ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *1974 Guidelines*, II.

⁹ John Paul II, "Address to Representatives of the West German Jewish Community," November 17, 1980, 3, <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/297-jp2-80nov17>.

¹⁰ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, 1985., VI.1, quoting John Paul II (6th March, 1982) and alluding to Rom 11:17-24. Emphasis in the original.

The 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also upholds the ongoing validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. In its section on the canon of Scripture, it asserts that the books of the Old Testament “retain a permanent value, for the Old Covenant has never been revoked.”¹¹ In its section on the Church and non-Christians, the *Catechism* quotes Romans 9 and 11, stating:

To the Jews “belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ”; “for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.”¹²

The 1998 document “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” also firmly rejects punitive supersessionism, quoting John Paul II:

“In the Christian world... erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people.” Such interpretations of the New Testament have been totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council.¹³

This statement is significant because John Paul II directly addresses and rejects the interpretive tradition of punitive supersessionism that had permeated Christian exegesis throughout history.

The 2001 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” goes even further. It not only strongly rejects economic supersessionism, but also asserts that the Church *owes her very existence* to the election and vocation that still belong *in the first place* to Israel—and this, despite her unbelief:

The Jews do not cease to be called to live by faith in the intimacy of God “for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). The New Testament never says that Israel has been rejected. From the earliest times, the Church considered the Jews to be important witnesses to the divine economy of salvation. She understands her own existence as a participation in the election of Israel and in a vocation that belongs, in the first place, to Israel, despite the fact that only a small number of Israelites accepted it.¹⁴

Most recently, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a document aptly titled “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (GCGI). This document presupposes the Church’s previous refutation of punitive supersessionism and focuses primarily on economic supersessionism, rejecting it forcefully and repeatedly. It clearly reaffirms God’s enduring covenant with Israel, while taking care at the same time not to fall into a “dual-covenant” scheme that would claim that the Jews could have sufficient communion with God through the Mosaic covenant and could attain salvation without the mediation of Christ:

¹¹ CCC 121; cf. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable*, 39.

¹² CCC 839; cf. Rom 9:4-5; 11:29.

¹³ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah” quoting Pope John Paul II, *Speech to Symposium on the roots of anti-Judaism*, 31 October 1997

¹⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 36.

While affirming salvation through an explicit or even implicit faith in Christ, the Church does not question the continued love of God for the chosen people of Israel. A replacement or supersession theology which sets against one another two separate entities, a Church of the Gentiles and the rejected Synagogue whose place it takes, is deprived of its foundations. (GCGI 17)

The following passages hold together two important truths, namely that the Church is indeed the “fulfilment of the promises made to Israel,” and yet Israel continues to be “the people of God”:

The Church is called the new people of God [...] but not in the sense that the people of God of Israel has ceased to exist. [...] The Church does not replace the people of God of Israel, since as the community founded on Christ it represents in him the fulfilment of the promises made to Israel. This does not mean that Israel, not having achieved such a fulfilment, can no longer be considered to be the people of God. (23)

The covenant that God has offered Israel is irrevocable. “God is not man, that he should lie” [...] The permanent elective fidelity of God expressed in earlier covenants is never repudiated (cf. Rom 9:4; 11:1–2). The New Covenant does not revoke the earlier covenants, but it brings them to fulfilment. [...] The term covenant, therefore, means a relationship with God that takes effect in different ways for Jews and Christians. (27)

The Church is the definitive and unsurpassable locus of the salvific action of God. This however does not mean that Israel as the people of God has been repudiated or has lost its mission. The New Covenant for Christians is therefore neither the annulment nor the replacement, but the fulfilment of the promises of the Old Covenant. (32)

The document adds that Israel continues to play a vital role in somehow providing a “locus in the history of salvation” for the Church:

It should be evident for Christians that the covenant that God concluded with Israel has never been revoked but remains valid on the basis of God’s unfailing faithfulness to his people, and consequently the New Covenant which Christians believe in can only be understood as the affirmation and fulfilment of the Old. [...] the Church without Israel would be in danger of losing its locus in the history of salvation. (33)

GCGI then comments on Paul’s analogy of the olive tree (Rom 11:16-21), even asserting that the Church’s identity and mission are in a certain way *dependent* upon “the root of Israel.” The image of the olive tree is

to be taken seriously in the sense that the Church draws nourishment and strength from the root of Israel, and that the grafted branches would wither or even die if they were cut off from the root of Israel. (34)

Taking for granted the Church’s rejection of punitive supersessionism, GCGI clearly repudiates economic supersessionism while adding that the Church still represents the “fulfilment” of

God's promises to Israel. GCGI's rejection of economic supersessionism, together with its multiple affirmations of God's enduring covenant with the Jews, implies a rejection of structural supersessionism as well. If the Church still "draws nourishment and strength from the root of Israel," this means that Israel must somehow continue to play a role in salvation history *after* Christ. It is thus incumbent upon Christian theology and biblical exegesis to reflect upon the ongoing role of Israel and its relationship to the Church in the unfolding story of salvation.

The above survey of Magisterial documents reveals that the Church explicitly rejects punitive and economic supersessionism, and implicitly rejects structural supersessionism. Our next task is to consider to what extent this is reflected in the Catholic interpretation of Sacred Scripture, and more specifically of the prophets. Our focus will be on selected passages from the prophets that highlight Israel's eschatological identity and destiny, because we are interested in how Catholic exegetes understand the nature of Israel's mission not only up to the coming of Christ (which all Christians accept) but especially *after* his coming and his establishment of the Church.

Reading the Prophets in Catholic Tradition

The prophets are not easy to read or understand for the average Christian. Unpronounceable names, bizarre metaphors, and cryptic oracles pronounced against ancient nations have perplexed readers in every generation, raising the perennial question: "how is all this relevant to my life and my faith?" The traditional solution has been to read the prophets (along with much of the Old Testament) typologically and allegorically, so that their value is revealed inasmuch as they prefigure Christ and are "fulfilled" in the New Covenant.

The typological and allegorical reading of OT prophecy is entirely legitimate, for it originates with the authors of the New Testament who believed and proclaimed that OT revelation "found its fulfillment in the life, in the teaching and above all in the death and resurrection of Jesus."¹⁵ Well-known examples abound: so the birth of the "Immanuel" (Isa 7:14) becomes a prediction of Jesus' virgin birth (Mt 1:23); the ruler born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2) is identified with Christ's birth in the city of David (Mt 2:6); the Lord's suffering servant (Isa 53) prefigures Christ's passion (Mt 8:17; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet 2:24); and the outpouring of the Lord's Spirit upon all flesh (Joel 2:28-29) is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:17-21).

In reinterpreting the OT in light of Christ, the authors of the NT established the legitimacy of the allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures for future generations of Christian exegetes. At the same time, the Christian reading of the OT raised some important questions regarding the identity of the people of God. The widespread Jewish rejection of Jesus' messianic claims, along with the entrance of many Gentiles into the community of believers, led the authors of the NT to grapple with the question of the Jews' status as God's chosen people.¹⁶ Yet despite the tension inherent in this question as to who constitutes the "true" people of God in the New Testament,

¹⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), III.A.2; cf. *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 6.

¹⁶ Passages that reveal tension as to the identity of God's people include Mt 21:43; Rom 2:28-29; 9:6; Gal 3:7, 28-29; 6:16; Heb 8:8-13; 1 Pet 2:9-10. For a discussion of these passages and a rebuttal of the view that they support a supersessionist reading of the NT, see Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 123-164.

the sacred authors never identify Israel with the Church. The expression “new Israel” or “true Israel,” in fact, does not appear anywhere in the NT: for the four evangelists, for St. Paul, and for the other inspired writers, Israel remains Israel.¹⁷ The Church is “grafted into” Israel, but the former does not replace the latter. In other words, the NT is not inherently supersessionist. The Fathers of the Church, however, would soon take the theology of the people of God in a very different direction.

Israel in Catholic Biblical Exegesis

Ancient Exegesis: Allegory and Supersessionism

The NT “re-reading” of OT passages in light of Christ provided the foundation for the allegorical methods of interpretation employed by the Church Fathers. In their reinterpretations of OT texts, which they understood to be fulfilled in Christ and in the New Covenant, the Fathers followed the lead of the apostles.¹⁸ Behind this reinterpretation of Scripture often lay apologetic concerns, for the early Church was engaged in a “protracted struggle to define its theological identity against three sets of opponents: Jews, pagans, and Gnostics.”¹⁹

In their debates with the Jews, however, the Fathers went far beyond St. Paul’s view of the Church as “grafted into” the root of Israel. They generally presupposed a supersessionist view of Scripture, which was facilitated by their allegorical interpretation of the OT. Although they acknowledged that God had originally given the prophetic word to the Jews, the Fathers believed that the prophecies no longer applied to “Israel in the flesh” after Christ’s advent, but had been transferred to the “new Israel,” the Church, with Jesus’ institution of the New Covenant. While OT warnings, admonitions and threats of punishments still applied to Israel because of their ongoing unbelief, the promises and blessings were now seized by the Church as her own.

In Alexandria, Origen was particularly influential in promoting punitive supersessionism. Convinced that God had rejected Israel because of their sins,²⁰ he grounded the theoretical basis

¹⁷ The word *Israel* (and *Israelite*) occurs some 77 times in the New Testament. In every one of these instances, the term always refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, or “Israel in the flesh.” *Israel* is never used as a synonym for the Church in the New Testament, even in the two instances where *Israel* is used in a special, more restrictive sense (Rom 9:6 and Gal 6:16). Cf. Derek Prince, *The Destiny of Israel and the Church* (Milton Keynes, England: Word (UK), 1999), 13–17, 23–30, 131–136.

¹⁸ As then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote in 2001, “the Fathers of the Church created nothing new when they gave a Christological interpretation to the Old Testament; they only developed and systematised what they themselves had already discovered in the New Testament.” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, Preface.

¹⁹ Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 40.

²⁰ For example, Origen stated: “And we say with confidence that they [Jews] will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind, in conspiring against the Saviour of the human race.” *Against Celsus* 4.22 (ANF 4:506). “After the advent of Jesus the Jews were altogether abandoned, and possess now none of what were considered their ancient glories, so that there is no indication of any Divinity abiding amongst them” *Against Celsus* 2.8, (ANF 4:433). On Origen’s supersessionism, cf. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 38–39; Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology* (IVP Books, 2004), 81–87.

of replacement theology in his allegorical reading of the Bible.²¹ Origen saw a three-fold meaning in Scripture (carnal, psychic, and spiritual), and he insisted on the superiority of the spiritual meaning.²² From this premise, it followed that “the interpreter must always posit a deeper or higher meaning for prophecies relating to Judea, Jerusalem, Israel, Judah, and Jacob which, [Origen] affirms, are ‘not being understood by us in a ‘carnal’ sense.’”²³ The allegorical reading of Scripture thus enabled Origen to read OT passages that spoke of physical or “carnal” Israel as types of “spiritual Israel,” the Church.

Even more influential than Origen’s threefold scheme was John Cassian’s “four senses of Scripture,” the interpretive model that eventually became dominant in the West—and is still preserved in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.²⁴ Cassian first distinguished *historica interpretatio* from *spiritualis intelligentia*, i.e. the literal and the allegorical interpretation. He then subdivided the spiritual sense into the allegorical, tropological (or moral), and anagogical senses. As the *Catechism* explains, the allegorical sense points to the significance of OT events in Christ. The tropological sense refers to their moral interpretation, or their application in the life of the Christian. The anagogical sense sees biblical realities and events “in terms of their eternal significance... thus the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.”²⁵ Cassian himself used the example of the city of Jerusalem to illustrate his own model:

The same Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically, as the city of the Jews; allegorically as Church of Christ, anagogically as the heavenly city of God “which is the mother of us all,” tropologically, as the soul of man.²⁶

The example of Jerusalem demonstrates well the value of Cassian’s model. On the one hand, it provides an interpretive framework that remains grounded in the literal sense of Scripture. On the other hand, it transcends the literal sense and enables the Christian exegete to tap into the spiritual senses of Scripture as fulfilled in Christ, in the Christian life, and in the world to come. Does this interpretive framework leave room for a post-Christic Israel? Theoretically, there does not seem to be any reason why not, for eschatological prophecies given to Israel can very well be fulfilled in Christ and the Church on a spiritual level, while still allowing for the possibility of a future fulfillment in Israel. In practice, however, ancient Christian exegetes tended to adopt an either/or rather than a both/and approach. In their view—as we shall see—the fulfillment of the prophecies in Christ and in the Church often precluded any additional level of fulfillment in Israel.

