

THE FULFILMENT OF END-TIME PROPHECY

With Special Reference to the Millennium

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Enter words *prophecy* and *fulfilment* into an internet search engine like Google and you will come up with all kinds of weird and wonderful suggestions on how biblical prophecies of old are being fulfilled today. Many of these centre on the city of God, with the middle three letters of the name JerUSAlem emphasized to suggest the world's leading superpower has a special role to play in the fulfilment of God's plan for Israel. Not surprisingly Israelis on the whole are not averse to such interpretations, and Zionists have actively encouraged American and other Evangelicals to aid the return of the Jews to Zion. While we can commend the provision of funds to aid Jewish families to escape persecution and move to freedom, we deplore the claim that this is to be encouraged on the basis of a passage like Jeremiah 16:16.¹⁶

There are probably no prophecies that excite more Christians than those that give the promise of a better life to come. Such promises can be found throughout the OT, especially in the contexts of Israel's exodus from Egypt and her return from the Babylonian exile. While such prophecies were clearly fulfilled in the contexts mentioned, they do raise the question whether they might also have a greater fulfilment, especially where it would appear such prophecies were only partially fulfilled at the time. This is especially the case with prophecies given at the time of the exile. Here we find promises that not only speak of a return to the promised land and the restoration of the temple, but also of a Davidic king, who will reign forever in circumstances of unprecedented peace and prosperity (e.g. Is. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; Ezek. 17:22). Moreover, such prophecies speak of a new covenant between God and his people, and of the nations coming to worship Israel's God (e.g. Is. 2:3; Jer. 3:17; 31:31ff.; Ezek. 36:24ff.; Mic. 4:1ff.).

How do we deal with such prophecies, that clearly are addressed to God's people in a particular context, and yet seem to promise more than what was

¹⁶ The explanation given is that the "fishers", peaceful Christian friends of the Jews, are to aid the Jews escape from the "hunters", as represented by the Nazis and their modern counterparts.

given them at the time? Are we free to simply take such prophecies and apply them to what Christ has done, and is still doing, and is yet to do for his people? Are all such prophecies necessarily open to a greater fulfilment, and if so, how, where and when? Is this an area where we can simply rely on the Spirit's direction, or are we to begin by seeking our guidance in the Word of God itself? On this point the Reformers have always agreed that Scripture must be its own interpreter, or in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself."¹⁷

What can we learn from Scripture about the interpretation of OT prophecies? In what ways do the inspired authors make use of the prophetic writings of the OT? To help us here we have a useful classification on the use of prophetic literature in the Bible provided by Darrell L. Bock. He suggests the biblical authors appeal to OT prophecy in the following seven ways (note that only the examples so identified are provided by Bock):¹⁸

- **Typology** (or *typological-prophetic*) – this usage “expresses a peculiar link of patterns with movement from the lesser OT person or event to the greater NT person or event.” An example of such escalation is found in persons of Solomon and Jonah as types of the Messiah (Mt. 12:41, 42); or the events of the passage through the Red Sea and the manna and water from the rock as types of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 10:1-4).
- **Analogy** – this corresponds and compares, but does not escalate and therefore it is not really prophetic. Paul’s comparison of Hagar to Mt. Sinai is an example of this approach (Gal. 4:24ff.).
- **Illustration** – here no linkage of passage is suggested, there is merely a sharing of descriptive terminology. Here we can mention the example of Elijah’s prayer as the effective intercession of a righteous man (Jas. 5:17).

¹⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith (1:ix). Luther used the words *Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres* (in *Assertio articulorum M. Lutheri per Bullam*: Leonis X novissimam damnatorum, 1520).

¹⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from prophecy and pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 49-50.

- **Legal proof** - here “the Law or a prophet is used to suggest or establish a point of appropriateness or of authority for a specific event.” Bock gives the example of Jesus dying on the cross (Gal. 3:13; cf. Deut. 21:23).
- **A proof passage** – this explains the event as divinely intended without further explanation or interpretation. Bock gives the example of general references to Christ’s suffering in order to fulfil Scripture.
- **Explanatory** (or hermeneutical) – where the words cited explain what is happening. When Paul explains how the law of love fulfils the commandments he gives examples from the commandments (Rom. 13:9)
- **Direct prophecy** – where the passage looks exclusively to a future event for its fulfilment. Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the creation of new heavens and a new earth belongs to this category (Is. 65:17ff.). Later we will be examining this prophecy in some detail.