²¹ Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 86, cited in Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 38.

²² Origen, *On First Principles*, IV.I.11 (ANF 4:359). Cf. Diprose, *Israel and the Church*, 82; Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2001), 171.

²³ Diprose, *Israel and the Church*, 84. Cf. Origen, *On First Principles*, II.IV.22 (ANF 4:370).

²⁴ Cf. Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (T&T Clark, 1994), 119 ; Henri De Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l’Écriture* [3 vols.; Paris, 1959-60]; CCC 115-118.

²⁵ CCC 117. The Catechism has preserved a medieval couplet which summarizes the significance of the four senses: “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.” (“The Letter speaks of deeds; Allegory to faith; The Moral how to act; Anagogy our destiny.”). CCC 118; Augustine of Dacia, *Rotulus pugillariorum*, I: ed. A. Walz: Angelicum 6 (1929) 256.

²⁶ Cassian, *Collationes* 2.14.8.

Modern Exegesis: The Historical-Critical Method

In contrast to ancient exegesis, modern scientific approaches to the Bible are dominated by the historical-critical method, which is characterized by a strong focus on the literal sense. The method is historical because “it seeks to shed light upon the historical processes which gave rise to biblical texts.” It is also critical because it operates “with the help of scientific criteria that seek to be as objective as possible,” in order to “make accessible to the modern reader the meaning of biblical texts.”²⁷

Although the historical-critical method is widely recognized as “the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts,”²⁸ many—including Pope Benedict XVI—have criticized its limitations. For Benedict, “the method’s first limit is that by its very nature it has to leave the biblical word in the past,” and so it cannot make the word present *today*.²⁹ For our purposes, this means that a historical-critical reading of the Bible is at risk of leaving Israel in the past as well. By limiting the meaning of the biblical text to its historical context, the method could easily fail to take into consideration the relevance of Israel’s covenant and mission in our own day—and in the future.

Critics have also noted that the historical-critical method is susceptible of adopting atheist, rationalist, or materialist presuppositions that tend to exclude the possibility of any supernatural, divine intervention in Scripture.³⁰ Some have argued that scientific exegesis is notable for “its sterility in what concerns progress in the Christian life. Instead of making for easier and more secure access to the living sources of God’s word, it makes of the Bible a closed book.”³¹ If the positive contributions of the method are undeniable, historical-critical commentaries should nevertheless be read with discernment: do they still allow room for faith and authentic prophecy in the study of the sacred texts, or are these excluded *a priori*? In other words, going back to our topic, does the scientific exegesis of the Bible allow for a continued role for Israel after Christ and a future fulfillment of eschatological prophecy in Israel’s ongoing history?

Conscious of both the merits and limitations of the historical-critical method, the Church in recent decades has promoted other approaches to biblical exegesis that combine the best features of both the ancient and modern methods. Among these, the canonical approach stands out. Canonical exegesis reads Scripture “from within an explicit framework of faith: the Bible as a whole,” interpreting each biblical text in light of the canon of Scripture.³² This approach, called the “content and unity of the whole Scripture” in the *Catechism*, presupposes faith in the task of

²⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, I.A.2. The method includes disciplines such as textual criticism, linguistic and semantic analysis, genre criticism, tradition and redaction criticism. (I.A.3)

²⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, I.A. Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan*, vi. The PBC states: “Historical-critical exegesis has too often tended to limit the meaning of texts by tying it too rigidly to precise historical circumstances.” (*IBC 1993*, II.B.1).

³⁰ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*; Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture*, 81.

³¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, Introduction A.

³² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, I.C.1. Pope Benedict XVI has also praised the merits of this approach (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan*, xviii-xx).

exegesis on the basis of the divine authorship of Scripture: “Different as the books which comprise it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God’s plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart.”³³ Keeping in mind the unity of God’s plan as disclosed in the whole canon of Scripture will help the exegete avoid the atomization or fragmentation of Scripture that has become so pervasive in modern biblical exegesis. Hence prophecies about Israel in the Book of Jeremiah, for example, are not limited or exhausted by Jeremiah’s sixth century BCE perspective, but should be read in light of the continued unfolding of divine revelation in the whole Bible.

Another aspect to keep in mind when considering the identity and mission of Israel is the question of the levels of meaning of Scripture. Although the Pontifical Biblical Commission endorses the historical-critical method, it also critiques the method’s tendency to read only one single meaning in any given biblical text. According to the PBC, “this thesis has now run aground on the conclusions of theories of language and of philosophical hermeneutics, both of which affirm that written texts are open to a plurality of meaning.”³⁴ The PBC recommends a balanced approach that takes into consideration both the literal and spiritual sense: On the one hand, it is “absolutely necessary to seek to define the precise meaning of texts as produced by their authors [in] what is called the ‘literal’ meaning,³⁵ for, as St. Thomas Aquinas states, “all other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal.”³⁶ On the other hand, a high regard for the literal sense should not “exclude all possibility of higher fulfillment.” Biblical exegesis should also take into consideration the spiritual sense, or “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”³⁷ Nevertheless, “the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense. The latter remains the indispensable foundation.”³⁸ We must keep this principle in mind when considering eschatological prophecies about Israel: any allegorical or tropological interpretation of these passages which propose a fulfillment in Christ and/or the Church should not *a priori* neglect, exclude or explain away the literal sense of the prophecies as originally given to Israel.

The Eschatological Destiny of Israel in Some Prophetic Texts

Keeping in mind the principles of exegesis outlined above, we shall now consider the following prophetic passages, which pertain in various ways to Israel’s eschatological destiny:

- The “Mountain of the Lord” in Isaiah 2:1-6
- The announcement of the “New Covenant” in Jeremiah 31:31-37
- The restoration of Israel, the War of Gog, and the New Temple in Ezekiel 36-48

³³ CCC 112; cf. *Dei Verbum* 12.

³⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, II.B.

³⁵ The literal sense is “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors. Since it is the fruit of inspiration, this sense is also intended by God, as principal author.” Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, II.B.1; cf. *STh* I, q.1, a.10, ad 1.

³⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh* I, 1, 10, ad 1; cf. CCC 116.

³⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, II.B.2. The Church’s emphasis on the importance of *both* the literal and spiritual senses is reflected in the *Catechism*’s adoption of Cassian’s four senses of Scripture as normative framework for the interpretation the Bible (CCC 115-118).

³⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *IBC 1993*, II.B.2.

- The eschatological battle and universal reign of God in Zechariah 10-14

For each of these passages, we will begin by briefly describing the literal sense of the prophecy in its original context. We will then examine a sample of patristic interpretations for each passage, paying close attention to how the Fathers interpret—or reinterpret—the oracles given to Israel.³⁹ We will then consider the perspective of a few modern Catholic commentaries and introductory texts on the prophets. Our first resource will be the *Navarre Bible*, of interest to us because of its theological approach to Scripture in light of Church tradition and magisterial teachings. Second, we will consult Thomas Leclerc’s *Introduction to the Prophets*, a popular textbook in Catholic institutions. Third, we will examine the perspective of the *Come and See* Catholic Bible Study, a basic introductory series on the Bible for Catholics. Finally, we will survey the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, another recent Catholic commentary series.

Isaiah 2:1-6: The Mountain of the Lord

Isaiah 2:1-6 is the famous passage of the “mountain of the house of the Lord” that is to become established in the “last days” (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים) on Mount Zion as a place of pilgrimage for all nations. In this oracle, “concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (v. 1), the prophet announces that the nations will flow to the highly exalted mountain of the Lord to receive instruction from Him; from this mountain located in Jerusalem, the Torah and Word of the Lord will go forth to the world (vv. 2-3). In this idyllic setting, God will “judge between the nations” and establish a reign of universal peace, so that they will “beat their swords into plowshares” and will no longer war against each other (v. 4). Given Jerusalem’s great universal destiny, the prophet exhorts the “house of Jacob” to “walk in the light of the Lord” (v. 5).

Isaiah’s prophecy is to take place in the “latter days;” and indeed, there does not seem to be any way to posit a literal fulfillment of this oracle either in the days of the prophet or at any other time in history. We have yet to see an era of universal peace on earth when all nations flow to Jerusalem to learn from the Torah such as Isaiah describes it. Let us now examine some ancient and modern interpretations of this prophecy.

Isaiah 2:1-6 (Ancient Interpretation)

The Church Fathers interpret Isaiah’s prophecy allegorically by identifying the mountain of the Lord with Christ and the Church. For Theodoret of Cyr, the “last days” of Isaiah’s vision refer not to the end of history but to the time following Christ’s incarnation, when all idolatry is destroyed.⁴⁰ For Cyril of Jerusalem, the mountain is the Church,⁴¹ and for Gregory the great, it is Christ, “our redeemer.”⁴² Leander of Seville distinguishes between the mountain—Christ, and

³⁹ Patristic excerpts will be taken from the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* volumes. This means that our selection of passages will inevitably be limited by the editorial choices of that series.

⁴⁰ Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Isaiah 2.2*. Patristic commentaries on Isaiah 2 are taken from Steven A. McKinion, ed., *Isaiah 1-39*, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Old Testament X (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 24–27.

⁴¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 21.7.

⁴² Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies* 33.

the “house of the God of Jacob”—the Church, “toward which the concourse of nations and assembly of peoples is moving.”⁴³

St. Jerome ties Isaiah 2 with 1 Tim 3:15, so that Isaiah’s “house of the Lord” is identified with “the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth... built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, who are mountains themselves as imitators of Christ.”⁴⁴ This ecclesiological interpretation logically leads to economic and punitive supersessionism: even though Isa 2:5 specifies that the prophecy is addressed to the “house of Jacob,” Jerome reinterprets verse 6 by putting new words into the mouth of the prophet: “Isaiah made a note to the Lord, saying... for you have abandoned your people, *formerly* the house of Jacob, *on account of their sins*.”⁴⁵

Some Fathers argue that Isaiah’s law coming forth from Zion cannot possibly be the Law of Moses, as the Jews claim, because the Mosaic Law originated at Mount Sinai, not Zion. For Justin Martyr, who identifies the mountain with Christ and the Church, the “law” going out from Zion is the message of the gospel preached by the 12 apostles who went out from Jerusalem.⁴⁶ Tertullian adds that “the gospel will be this ‘way’ of the new law and the new word in Christ, no longer in Moses.”⁴⁷ Moreover, God’s judgment of the nations and the subsequent era of peace (Isa 2:4) refer to “not those of the Jewish people only, but also of the nations which are judged by the new law of the gospel and the new word of the apostles.”⁴⁸ John Chrysostom also understands the passage as an announcement that the Church will bring great peace for the world.⁴⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea also identifies “the law from Zion” with the words of the Gospel, which he contrasts to the Law of Moses:

What can this law proceeding from Zion, which is different from what was made law by Moses in the desert at Mount Sinai, be but the word of the gospel through our Savior Jesus Christ which proceeds from Zion through all the nations?⁵⁰

Likewise, Theodoret of Cyr rejects the possibility that the “law from Zion” could refer to the Torah given on Mount Sinai:

God gave the ancient law on Sinai, not Zion. Clearly Isaiah is referring to the New Testament, where the law was first given to the apostles and then delivered to all peoples by them. He announces that in addition to the law, the word would come from Zion. The term *word* is a title given to the message of the gospel.⁵¹

⁴³ Leander of Seville, *Homily on the Triumph of the Church*.

⁴⁴ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 1.2.2.

⁴⁵ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah* 1.2.6. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 39.

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.21.

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.1.

⁴⁹ John Chrysostom, *Demonstration against the Pagans* 6.6.

⁵⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Proof of the Gospel* 1.4.

⁵¹ Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Isaiah* 2.4. In similar fashion, Basil the Great writes: “Ask a man of circumcision, a Jew after the flesh, which law and which word the prophet is talking about. About the law given through Moses? Let them show how this law comes “out of Zion.” For Moses did not enter the land of possession, whereas Zion is in Judea.” (*Commentary on Isaiah* 2.72)

St. Augustine also identifies Isaiah's mountain with Christ, "your mountain of refuge," who is "coming from the nation of the Jews, which was also a mountain."⁵² Since the first law, the Old Testament, came out of Mount Sinai by the lips of Moses, the "law from Zion" announced by Isaiah is the law that Christ came to give.⁵³ And so "the law and the Word of God was going to proceed from Zion and Jerusalem to all nations, not from Mount Sinai to one nation. This we see most evidently fulfilled in Christ and the Christians."⁵⁴ To the Jewish objection that the prophecy is addressed to the "house of Jacob" (Isa 2:5), Augustine replies with LXX Isa 2:6: "For he has cast off his people, the house of Israel." Like Jerome, Augustine interprets this verse in a supersessionist way, as an expression of God abrogating His covenant with the Jews.

In summary, for the Church Fathers, Isaiah 2's vision entirely points to Christ's reign, in and through the Church; Israel is completely excluded. In some cases, economic supersessionism is explicitly asserted; in virtually all cases, structural supersessionism is presupposed, so that physical Jerusalem and Israel have no role to play in the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. Moreover, the eschatological dimension of the oracle gives way to a christological and ecclesiological reading, so that the vision is understood to be fulfilled not literally at the end of days, but allegorically in the era of the Church. The problem with this interpretation, obviously, is that the age of the Church has never produced an idyllic situation of global peace such as that described by Isaiah, let alone one centered around Jerusalem. Whatever the merits of the allegorical interpretation of the Fathers, it is difficult to see how Isaiah's eschatological vision can be perfectly fulfilled in Christ and the Church apart from Israel and Jerusalem.

Isaiah 2:1-6 (Modern Interpretation)

Navarre

The Navarre Bible briefly comments on the literal sense of Isaiah's oracle, acknowledging that the prophet's vision is one of "messianic and eschatological restoration which shows that the salvation of the world centres on Zion, 'the mountain of the Lord', that is, Jerusalem."⁵⁵ The commentary situates the prophecy in the context of the Second Temple period, for it "links the Law with the temple, the spiritual centre of Jerusalem after the national reconstruction that took place when the exiles returned from Babylon." Navarre then quotes *Gaudium et Spes* 78, which applies the ultimate fulfillment of Isa 2:4 to Christ's second coming, while also acknowledging that the words of the prophet come true anytime that "men vanquish sin by a union of love."⁵⁶ The commentary then continues to interpret the prophecy through a Christological lens: "These words of Isaiah announcing God's salvific intervention in the fullness of time will come true with the birth of Christ, who will open up an era of perfect peace and reconciliation."⁵⁷ While Navarre avoids overt expressions of punitive or economic supersessionism, Jerusalem, Zion and post-Christic Israel remain wholly absent from the discussion and interpretation of Isaiah's

⁵² Augustine, *Sermons* 62A.3; 147A.4.

⁵³ Augustine, *City of God* 18:54.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *In Answer to the Jews* 8.

⁵⁵ University of Navarre, *Major Prophets*, The Navarre Bible (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2005), 53.

⁵⁶ "Insofar as men are sinful, the threat of war hangs over them, and hang over them it will until the return of Christ. But insofar as men vanquish sin by a union of love, they will vanquish violence as well and make these words come true: 'They shall turn their swords into plough-shares...'" (GS 78).

⁵⁷ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 54.

mountain of the Lord. Hence it appears that structural supersessionism underlies Navarre's exegesis of Isaiah 2.

Leclerc

Thomas Leclerc's short treatment of Isaiah 2 is primarily historical-critical and limited to the literal sense of the prophecy: Yahweh will be "enthroned in his 'house,'" established on Zion, and there shall be universal peace: "The center of Yahweh's universal rule, the place from which he will issue his decrees, and the city to which all nations shall come is Jerusalem."⁵⁸ Leclerc factually describes the prophet's eschatological vision, but he does not conjecture as to how this vision might be fulfilled in the future, or whether post-Christic Israel might still play a role in this context in the age of the New Covenant.

Come and See

In the *Come and See* volume on Isaiah, Charles Kosanke and Laurie Manhardt provide a brief description of Isaiah's vision that is faithful to the literal sense, but the authors do not add any further theological reflections. Isaiah's message

describes a universal vision of God's reign. The devout Jew would *go up to the mountain of the LORD* (Isaiah 2:3) in Jerusalem to worship. In the future ALL nations and many peoples will go to Zion, the highest mountain, in order to worship in the house of the God of Jacob. This future period is one of universal peace.⁵⁹

Like Leclerc, *Come and See* accurately describes Isaiah's eschatological vision from the perspective of the prophet, but the commentary does not contextualize it or reflect on how it might still come to pass in post-Christic Israel in the age of the Church.

New Collegeville Bible Commentary

In the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*, Leslie J. Hoppe provides a brief, literal description of Isaiah's prophecy, without venturing into any Christological or ecclesiological interpretations:

The prophet speaks not of Jerusalem of his day but of Jerusalem in the distant future—a time after the city is purged by the coming judgment. Isaiah is convinced that the city's status will change in the future. However, that status will not be the consequence of God's presence in the temple, but of the city's role as the place to which all peoples will come to learn the torah... The universal observance of the torah will bring an era of peace.⁶⁰

While this is more a factual description of the biblical text than a theological interpretation or reflection, it seems to allow for the possibility a future fulfillment of the prophecy in Israel. Hoppe maintains a similar approach in his discussion of the restoration of Jerusalem in the latter chapters of Isaiah (56-66). While he occasionally mentions prophetic elements that are

⁵⁸ Thomas L. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings, and Scrolls* (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 179.

⁵⁹ Charles G. Kosanke and Laurie Watson Manhardt, *Isaiah, Come and See Catholic Bible Study* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2011), 10.

⁶⁰ Leslie J. Hoppe, *Isaiah, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 13* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 16.

reinterpreted in the NT in light of Christ, on the whole he remains faithful to the literal sense. Commenting on Isa 62:1-5, for example, he notes that “[t]here will be a new Jerusalem for all peoples to see.” The prophet anticipates “the city’s coming restoration and glorification” when God will be “reconciled with Jerusalem as a husband is reconciled with his estranged wife. This union will bring fertility to the land and the rebuilding of the city.”⁶¹

In summary, while the Navarre Commentary’s focus on the christological fulfillment of Isa 2 (at the expense of Israel) tends toward structural supersessionism, the discussions in Leclerc, *Come and See*, and the *New Collegeville Bible Commentary*—although too brief to draw any meaningful conclusions—seem to allow for the possibility of a future fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of the mountain of the Lord in Zion, as intended by the prophet.

Jeremiah 31:31-37: The New Covenant

Jer 31:31-37 is the famous passage announcing the new covenant that the Lord will make with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. This new covenant will perfect the covenant that they received at Sinai by internalizing of the law, universalizing the knowledge of the Lord, and granting the forgiveness of sins (31:33-34). Almost as if anticipating future supersessionist interpretations of this passage claiming that the New Covenant would abrogate Israel’s own election, the prophet then affirms the permanence of God’s covenant with Israel, whose descendants will remain a nation before Him forever as long as the order of the moon and stars, heaven and earth endure (31:35-37). The new covenant is clearly intended for *Israel*. Far from undermining their divine election, the new covenant will confirm it. The chapter concludes with a promise that the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt for the Lord (31:38-40).

Jeremiah 31:31-37 (Ancient Interpretation)

The Fathers naturally apply this verse to the New Covenant established by Christ (cf. Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20), praising its superiority over the Old, which they claim is now abolished: “The day of the Old Testament is gone. The new day has come in which the New Testament is made perfect,” says Ambrose.⁶² For Chrysostom, the first covenant consisted of types; the new is the reality.⁶³ Likewise, Jerome says: “For the grace of the law, which has passed away, we have received the abiding grace of the gospel, and, instead of the shadows and figures of the ancient covenant, truth has come by Jesus Christ.” Jerome adds that the promise of the New Covenant is not given to the Gentiles but to the Jews, who are now expected to “no longer live according to the ancient letter but in the newness of the Spirit.”⁶⁴

The ACCS includes only one patristic commentary on Jer 31:35-36—the passage that affirms the permanence of God’s covenant with Israel. St. Ephrem the Syrian reinterprets God’s promise that the “descendants of Israel” will never cease from being a nation before Him forever (31:36)

⁶¹ Hoppe, *Isaiah*, 162.

⁶² Ambrose, *Letter 50* (44). Patristic commentaries on Jeremiah 31 are taken from Dean O. Wenthe, ed., *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XII (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 211–221.

⁶³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 14.

⁶⁴ Jerome, *Letter 75*.

as “the promise given to David would not be left unfulfilled, and his kingdom and his seed would not cease before God’s face.” Ephrem posits that the prophecy was fulfilled in its own time for Zerubbabel, but was “more completely fulfilled in our Lord.” The prophecy, therefore, no longer speaks of the nation of Israel but of “the spread and eternity of Christ’s kingdom.” And so even a passage that so strongly speaks of God’s enduring covenant with Israel is given a supersessionist interpretation:

the prophet depicts the gospel and the church of Christ in the image of the powers of heaven (stars) and their spread in the image of the sands of the sea, because thus it should be that the gospel and the church would become known to all the ends of the universe and that all nations would believe in them.⁶⁵

On the rebuilding of the city (Jer 31:38-40), Jerome argues for a preterist, physical fulfillment at the time of Ezra on a first level, and for a tropological/ecclesial fulfillment on a second level. On the first level, he writes polemically against Jewish millennialists:

Those who accept the reign of the Messiah for one thousand years in the land of Judea—clearly the Jews and our Judaizers—strive to claim and to demonstrate that the sanctuary of the Lord, that is, the temple, must be maintained forever in one location... Because they are unable to show that it was completed after their captivity in the times of Zerubbabel and Ezra, they pass to the times of the Messiah, whom they say is coming at the consummation of the world, so that a golden and bejeweled Jerusalem can descend, according to the Apocalypse of John, and be built within this space of land.⁶⁶

Jerome argues that the Jews and Judaizers fail to understand that the literal sense of this prophecy was already fulfilled at the time of Ezra. The present and future fulfillment of the city’s reconstruction, he adds, is found in the edifice of the Church, which is “built from the tower ‘of obedience’ or ‘grace’ or ‘the gifts of God.’”⁶⁷

In short, while the Fathers understand Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant as announcing the New Covenant established by Christ, they ignore the prophet’s firm assurance that the descendants of Israel will never cease from being a nation before God, as expressed in Jer 31:35-37. The patristic commentaries are characterized by economic and structural supersessionism.

Jeremiah 31:31-37 (Modern Interpretation)

Navarre

The Navarre Commentary expounds at length on the New Covenant announced in Jer 31:31-34, stating that it “will endure forever.” Navarre contrasts the two covenants: whereas the Old carried the force of tradition, was a sign of divine election, and showed the Lord’s authority over his people, the New Covenant is new, interior, and heartfelt. The commentary adds that Jeremiah’s new covenant “has given its name to the ‘New Testament,’ on which the new people

⁶⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Jeremiah* 31:36.

⁶⁶ Jerome, *Six Books on Jeremiah* 6.29.2-5.

⁶⁷ Jerome, *Six Books on Jeremiah* 6.29.6-11.

of God is founded.”⁶⁸ It goes on to cite *Lumen Gentium*, which states that God’s dealings with Israel served as a “way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ” (LG 9).

Navarre then very briefly explains Jer 31:35-37, affirming the enduring nature of God’s covenant with Israel but without exploring the implications of this statement:

The Lord himself declares that his plans for his people endure forever. He assures Israel that his love and mercy towards them cannot change; they are as fixed as the stars in heaven, as immutable as the laws of nature. Nothing can change God’s love for Israel.⁶⁹

On the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the commentary acknowledges that “in the new dispensation the holy city of Jerusalem plays a key role.” Here, Navarre does not spiritualize Jerusalem but seems to accept that the prophet is writing about the earthly city, though without any suggestions as to how this might take place: “Hence the promise that Jerusalem will be rebuilt and that it will be consecrated to the Lord; under the New Covenant the city limits will be inviolate.”⁷⁰

Leclerc

In discussing Jeremiah’s new covenant, Leclerc asserts that God’s covenant with Israel was conditional, and thus could be broken and ended—which is precisely what happened when Israel persistently sinned and fell into idolatry.⁷¹ The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people were the proof that the covenant was broken. And so

[a] new covenant had to be established. It would be like the old covenant in that it, too, would be based on God's Torah (“my law”; 31:33); and, like the old covenant, a relationship between God and Israel would be established... In future days, God will once again bring together “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” as they were before the kingdoms were divided, and God will once again write the divine Law down for the people.

But there are differences, too. Whereas God had previously written the Law on tablets of stone (Exod 24:12), this new covenant will be written “on their hearts.”⁷²

After discussing the forgiveness of sins that is offered in the new covenant, Leclerc summarizes it as still fully intended for Israel:

Jeremiah's prophecy of a “new covenant” offered hope that the past with its sins and the present with its despair could be overcome by the gracious act of God who would reunite the people, reestablish the relationship between God and Israel, write the divine Law on people's hearts, and be present to people with forgiveness and mercy.⁷³

⁶⁸ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 435.

⁶⁹ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 436.

⁷⁰ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 436.

⁷¹ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 256–257.

⁷² Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 257.

⁷³ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 257.

Leclerc entirely bypasses Jer 31:35-37, however. He makes no mention of Jeremiah's hope that God's covenant with Israel will endure as long as the present age. In another section, dedicated to Jeremiah in later traditions, Leclerc considers the interpretation of Jer 31:31 in the NT. He points out that Paul and Luke "differ from Jeremiah in asserting that in Jesus God establishes a new and different covenant than the one God had established with Israel," since this covenant is now made with Jews and gentiles alike.⁷⁴

Come and See

The *Come and See* series discusses Jeremiah in its volume entitled *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Israel*. The commentary mentions the new covenant of Jer 31:31-34 only very briefly and exclusively from the perspective of its fulfillment in Jesus:

Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant written on hearts is fulfilled most perfectly in the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The divine nature of Christ proposes the new covenant to the human nature of Christ. The human nature answers Amen, and the resulting hypostatic union of human and divine ratifies the covenant eternally... The faithfulness of Jesus together with his mother Mary thus displaces the faithlessness of Adam together with his wife Eve.⁷⁵

Come and See is entirely silent about the perpetual nature of Israel's covenant in the present context (31:35-37). At the end of the volume, it describes the future "restoration of Israel" as something that would eventually be accomplished by John the Baptist, Jesus, and Mary.⁷⁶ The people of Israel are thus entirely missing from *Come and See's* eschatological perspective, which points again to an underlying structural supersessionism.

New Collegeville Bible Commentary

Pauline A. Viviano, the author of the NCBC volume on Jeremiah and Baruch, intentionally focuses on the historical and literary context of the new covenant rather than on its fulfillment in the NT. Jeremiah's new covenant is "the announcement of the Lord's new salvific action on behalf of the people: God will bring them home from exile." This return will include "the repopulation of the land (31:27-28) and the rebuilding of Jerusalem (31:38-40)." Viviano firmly keeps the new covenant tied to its original recipient, Israel (even to the point of ignoring its NT interpretation, somewhat surprisingly):

Thus this new covenant is not spiritualized or universalized but is grounded in the Lord's actions on behalf of the people at this time in their history and these actions will define their future. In spite of their unfaithfulness in the past, Israel's relationship to the Lord has never ceased. They are still "my people" and the Lord is "their God," but now they will be the Lord's people in a new way. The law remains, even in this new covenant, as

⁷⁴ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 270.

⁷⁵ Fr. Joseph L. Ponessa, Laurie Manhardt, and Sharon Doran, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Israel*, *Come and See Catholic Bible Study* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2014), 179.

⁷⁶ Ponessa, Manhardt, and Doran, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Israel*, 212.

an identifying characteristic of this people, but that law will no longer exist as an external reality; it will be “in the heart.”⁷⁷

Viviano acknowledges that the Torah will remain even in the age of the new covenant characterized by the universal knowledge of the Lord and the forgiveness of sins. She also emphasizes “the enduring character of the Lord’s relationship to Israel” expressed in Jer 31:35-37, so that “never will Israel and its offspring cease to be the Lord’s people.”⁷⁸ Moreover, Jerusalem “will be rebuilt and enlarged as the Lord’s city, but no temple is mentioned.”⁷⁹

To summarize our commentaries on Jer 31, the Navarre Commentary strongly emphasizes the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s new covenant in Christ while still affirming God’s enduring love for Israel. Leclerc also maintains the Israelite context of Jer 31 (although he bypasses verses 35-37), treating of its NT interpretation in a separate section. *Come and See*’s approach is resolutely supersessionist, ignoring the literal sense of Jer 31 and focusing entirely on its fulfillment in Christ, with no mention of the lasting covenant with Israel or the future restoration of the nation. Finally, in sharp contrast to *Come and See*, the NCBC stays close to the literal sense, discussing Jeremiah’s new covenant exclusively in the context of Israel, without even mentioning its NT fulfillment.

Ezekiel 36-48: The Restoration of Israel, the War of Gog, and the New Temple

Ezekiel 36 describes the reforestation and repopulation of the formerly desolate mountains of Israel (36:8-12). The prophet vividly reveals that the scattering of Israel across the nations because of their sin (36:16-21) is not their ultimate destiny, for God will gather them back into their land to vindicate the holiness of His name (36:22-24). This ingathering will be followed by a spiritual resurrection, when the Lord will “sprinkle clean water” upon the house of Israel and give them “a new heart” and “a new spirit” (36:25-27). The spiritual revival of Israel is inextricably linked with their physical ingathering into the land of Israel, including the rebuilding of their cities and the renewed tilling of their land (36:33-36).

The prophet’s famous vision of the dry bones in chapter 37 essentially repeats the same message, describing the restoration of Israel in two stages: First, the dry bones are covered with sinews and flesh, but they remain lifeless corpses (37:7-8). Second, God commands “the spirit” to breathe upon the slain bodies, so that they come back to life and stand upon their feet (37:9-10). The Lord interprets the vision for Ezekiel: the first stage of Israel’s restoration represents the physical return of the people to the Land of Israel (37:12-13; cf. 36:22-24); the second stage announces the outpouring of God’s spirit upon them (37:14; cf. 36:25-27). The Lord then asks the prophet to join two sticks together, an action that symbolizes the future joining of Israel and Judah, which will make them “one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel” (37:22). A Davidic king will reign over the reunited nation in the land under a “covenant of peace,” when the Lord will dwell in their midst forevermore (37:24-28).

⁷⁷ Pauline A. Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 14 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 92–93.

⁷⁸ Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 93.

⁷⁹ Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 93.

The restoration of Israel is followed by the prophecy against Gog of the land of Magog in chapters 38-39. After Israel has been “gathered from many nations upon the mountains of Israel” (38:8), Gog and its allies (Persia, Cush, and Put, 38:5) violently attack the inhabitants of the peaceful land to plunder it (38:9-13), but thanks to a sovereign act of divine intervention, the war ends disastrously for Gog and its allies (39:1-9). After a decisive defeat, their weapons burn for seven years and the house of Israel buries them for seven months (39:9-16). This dramatic conflict ends with the reaffirmation that God will restore Israel into the land and pour His spirit upon the people (39:21-29).

Several things are striking about Ezekiel 36-39. First, the prophecies have both a physical and a spiritual dimension. Even though the *telos* of the oracles is the ultimate reconciliation of Israel with God through the outpouring of the Spirit, this scenario is closely linked to the Land of Israel, for it is in the land that God will pour out His spirit upon His people. Second, these prophecies have a strong eschatological character, as they have not been fulfilled at any given time in history. While Israel was indeed sent into exile, they have never fully returned to their land to live there in permanent peace and security; even less did they ever corporately receive a “new heart” and “new spirit” enabling them to walk faithfully in God’s statutes and ordinances. Even if we follow the standard Christian interpretation holding that the new heart and new spirit became a reality in Christ’s institution of the New Covenant, it remains that Israel as a nation never received this covenant. As St. Paul writes, “through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:11).

Moreover, while many Jewish and Christian Zionists see a partial fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecies in the modern-day return of the Jews to the Land of Israel, this return hardly mirrors the spiritual resurrection or the reunion of Israel and Judah depicted by the prophet. Neither has a coalition of hostile nations led by a “Gog” ever risen against Israel only to be annihilated by an act of sovereign divine intervention (though many see the stage being set for this scenario today with the increasing hostility of the Middle East Muslim nations against the State of Israel). A preterist interpretation of Ezekiel 36-39 is thus excluded.

Similar things can be said about the intricate description of Ezekiel’s Temple in the last nine chapters of the book. Ezekiel hardly intended this description to be a mere metaphor for spiritual realities, for it includes very precise physical features, including measurements of gates, courts, vestibules, chambers, an altar, and prescribed animal sacrifices (Ezek 40-44). Moreover, the Temple is clearly situated in the Land of Israel, though not necessarily in Jerusalem (45:1-8),⁸⁰ and the stream that flows from it follows a course through precise locations in the land (into the Arabah and the Dead Sea, 47:1-12). Finally, the boundaries of the land and allotted tribal portions (47:13-48:35) are inseparable from the geography and topology of the Land of Israel. In his *Handbook on the Prophets*, Robert Chisholm raises the question that concerns us here: “Ezekiel’s vision of a new temple and a restored nation was not fulfilled in the postexilic period. How then should we expect the vision to be fulfilled?”⁸¹ Let us now consider how ancient and modern interpreters understand Ezekiel’s eschatological visions of the restoration of Israel, the war of Gog, and the new Temple.

⁸⁰ “The city” in Ezek 45:6-7 is distinct from the “holy district” where Ezekiel’s Temple is situated (45:1-2).

⁸¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Baker Academic, 2009), 285.

Ezekiel 36-48 (Ancient Interpretation)

As with the other prophetic passages seen above, the Fathers interpret Ezek 36-48 allegorically. In his dialogue with Trypho the Jew, Justin Martyr comments on the oracle announcing that the people of Israel will inherit the mountains of Jerusalem (36:12). But Justin transfers the identity of Israel to Christ and the nations, excoriating Trypho: “why do you not feel compunction both for fooling yourselves by imagining that you alone are the people of Israel and for cursing those whom God has blessed?”⁸² Jerome also allegorizes the mountains of Israel as referring to “the prophets and apostles” and “those who hear the Word of God.”⁸³

Other Fathers interpret tropologically and sacramentally the sprinkling of clean water that is to give Israel a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek 36:25-27). They understand it as referring to the new life emerging from the waters of baptism and the Holy Spirit given to the apostles, thereby detaching the oracle from the context of Israel’s ingathering from exile, and transferring the promise of the spirit to baptized Christians.⁸⁴ Jerome grants that the prophecy is still intended for the Jewish people, but he spiritualizes it and abstracts it from the return to the land:

When a new heart and a new spirit are given, all hardness is taken away from the Jewish heart, which is compared with a heart of stone, and instead of a heart of stone there is a heart of flesh, soft and tender, which can receive the spirit of God within it and be written with the words of salvation.⁸⁵

The Fathers also separate the valley of dry bones from its Israelite context, reading it as a “witness of the future resurrection” that Christ will accomplish.⁸⁶ Likewise, they interpret the union of the two sticks, Israel and Judah, as referring to the ingathering of the Church.⁸⁷

It is telling that the ACCS entirely skips the prophecy against Gog in Ezek 38-39 without providing even a single commentary from the Church Fathers. Do the Fathers really have nothing to say about this eschatological passage so closely linked to the Land of Israel, or does this silence indicate a supersessionist bias on the part of the ACCS editors? The ACCS jumps straight to Ezekiel’s prophecy of the new Temple, which the Fathers interpret as a spiritual edifice. Gregory the Great writes that the city (40:2) “has here already its great building in the conduct of the saints,” and those who build it are “holy teachers who by speaking spiritual words arrange living stones, that is, the souls of the elect, into a heavenly building.”⁸⁸

For Jerome, the revelation of the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east and filling the Temple (43:1-5) “really takes place at the coming of Christ, when the sound of the apostles goes

⁸² Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 123. Patristic commentaries on Ezekiel 36-39 are taken from Kenneth Stevenson and Michael Gluerup, eds., *Ezekiel, Daniel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XIII (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 115–124.

⁸³ Commentary on Ezekiel 11.36.1-15.

⁸⁴ Cyprian, *Letter* 70.1; Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 14.36; Paulinus of Nola, *Poem* 31.311.

⁸⁵ Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 11.36.16-38.

⁸⁶ Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 52; Ambrose, *On His Brother Satyrus* 2.69; Aphrahat, *Demonstrations* 8.13

⁸⁷ Cassiodorus, *Exposition of the Psalms* 101.23

⁸⁸ Gregory the Great, *Homilies on Ezekiel* 2.1.5, 10. Patristic commentaries on Ezekiel 40-48 are taken from Stevenson and Gluerup, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 125–147.

forth on the whole earth and their words to the ends of the earth.” If the Lord has promised that He will “dwell in their midst forever” (43:9), it means that “He did not dwell for a short time as in the synagogue, but forever, as is shown in the church of Christ.”⁸⁹ For some, the eastern gate of the sanctuary which is shut refers to the virginal womb of the Virgin Mary, “the gate through whom the Redeemer entered this world.”⁹⁰

As for the waters flowing from the threshold of the Temple (Ezek 47:1-12), Jerome explains that they refer to Christ, the grace of baptism, and the teaching of the Church: “From the temple of the Lord, that is, from his bosom, the Savior came forth and sweetened the Dead Sea and the bitter waters.”⁹¹ The miraculous fruit and leaves of the trees on the banks of the river, moreover, mean “the mysteries of the divine books.”⁹²

The ACCS also skips entirely over the detailed division of the land to the twelve tribes described in Ezek 47:13-48:35. This short overview demonstrates that the patristic interpretation of Ezekiel 36-48 is thoroughly supersessionist: virtually all the prophecies that Ezekiel intended for the land and people of Israel are allegorized and transferred to the Church, to the exclusion of Israel.

Ezekiel 36-48 (Modern Interpretation)

Navarre

The Navarre Commentary says very little about the prophecy to the mountains of Israel (Ezek 36:1-15). On the prophet’s anticipated restoration of Israel (36:16-39:29), Navarre acknowledges that Ezekiel’s oracles “have an eschatological dimension to them, particularly the latter ones (38:1-39:29),”⁹³ but it fails to clearly develop the implications of these words. The commentary vaguely asserts that “the return of the people to the promised land was a necessary part of their deliverance,” but it then moves into a discussion of the “theology of the Name of God” in the New Testament and in Christian tradition.⁹⁴ Like the Fathers, Navarre connects the cleansing of Israel (36:25) with Christian Baptism:

Ezekiel views the renewal of Israel from the perspective of divine worship—sprinkling with water and other purification rites being a sign of inner change. This passage can be read as an announcement of the effects of Baptism...⁹⁵

Navarre doesn’t entirely exclude Israel from God’s redemption as announced by the prophet:

The Israelites will have a completely new life-force: as a result, their conduct will be perfect (v. 27), the Covenant will never again be broken (v. 28), and the land, also cleansed of defilement, will be abundant in the fruit it yields (v. 30). God’s patent

⁸⁹ Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 13.43.1-9.

⁹⁰ Ambrose, *Letter 44*; Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 13.44.1-3; Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 16.44.

⁹¹ Jerome, *Homilies on the Psalms* 10 (Ps 76).

⁹² Jerome, *Commentary on Ezekiel* 14.47.1-12.

⁹³ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 738.

⁹⁴ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 740.

⁹⁵ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 740.

initiative in repatriating and renewing Israel is a proof of his disinterested love for his people.⁹⁶

And yet the commentary does not speculate on how this redemption might occur. Instead, it interprets the prophecies in light of Jesus and the salvation he offered to mankind.

The commentary's interpretation of the valley of dry bones is similar. Navarre speaks of "the climax of the resurgence of Israel, the unification of the two kingdoms," but it remains vague: "the revitalization that God will bring about goes much further than material reconstruction or simply a return to the promised land; it implies, rather, a new beginning, both personal and social."⁹⁷ Navarre explains that Ezekiel envisions "the destruction-restoration of Israel," while the Church Fathers "see in it veiled references to the resurrection of the dead." Israel disappears, however, with the commentary's interpretation of the outpouring of the Spirit: "This promise... will find its complete fulfilment at Pentecost, when the Spirit descends on the apostles."⁹⁸

As for the symbolic union of the two sticks, Navarre acknowledges that Ezekiel is announcing the future unification of the tribes of the Southern and Northern kingdoms, "a union so strong that it will never again be broken." This unity, however, "is also a symbol of the oneness that Jesus wants the new people of God to have... and which is essential for the success of his plans for mankind's salvation."⁹⁹

Commenting on the war of Gog, Navarre admits, after giving a brief description of the content of the prophecy, that "no satisfactory explanation has been found as to who Gog is, or Magog."¹⁰⁰ The commentary does not consider the possibility that this war may still take place in the future, and it seems to dismiss a literal interpretation of the prophecy:

In the language of eschatology, places and dates are idealized and exaggerated; what is being referred to here is Jerusalem, *the* city of the messianic era. The Letter to the Hebrews and the book of Revelation will speak of a heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁰¹

Navarre then describes the events of chapter 39, saying that "Gog's downfall is a sign that the new Israel will never again be attacked by another nation." But Israel's restoration and the outpouring of the Spirit upon them (39:29) are then appropriated by the Church: "The New Testament allows us to read this as an announcement of the presence of the Holy Spirit who renews the new people of God, the Church, with his manifold gifts."¹⁰²

The Navarre Commentary describes Ezekiel's New Temple fairly accurately, but it then reverts to a christological and ecclesiological interpretation based on St. Gregory the Great's description of the temple as an image of the Church.¹⁰³ The return of the Lord's glory into His Temple (43:1-

⁹⁶ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 741.

⁹⁷ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 743.

⁹⁸ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 743–44.

⁹⁹ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 745.

¹⁰⁰ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 749.

¹⁰¹ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 748.

¹⁰² Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 752.

¹⁰³ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 760.

5) is also interpreted christologically, being associated with Jesus' promise that he would always remain with his disciples (Mt 28:20).¹⁰⁴ Likewise, the spring flowing from the temple, "although it contains references to actual places," is merely "symbolic," for it shows "that the renewal of the temple and its worship will bring all sorts of advantages to the whole people." Navarre connects this stream with the "rivers of living water" spoken by Jesus in Jn 7:37, adding that early Christian tradition sees "in the spring in the temple the waters of Baptism that flow from Christ who is life, or from Christ's side on the altar of the cross."¹⁰⁵

On the borders of the new Israel and the division of the land (Ezek 47:13-48:29), Navarre refrains from suggesting any eschatological interpretations connected to Israel, appealing instead to the allegorical views of the Church Fathers, who

explained this arrangement of the idealized holy land as being a symbol of the establishment of the messianic kingdom, where everything will be perfectly in order and all mankind will acknowledge and praise the true God.

In summary, Navarre provides fairly accurate descriptions of Ezekiel's prophecies in their literal sense. But the commentary offers no suggestions as to how these prophecies could be fulfilled in Israel after Christ—despite the unmistakable connection of the prophecies with the Land of Israel. All interpretations are based on an allegorical, christological or ecclesiological reading of the oracles, which points again to an underlying structural supersessionism.

Leclerc

Leclerc's treatment of Ezekiel 36-48 is very brief. He entirely bypasses the restoration of Israel described in Ezek 36, and only summarily describes the valley of the dry bones, with no attempt at interpreting it beyond saying that this vision is one of "national restoration and revival."¹⁰⁶ For Leclerc, Ezekiel's new Temple "will be the heart of the restored Israel," and yet it is "unlikely" that Ezekiel's great details for the sacred space and its furnishings are meant to be "blueprints" for an actual Temple. "Rather, Ezekiel is envisioning an ideal setting in which society is built around the worship of God and the holy places are safeguarded from defilement."¹⁰⁷ Leclerc thus interprets the Temple as a symbolic structure. He briefly describes the river flowing from it without further comment, and concludes by writing:

Ezekiel's vision is of a very definite kind of future, in which the Temple and its priesthood is the center of life and Israel is, for all practical purposes, a priestly theocracy.¹⁰⁸

Come and See

In contrast to Leclerc's brief treatment, the *Come and See* volume on Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation provides a fairly extensive commentary on Ezek 36-48. Like Navarre, it jumps from short descriptions of Ezekiel's oracles to christological and ecclesiological fulfillments. Even

¹⁰⁴ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 765.

¹⁰⁵ Navarre, *Major Prophets*, 781.

¹⁰⁶ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 297.

¹⁰⁷ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 298.

¹⁰⁸ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 299.

though Ezek 36 announces, for example, that “Israel must be reestablished” and “the sinful people will be spiritually regenerated,” the commentary claims that this oracle was “eventually fulfilled in the spiritual Israel, the Catholic Church, founded by Christ.”¹⁰⁹ Likewise, the vision of the dry bones “refers to the revival of the defunct nation of Israel” and the joining of the two sticks “signifies the reunion of the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel by God’s will; they shall form a single nation under a single ruler, the New David.” But Israel disappears in the christological and ecclesiological interpretation that follows: “This prophecy is clearly messianic and spiritually fulfilled in the one true Church, the Catholic Church.”¹¹⁰

On the oracle against Gog (Ezek 38-39), *Come and See* mentions the possibility of a preterist interpretation, where Gog is identified with “some specific foreign invader, the Seleucids for instance.” It also proposes a christological and ecclesiological reading, where Israel has all but disappeared: “Others, who see a messianic meaning, explain Gog and his army as signaling the forces of evil seeking vainly to undermine the Church founded on the Rock, which is Christ.”¹¹¹ And so “restored Israel” is a symbol of the “kingdom of God,” and Gog and Magog “symbolizes all the forces of evil ranged against God’s people, a sort of Antichrist.”¹¹² As for Ezekiel’s New Temple, descriptions of Ezekiel’s vision are given supersessionist interpretations in which Israel disappears: “Catholic tradition has usually regarded this picture as a prefiguring of the messianic kingdom, the Church founded by Christ.”¹¹³ Likewise, in Ezekiel’s description of the New Holy Land (chaps 47-48), “there are several features, especially the temple river, that defy a realistic interpretation, and therefore invite a mystical interpretation.”¹¹⁴

New Collegeville Bible Commentary

Corrine L. Carvalho and Paul V. Niskanen, the authors of the NCBC on Ezekiel and Daniel, follow the sober literal approach to the biblical text that is characteristic of the series. They do not dodge the prophecies on the physical restoration of Israel, emphasizing throughout that Israel is the “passive recipient of God’s actions. God gathers them, brings them back to their own land, purifies them, literally recreates them, and then rewards them with fertility.”¹¹⁵ Likewise, the authors acknowledge that the dry bones “represent the nation” that God will recreate and revivify. The commentary on the two sticks (Ezek 37:15-28) is straightforward: the reunification of the two kingdoms under the Davidic king in the land promised to Jacob under the everlasting covenant of peace “make clear that the restoration of a united monarchy is not an end in itself but is a necessary step for the restoration of a pure and peaceful land united in the worship of the Lord.”¹¹⁶

The NCBC acknowledges the interpretive difficulties of the war of Gog and Magog described in chapters 38-39, noting that Gog/Magog is not a neighbor of Israel but a “universal hypothetical

¹⁰⁹ Fr. Andreas Hoeck and Laurie Watson Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation, Come and See Catholic Bible Study* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2010), 57.

¹¹⁰ Hoeck and Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation*, 57.

¹¹¹ Hoeck and Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation*, 58.

¹¹² Hoeck and Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation*, 58.

¹¹³ Hoeck and Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation*, 65.

¹¹⁴ Hoeck and Manhardt, *Ezekiel, Hebrews, Revelation*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Corrine L. Carvalho and Paul V. Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 16 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 95.

¹¹⁶ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 97.

enemy,” that these events “will occur in the distant future,” and that “Israel’s depiction as an unfortified, unarmed, peaceful people does not match the situation of Judah during the lifetime of Ezekiel.”¹¹⁷ All in all, the commentary is more descriptive than theological. It does not speculate as to how or when these events might take place—if they ever come to pass: “The whole point of the restoration is to carry through to completion God’s plan to be known throughout the world as a strong, powerful god in control of human history.”¹¹⁸

Coming to Ezekiel’s Temple, Carvalho and Niskanen question the purpose of the vision: “Is it a romantic recollection of the first temple, a utopian vision of a heavenly temple, or a program for rebuilding the temple?”¹¹⁹ The answer is inconclusive. While the plan of the temple, with its very practical concerns and ritual laws

may describe a heavenly or eschatological vision, it may also present a divinely revealed program for the restoration of the national temple. Whether the plan was utopian or practical, however, it has a primarily theological function. It expresses in concrete, spatial terms, God’s sovereignty over the nation.¹²⁰

Further observations on Ezekiel’s vision continue along the same ambiguous lines: thus the river flowing out of the temple in chapter 47 is “a visual expression of the life-giving qualities that God’s presence brings to the nation.” And the vision of the political reorganization of Israel in the last chapters of the book, where each tribe has an equal strip of land, “depicts in a concrete way the centrality of God’s presence for Ezekiel’s vision of a perfect Israel” and “represents the book’s understanding of the unique status of Jerusalem within the divine economy.”¹²¹

In summary, one senses a certain interpretive unease in our Catholic commentaries on the eschatological oracles of Ezek 36-48. The prophecies so clearly announce a physical (and spiritual) restoration of the nation of Israel, followed by a devastating military conflict and the reestablishment of the temple in or around Jerusalem, that it is difficult to entirely dismiss the literal sense and exclusively read the text as an allegorical metaphor anticipating the coming of Christ and the establishment of the Church. While Navarre and *Come and See* lean towards ecclesiological interpretations and structural supersessionism, Leclerc and the NCBC barely venture beyond terse, descriptive comments. None of them seriously consider the possibility that the eschatological oracles of Ezek 36-48 could still be fulfilled in the future in the Land of Israel.

Zechariah 10-14: The Eschatological Battle and Universal Reign of God

Like Ezek 36-48, the last few chapters of the Book of Zechariah are thoroughly eschatological. Zech 10:6-12 predicts a reunification of the tribes of Israel, announcing the strengthening of the house of Judah and the salvation of the house of Joseph (10:6). God’s future redemption will be manifest in the ingathering of His people from exile as they come home from Egypt and Assyria (10:8-12). Zechariah 12 describes a great battle against Jerusalem, when “all the nations of the

¹¹⁷ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 98–99.

¹¹⁸ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 101.

¹¹⁹ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 102.

¹²⁰ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 102.

¹²¹ Carvalho and Niskanen, *Ezekiel, Daniel*, 116–17.

earth will come together against it” (12:3). As with Ezekiel’s war of Gog, the Lord will sovereignly protect and deliver the city, putting “a shield about the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the feeblest among them on that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God” (12:8). God will then “seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem (12:9). At that moment of great tribulation, the Lord will “pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication, and they will look on me whom they have pierced” (12:10). The recognition of this mysterious “pierced one” will unleash a great period of mourning in the whole land (12:11-14). Chapter 13 continues along the same lines, speaking of a “wounded prophet” (13:6), and of a great tribulation in the land (13:8). Chapter 14 describes the ultimate Day of the Lord, when all nations gather together to fight against Jerusalem, but they are defeated by the Lord’s sovereign intervention (14:2-3). In a poignant anthropomorphism, the prophet announces that the Lord’s “feet” will stand on the Mount of Olives, which will be “split in two from east to west” (14:4). At that time, “living waters shall flow out of Jerusalem” (14:8; cf. Ezek 47:1-12), the Lord will reign over the whole earth (14:9), Jerusalem will dwell in security (14:11), and the survivors of the formerly hostile nations will “go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of booths” (14:16). Zechariah’s eschatological vision, including the final conflagration between good and evil, the last judgment, and the ensuing universal reign of God, is remarkable in that it is most definitively *earthly*, with the epicenter of these dramatic events clearly located in and around the city of Jerusalem.

Zechariah 10-14 (Ancient Interpretation)

Significantly, the ACCS does not provide a single patristic commentary on Israel’s ingathering from exile described in Zech 10:6-12. It also bypasses entirely the battle of the nations against Jerusalem (12:2-9). The ACCS does propose several excerpts from the Church Fathers on the mourning over the “pierced one” (12:10-14): According to Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*, Zech 12 refers to “what the people of the Jews shall say and do, when they see [Christ] coming in glory.” Although Justin ignores the ingathering of Israel and the eschatological battles of Zech 12-14, he acknowledges that the great lamentation will occur in (earthly) Jerusalem when the Jews “shall look on him whom they have pierced.”¹²² Similarly, Augustine detaches Zech 12:10 from the context of Israel’s ingathering and its deliverance from the hostile nations. For Augustine, the verse refers to the future conversion of the Jews from their deicidal act, a conversion that will precede God’s universal salvation: “Even those who killed him ‘will look on the one whom they have pierced.’ So ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”¹²³ Hippolytus of Rome does the same, noting the conversion of Israel but ignoring their restoration to the land and the divine protection that is extended to them in the same context:

For the crucifiers shall see him in human form, as he appeared to them “when he came” by the holy virgin in the flesh and as they crucified him. And he will show them the “prints of the” nails in his hands and feet, and his side pierced with the spear, and his head crowned with thorns, and his honorable cross. And once for all shall the people of

¹²² Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 52. Patristic commentaries on Ezekiel 40-48 are taken from Alberto Ferreiro, ed., *The Twelve Prophets*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament XIV (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 263–282.

¹²³ Augustine, *Sermon* 277.

the Hebrews see all these things, and they shall mourn and weep, as the prophet exclaims, “They shall look on him whom they have pierced.”¹²⁴

Concerning the coming Day of the Lord, Eusebius of Caesarea considers the battle of the nations against Jerusalem (14:2) as having been fulfilled with “the destruction of the whole Jewish race, which came on them after the coming of Christ” at the hands of the Romans.¹²⁵ Eusebius does not say a word about God’s deliverance of Jerusalem described in the very next verse.

Ephrem the Syrian has a more positive view of the Jews in his discussion of the living waters flowing from Jerusalem (14:8): “From Jerusalem the law of salvation will come. Indeed, as the Lord says, salvation is from the Jews, and it will spread among the neighbor nations.” However, he allegorizes the eastern and western seas as symbolic of the nations who will be irrigated by the “living waters of the divine precepts of Christ.”¹²⁶ Moreover, Ephrem interprets the universal reign of God (14:9) in preterist fashion as having been partially fulfilled at the time of the Maccabees, when “all Judea embraced the cult of the one God.” Zechariah’s prophecies, moreover, are “fulfilled and perfected by Christ” when “after the promulgation of the gospel of Christ, the whole world believed in him and recognized that he is God and the true king.”¹²⁷

In short, all the features particular to Israel in Zechariah’s eschatological vision—the ingathering of the Jews, the centrality of Jerusalem, God’s deliverance of the city from the gentiles, the surviving nations coming to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles—all these entirely disappear in the patristic commentaries. While some of the Fathers make statements expressing punitive or economic supersessionism, all of them presuppose a structural supersessionism in which Israel no longer has any role to play at the end of human history.

Zechariah 10-14 (Modern Interpretation)

Navarre

The Navarre volume on the Minor Prophets adopts a relatively positive outlook towards Israel in its commentary on Zechariah’s eschatological visions. It reads the ingathering of Israel (10:8-9) fairly literally as referring to a future “return and reunification” of Judah and the northern kingdom, forming a new community that will “include within it all the people of Israel.”¹²⁸ Navarre also interprets Zech 12 literally, speaking of “the eventual, permanent restoration of Jerusalem and Judah.” On that day,

Israel will fully triumph over her enemies (12:1–9), the people’s conversion to God will be complete and irreversible (12:10–13:9), and Jerusalem will be established forever in splendour as the capital of the Kingdom of God on earth (14:1–4).¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Hippolytus of Rome, *On the End of the World* 40.

¹²⁵ Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel* 2.3.50, 53.

¹²⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Zechariah*.

¹²⁷ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Zechariah*.

¹²⁸ University of Navarre, *Minor Prophets*, The Navarre Bible (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2006), 320.

¹²⁹ Navarre, *Minor Prophets*, 325.

Although Navarre interprets the mourning over the “pierced one” (Zech 12:10-14) christologically, so that the “much lamented person prefigures Jesus Christ nailed on the cross on whom sinful man will look,”¹³⁰ it seems to remain open to the possibility of an eschatological role for Israel: “The End time will be marked by profound repentance and penance in Jerusalem induced by the spirit of God.” Likewise, Navarre does not spiritualize away the eschatological battle in Zech 14: it points to “the punishment of Israel’s enemies (vv. 12–15) and all the nations coming in pilgrimage to the temple (vv. 16–21).” The role of (earthly) Jerusalem is also affirmed: “Jerusalem will be a great fount of waters, and from her the Lord will rule over all the earth”—though the commentary hastens to add a more universal interpretation: “All this imagery is designed to express hope in the fact that God will at last establish his kingdom in this world, and that creation itself will be wonderfully renewed in the land where the Lord dwells.” Moreover, “the symbolism of water signifies the Holy Spirit’s action in Baptism.”¹³¹ Finally, on the universal establishment of God’s kingdom, Navarre states that “all the nations, especially Egypt, Israel’s traditional enemy, must visit Jerusalem on pilgrimage for the feast of booths,” and “in the holy land, everything will be consecrated to the Lord or set aside for use in the liturgy.”¹³² Navarre concludes by connecting Zechariah’s prophecies with the NT, so that “[t]he image of a new and glorious Jerusalem coming down from heaven as described in Revelation 21–22 rounds off the picture provided by the book of Zechariah.” This proposed anagogical fulfillment of Zech 14 does not detract from Navarre’s respect for Israel’s eschatological role as expressed in the literal sense of the text.

Leclerc

In contrast to Navarre’s comprehensive reflections on the literal and spiritual senses of Zech 10-14, Leclerc’s introduction has very little to say about the same passage. Apart from stating that “[t]he reestablishment of Davidic kingship would be a great joy to the city of Jerusalem,”¹³³ Leclerc is silent about the significance of the prophesied restoration of Israel, the eschatological battle over Jerusalem, and the reign of God that will go forth from the holy city.

Come and See

Come and See dedicates a few pages to Zech 7-14 in its volume entitled “Prophets and Apostles.” Its focus is primarily messianic and christological; it has nothing to say about Israel’s destiny as depicted by Zechariah. On Zech 12-14, it only mentions that the prophecy about the “pierced one” (12:10) is fulfilled “when Mary wept over the broken body of her Son” and when John observed Jesus being pierced on the cross (Jn 19:34, 37).¹³⁴ The commentary on this passage thus reveals a strong underlying structural supersessionism.

New Collegeville Bible Commentary

John J. Collins is the author of the NCBC volume that includes the book of Zechariah. His commentary is rigorously historical-critical, closely following the literal sense of the biblical text. He notes that the reunification of Israel and the ingathering of the exiles announced in Zech

¹³⁰ Navarre, *Minor Prophets*, 327.

¹³¹ Navarre, *Minor Prophets*, 330.

¹³² Navarre, *Minor Prophets*, 332–333.

¹³³ Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets*, 350.

¹³⁴ Fr. Joseph Ponessa and Laurie Watson Manhardt, *Prophets and Apostles*, *Come and See Catholic Bible Study* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2004), 160.

10:6-12 is portrayed as kind of reverse Exodus, and that the restored Israel will extend far beyond the bounds of Judah.¹³⁵ Collins factually describes the attack of the nations on Jerusalem in chapter 12, followed by their defeat and destruction. He is evidently more interested in the ANE and OT historical background to the prophecies—including the nation’s mourning over the “pierced one” (12:10) and the final battle for Jerusalem (14:1-5)—than in speculating on how these might be fulfilled. And so his comments on the changes that will affect Israel and the world after the final war—such as the living waters flowing from Jerusalem, the reign of God over all the earth, the plague on the enemy nations, and the celebration of the feast of booths in Jerusalem—are all more descriptive than theological.

In summary, our commentators on Zech 10-14 display a variety of approaches: Navarre is fairly balanced, combining an accurate analysis of the literal sense with some christological and ecclesiological fulfillment; Leclerc is too brief to be really useful; *Come and See* is structurally supersessionist in its neglect of the literal context in favor of an exclusive theological fulfillment in Christ; while the NCBC does the opposite, narrowly focusing on the historical-literal meaning of the prophecies without any speculation on how they might have been fulfilled in the NT, or may still be fulfilled in Israel in the future.

Structural Supersessionism Survives

Our survey of ancient and modern commentaries on prophetic texts concerning Israel’s eschatological destiny leads us to the following conclusions: First, the patristic commentaries sharply manifest all three forms of supersessionism—punitive, economic, and structural. Some Church Fathers assert that God abrogated His covenant with the Jews because they rejected Christ. Others affirm that Israel’s role in salvation history simply “expired” with the institution of the New Covenant. All take for granted that the Church has replaced Israel. Consequently, they either exclude the Jewish people from their interpretation of eschatological prophecy, or allegorize Israel as a prefiguration of the Church. While several Fathers expect that the Jews will acknowledge Christ near the end of history, they don’t believe that this conversion will lead to any restored role for the nation of Israel in God’s plan. In their view, the conversion of the Jews will only result in their assimilation into the Church.

The situation is different in modern Catholic commentaries. On the one hand, overt expressions of punitive and economic supersessionism have largely disappeared. One is hard pressed to find explicit claims that God abrogated His covenant with the Jewish people after the institution of the New Covenant. On the other hand, the commentaries we have examined often seem to presuppose structural supersessionism in their exposition of the prophets: with few exceptions, Israel is largely absent from Catholic eschatological scenarios. In Navarre and *Come and See*, which approach the text from a theological perspective, Israel acts as a prefiguration and type of the Church, but it disappears in the age of the New Covenant. Leclerc and the NCBC, following a more historical-critical approach, are more descriptive: they generally acknowledge the eschatological role of Israel as the prophets foresaw it, but they refrain from contextualizing these prophecies to our own day or reflecting on what Israel’s mission might look like in the age

¹³⁵ John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, New Collegeville Bible Commentary 17 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 106–107.

of the Church. In other words, as we have noted above, the historical-critical commentaries “leave the biblical word in the past.”

The virtual disappearance of punitive and economic supersessionism in Catholic biblical exegesis shows that *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent ecclesial documents on the Jewish people have undeniably produced good fruit. Despite this progress, it appears that the contemporary Catholic exegesis of Scripture remains significantly affected by structural supersessionism. Although ancient and modern commentaries differ widely in their exegetical and hermeneutical presuppositions and approaches, it is striking that they still share the common assumption that the message of the prophets to Israel had largely spent itself by the first century A.D. For the Church Fathers committed to allegorical exegesis, the prophecies are fulfilled in Christ and transferred to the Church. For modern commentaries committed to the historical-critical method, prophecies written thousands of years ago have no real relevance for the Jewish people today beyond a vague metaphorical or pedagogical value.

It could be argued that both methods reflect a reductionist approach to Scripture that leaves serious exegetical and doctrinal difficulties unresolved. When one approaches OT prophetic and eschatological passages—such as Isaiah’s “mountain of the Lord,” or Ezekiel’s restoration of Israel followed by the war of Gog and the construction of the New Temple—it is obvious that these were never historically realized. Why not? If we believe that Scripture is divinely inspired and teaches “solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God, for the sake of salvation, wanted put into sacred writings,”¹³⁶ then we should hesitate to summarily dismiss the prophets as having been “wrong.” Neither should we explain away eschatological prophecies in a facile way as having been uttered by men who used the language and images of their time and never really intended them literally. Such an explanation better reflects the rationalist mentality of our age than the mind of the ancient sacred writers. If an allegorical or spiritual fulfillment of the prophecies is often possible, it remains true that sometimes an *exclusively* allegorical or spiritual interpretation, at the expense of the literal sense, does violence to the text and produces implausible results, in addition to presupposing a supersessionism that the Church no longer accepts as legitimate.

Which Gifts Are Irrevocable? The Significance of the Land of Israel

How could Catholic biblical exegesis better integrate the Church’s view that the Jews continue to be “important witnesses to the divine economy of salvation”? How could the interpretation of the prophets better reflect the reality that the Church “understands her own existence as a participation in the election of Israel and in a vocation that belongs, in the first place, to Israel”?¹³⁷

A good point of departure might be to return to *Nostra Aetate* and St. Paul’s assertion that “the gifts and the call of God [to Israel] are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). What exactly are the “gifts and call” that God permanently entrusted to the Jewish people? St. Paul provides a partial answer: “theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises” (Rom 9:4; cf. NA 4). While it is beyond the scope of the present article to unpack this

¹³⁶ Dei Verbum 11.

¹³⁷ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 36.

verse in detail, we may note that one of God’s most important promises to the Jewish people in the Hebrew Scriptures—if not *the* most important, being intrinsically tied to covenant, law, and worship—is the gift of the land.¹³⁸ As we have seen, OT eschatological prophecies are generally inseparable from the context of Zion, Jerusalem, and the Land of Israel. Supersessionists, however, typically deny the ongoing validity of God’s gift of the land to the Jewish people after Christ. According to punitive or economic supersessionism, the Jews lost their right to the land after Jesus instituted the New Covenant. It follows that the earthly Jerusalem is stripped of its theological significance and is henceforth understood only as a type of the heavenly Jerusalem. In the case of structural supersessionism, Jerusalem and the land of Israel are perhaps not explicitly dismissed as obsolete; but they are passed over in silence as irrelevant for the presentation of the Christian message (except as places of pilgrimage where Christians can go and visit the sites where salvation history was made in the *past*).

Even with the “thawing” of Jewish-Christian relations that has been progressing since *Nostra Aetate*, many Jewish voices continue to critique the Church for failing to give due recognition to the importance of the land as an integral part of God’s covenant with Israel. In its 1985 *Notes*, for example, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews noted that Jewish people preserved “the memory of the land of their forefathers at the hearts of their hope.” But the document also expressed reservations about how Christians should understand the religious attachment of the Jews to the Land of Israel:

Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship...

The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.¹³⁹

The absence of the people and land of Israel in Catholic eschatology is all the more surprising considering an important paragraph in the *Catechism* that directly links Jesus’ Second Coming to His prior recognition by “all Israel.”¹⁴⁰ But can we conceive of “all Israel” apart from the Land of Israel? Can a nation exist without a land? The Catholic ambivalence concerning the land is still evident in the silence of the CRRJ’s latest document on Catholic-Jewish relations. At the press conference marking the release of “The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable,” Rabbi David Rosen, International Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee, expressed his concerns about this silence:

¹³⁸ Cf. Gen 13:14-17; 17:7-8; 26:3-4; 35:10-12; 50:24; Exo 3:6-8; 32:13; Deut 1:6-8, 19-20; 30:1-6; Josh 1:2-5; Ps 105:7-11; 147:2; Amos 9:14-15; Isa 11:10-12; 14:1; 43:5-6; 49:8-12; Zeph 3:16-20; Jer 3:16-18; 7:5-7; 16:14-16; 23:7-8; 31:10-11, 17; 31:35-37; 32:36-44; 33:6-9, 25-26; Ezek 11:16-20; 28:25-26; 36:8-12, 24-28; 37:1-14, 21-27; 39:25-28; Neh 1:8-9; Zech 2:9; 10:6-12.

¹³⁹ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *1985 Notes*. VI.1.

¹⁴⁰ CCC 674; cf. Rom 11:12, 15, 20-26

to fully respect Jewish self-understanding, it is also necessary to appreciate the centrality that the Land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish People, and that appears to be missing [in the new document].¹⁴¹

Is it possible for Catholic exegesis and theology to overcome structural supersessionism without recognizing the centrality of the Land of Israel, so often emphasized in Scripture as integral to God's covenant with the Jewish people? Gary Anderson poses a similar question: "If we truly believe that God's promises to the Jewish people have not come to an end, and that those promises are linked inextricably to the land, what are we to make of the current return to Israel?" His answer is clear:

We must... insist that the promises of Scripture are indeed inviolable and that Israel's attachment to this land is underwritten by God's providential decree. The miraculous appearance of the Israeli state just after the darkest moment in Jewish history is hard to interpret outside of a theological framework."¹⁴²

Perhaps the time has come for Catholic theologians and exegetes to give greater consideration to this question. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission states in its 2001 document on the Jewish Scriptures, while Christians cannot accept all of Judaism's presuppositions in its reading of the Hebrew Bible, they still "can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period."¹⁴³ Given that the locus of biblical eschatology is consistently Jerusalem and the Land of Israel, it is incumbent on Catholic exegetes to give greater attention to this topic as it is understood in Jewish tradition.

Rethinking Catholic Eschatology

Leaving room for the people and land of Israel in the interpretation of the prophets will inevitably have an impact on the broader framework of Catholic eschatology. Supersessionism has traditionally been closely related to amillennialism, the eschatological position favored in the Church since the days of St. Augustine. As its name indicates, amillennialism holds that there will be no literal millennial reign of Christ on earth. The age of the Church will continue in its present form until Christ's Second Coming. Jesus will then usher in the general resurrection, the final judgment, and the eternal, heavenly reign of God. The millennium described in Revelation 20, therefore, does not represent a visible, thousand-year reign of Christ with the risen saints before the general resurrection and judgment (as a literal reading suggests), but rather the present, historic reign of Christ in the Catholic Church.¹⁴⁴ Amillennialism is closely related to

¹⁴¹ David Rosen, "Reflections from Israel (on 'The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable')," December 10, 2015, <http://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/analysis/crrj-2015dec10/1365-rosen-2015dec10>.

¹⁴² Gary A. Anderson, "How to Think about Zionism," *First Things*, April 2005, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/04/how-to-think-about-zionism>.

¹⁴³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ On the various views of the millennium, see Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 (Eerdmans, 1910), 613–620; Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds., *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 1997), 738–741; J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets: A Survey of the Prophetic and Apocalyptic Books of the Old Testament*, ed. Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids,

supersessionism because both systems interpret the OT eschatological prophecies (and Rev 20) symbolically. OT oracles concerning Israel (e.g. the return to the land, the eschatological battles, the messianic age on earth centered in Jerusalem, etc.) are not understood literally but are allegorized and believed to be fulfilled spiritually in Christ and the Church, and perfectly in heaven. Amillennialism thus tends to combine a high view of the Church with a low view of Israel, which is typically subsumed into the Church. Moreover, by understanding the millennium to be symbolic of the present age of the Church, the focus of the amillennialist position tends to be on the now, the “already” rather than the “not yet,” resulting in a weak sense of eschatology.

At the other end of the spectrum is the eschatological model known as dispensational premillennialism. This view holds to a literal fulfillment of the OT prophecies for Israel, including a literal millennium at the end of the age of the Church when the kingdom of Israel will be fully restored as it was at the time of David. This scenario creates a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church, holding a high view of the former and a low view of the latter. The Church, in fact, is considered to be a mere “parenthesis” in God’s plan until the final, millennial restoration of Israel is accomplished. Since the “now” of the current church-age is but a parenthesis in the history of salvation, dispensationalist premillennialists tend to focus on the “not yet”—the eschatological events that are still to come. Although this model is more respectful of Israel’s post-Christic role than amillennialism, Catholics can scarcely accept its legitimacy because of its low view of the Church, because of the strange rapture theories that are associated with it, and especially because it has no basis in tradition, being unheard of before its rise in the nineteenth century.

Between these two views lies the intermediate position known as historic premillennialism. This view subscribes to a more literal reading of Rev 20 than amillennialism, asserting that there will be some form of a millennial reign of Christ at the end of history before the general resurrection and the final judgment, distinct from the eternal establishment of “the new heaven and the new earth.” Historic premillennialism predates amillennialism and is the oldest eschatological view in the Church. It is found in early Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature,¹⁴⁵ and it was held by a number of early Church writers and Fathers, such as the Epistle of Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Methodius, and Lactantius.¹⁴⁶ While these Fathers often combined this eschatological position with supersessionist ideas, historic premillennialism can stand on its own without any underlying replacement theology. It is able to hold a high view of *both* Israel and the Church by remaining open to a literal, earthly fulfillment of the eschatological prophecies to Israel, while allowing for christological, ecclesiological, liturgical, and sacramental fulfillments of the same prophecies in the life of the Church (and without necessitating the novel rapture theories of dispensationalism). By allowing for multiple levels of fulfillment of Scripture in Israel and the Church, historic premillennialism holds together both the “already” and “not yet” of biblical prophecy and eschatology. It is faithful to Scripture and has a precedent in both Jewish and Christian tradition: In distinguishing between the earthly millennium and the

MI: Zondervan, 2010), 77–91. See the Appendix below for illustrations of the eschatological positions discussed in this section.

¹⁴⁵ 1 En. 13:1; 91:12-17; 2 Bar. 29-30; 40:1-3; 4 Ezra 7:28-29; 12:31-34; cf. B.J. Dodds, “Millennium” in Martin and Davids, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, 740.

¹⁴⁶ *Ep. Barn.* 15.8; Justin Martyr *Dial. c. Tryph.* 80-81; Irenaeus *Haer.* 5.32-39; Tertullian *Adv. Marcion* 3.24; Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39; Commodian, *Instruct. adv. Gentium Deos*, 43, 44; Lactantius, *Instit.* 7.24; *Epit.* 72; Victorinus, *Commentary on Revelation; De Fabrica Mundi*. Cf. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:615–618.

heavenly, eternal reign of God, it follows rabbinic tradition, which distinguishes between the intermediate “days of the Messiah” (ימות המשיח) on earth and the eternal, heavenly “world to come” (עולם הבא).¹⁴⁷ This view of the millennium also fits well with the “age of peace” that many Church Doctors, saints and mystics have spoken of at various times in Church history.¹⁴⁸

While the *Catechism* rejects a certain form of millenarianism in its section on eschatology, it identifies this millenarianism with a “falsification of the kingdom” by which “the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment.”¹⁴⁹ Historic premillennialism, however, does not propose a secular fulfillment of messianic hopes but the establishment of the messianic reign on earth by Christ. In the task of overcoming structural supersessionism, perhaps it would be worthwhile for Catholic exegetes and theologians to reconsider the merits of historic premillennialism as an ancient view that is better able to integrate eschatological prophecies about Israel than the amillennialist position.

Conclusion

By rejecting supersessionism and affirming the enduring nature of God’s covenant with Israel, *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent magisterial documents have radically transformed Jewish-Christian relations. And yet, although these documents clearly reject punitive and economic supersessionism, they don’t explicitly address the problem of structural supersessionism, or the habitual absence of post-Christic Israel in the presentation of the Christian message. The Catholic exegesis of the prophets reflects this situation: while the punitive and economic supersessionism that was characteristic of patristic exegesis has largely disappeared, modern Catholic commentaries on the prophets still display symptoms of structural supersessionism: eschatological prophecies about Israel’s covenant and mission are either subsumed into the Church or simply left behind in the past. The earthly Jerusalem and Land of Israel either lose their significance or are understood to be mere types of the heavenly Jerusalem and kingdom of God. As a result, post-Christic Israel is largely missing from the eschatological position of many Catholic exegetes and theologians, whose tacit acceptance of structural supersessionism tends to be closely related to amillennialist views.

The present author proposes that while substantial progress has been achieved in overcoming punitive and economic supersessionism, there remains much work to be done in overcoming the

¹⁴⁷ B. Pesah. 68a, Ber. 34b, Sanh. 91b, 99a, Shabb. 63a, 113b, 141b; cf. “Millennium” in Isidore Singer and Cyrus Adler, eds., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1901, 593.

¹⁴⁸ Rev. Joseph Iannuzzi shows how Scripture and Church tradition testify to “a day when creation will be set free from the bondage of slavery. From man to beast, from galaxies to planets, all creation will experience its freedom from the present laws of aging, suffering, sickness and death after a period of the Church’s history commonly referred to as the ‘era of peace.’” Joseph Iannuzzi, *The Splendor of Creation: The Triumph of the Divine Will on Earth and the Era of Peace in the Writings of the Church Fathers, Doctors and Mystics* (McKees Rocks, PA: St. Andrew’s Productions, 2004).

¹⁴⁹ CCC 676 refers to the Decree of the Holy Office of July 21, 1944, which expresses reservations about a “system of mitigated Millenarianism” in which Christ would “come visibly to rule over this world.” The Decree states that this idea “cannot be taught safely,” yet without declaring the belief to be erroneous. Iannuzzi (*The Splendor of Creation*, Chapter 7: Magisterium and Millenarianism) explains the difference between the carnal form of millenarianism rejected by the Church, and the spiritual “era of peace” taught by the Fathers and Doctors.

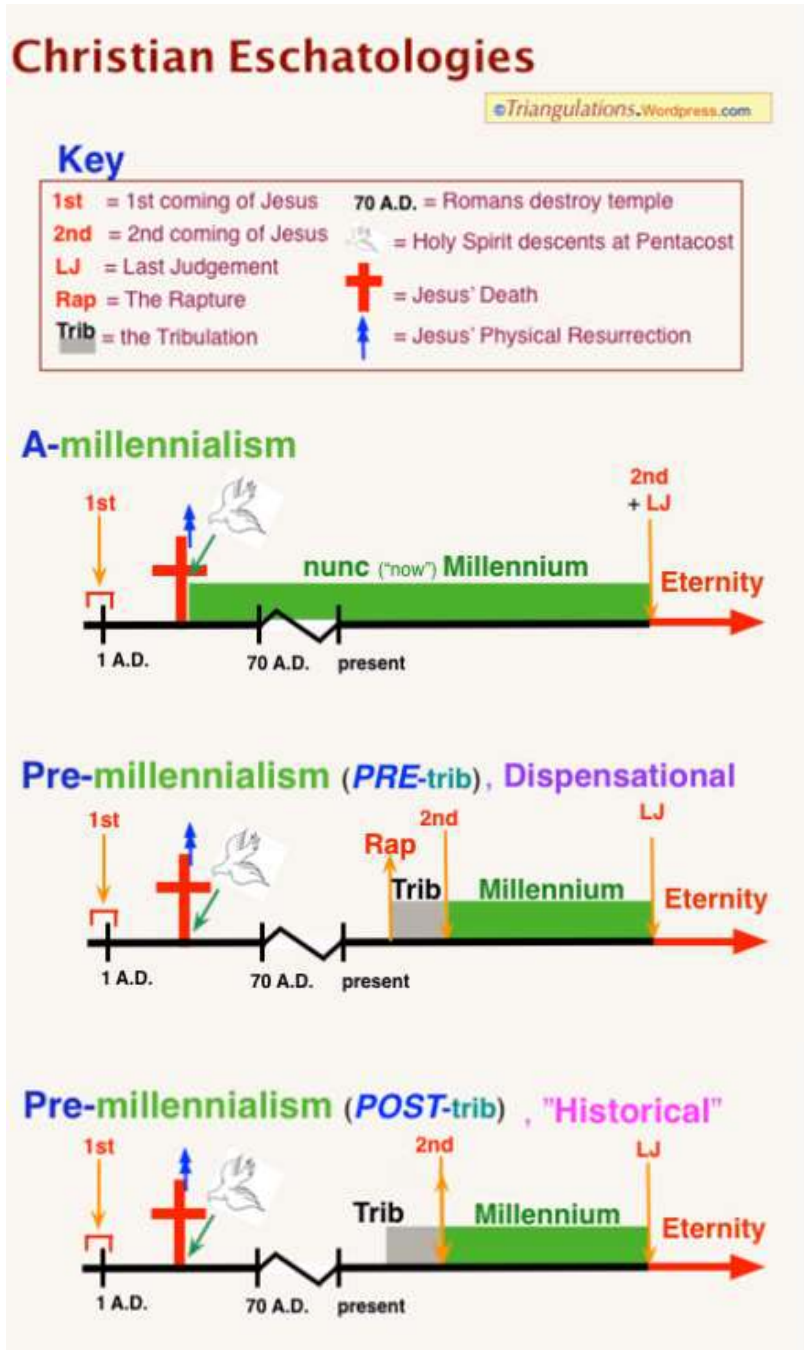
problem of structural supersessionism in Catholic exegesis. This requires a rethinking of not only the mission and role of the Jewish people today, but also of their religious connection with the Land of Israel and of the events taking place there today. Overcoming structural supersessionism may also require Catholic exegetes and theologians to reconsider their eschatological views (including, perhaps, tacit commitments to amillennialism). Reevaluating the merits of historic premillennialism—in light of Scripture, Tradition, and the teachings of the Magisterium—could provide a more fertile theological ground to conceive of the fulfillment of the eschatological prophecies given to Israel in both their literal/earthly and spiritual/heavenly dimensions. Allowing for the possibility of a future earthly millennium, or “age of peace” as Christian saints and mystics have called it, could help overcome structural supersessionism and restore Israel’s role in eschatological prophecy—without affecting the Church’s share in the spiritual fulfillment of these prophecies, but also without “robbing” them from their original recipient.

If, indeed, “[t]he glorious Messiah’s coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by ‘all Israel,’¹⁵⁰ and if the Church truly “understands her own existence as a participation in the election of Israel and in a vocation that belongs, in the first place, to Israel,”¹⁵¹ then it is incumbent to rightly restore Israel’s place in the Catholic view of biblical prophecy and eschatology.

¹⁵⁰ CCC 674.

¹⁵¹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 36.

Appendix: Christian Eschatologies



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