At a recent Preaching Workshop I presented these categories and asked people to comment on which of these they would identify as prophetic. The consensus was as follows:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A proof passage 2. Direct prophecy 3. Typology <u>4. Legal proof</u> 5. Analogy 6. Illustration 7. Explanatory¹⁹ | Identified as prophetic |
| | Identified as non-prophetic |

I then asked which categories they would be willing to apply in their preaching without biblical precedent. Here most recognized only the last

¹⁹ Some NT authors, like Matthew, provide examples of even the last three categories as fulfilments of the OT (Mt. 2:15, 17, 23; etc.). This probably reflects the usage of his intended audience, the first century Jewish community, who would not just have considered the text itself, but rather its whole context as addressing the matter at hand.

three as suitable for use today, i.e. they were ready to use the biblical material by way of analogy, illustration or explanation. They agreed they would be hesitant to claim certain events on the world scene today were in direct fulfilment of OT prophecy where the NT had not already made that application. Yes, they expected to identify the fulfilment of NT prophecies such as Christ's return on the clouds. But when it came to events in Iraq or the founding of Israel in 1948 most were reluctant to endorse these as fulfilments of specific OT prophecies.

The reason for this reluctance is no doubt that many workshop attendees followed the *redemptive-historical* approach, also known as the *biblical-theological* method of interpretation.²⁰ This approach recognizes that OT prophecy first of all points to Christ. Jesus himself upbraided the Jews: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me..." (John 5:39; cf. Lk. 24:44). When it comes to God's (prophetic) promises we must keep it in mind that "no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ" (2 Cor 1:20).

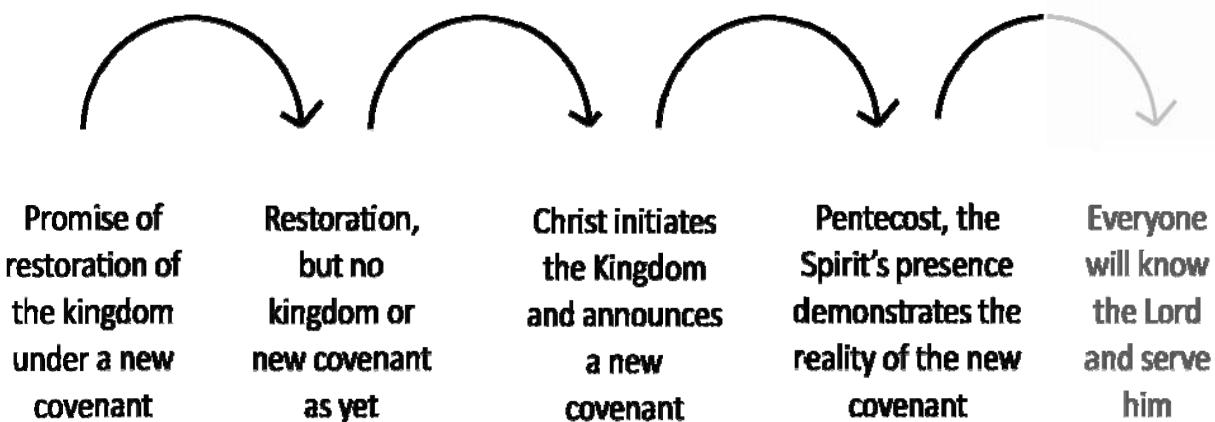
We cannot go directly from the OT prophecies to fulfilments in our day and age without first checking how these promises are confirmed in Christ. We need NT confirmation that such prophecies are indeed speaking of the things we are observing in the world today. The danger of ignoring this rule has been borne out over history. Here we have seen many attempts to apply OT prophecies without NT sanction, only to see how they failed to be fulfilled. The identification of Gog and Magog with Russia and China is an example of an applied prophecy that captured the imaginations of many Evangelicals during the Cold War.²¹ With the collapse of the communist states and the growth of Christianity in these regions there are few who would still champion this interpretation. As for the identification of the present State of Israel with any prophetic fulfilment, the NT appears to make no mention of it and the OT knows of no restoration of Israel that was not preceded by repentance from sin.

Most of the OT redemption prophecies do not have their first fulfilment in NT events, but in God's acts of deliverance in the more immediate context.

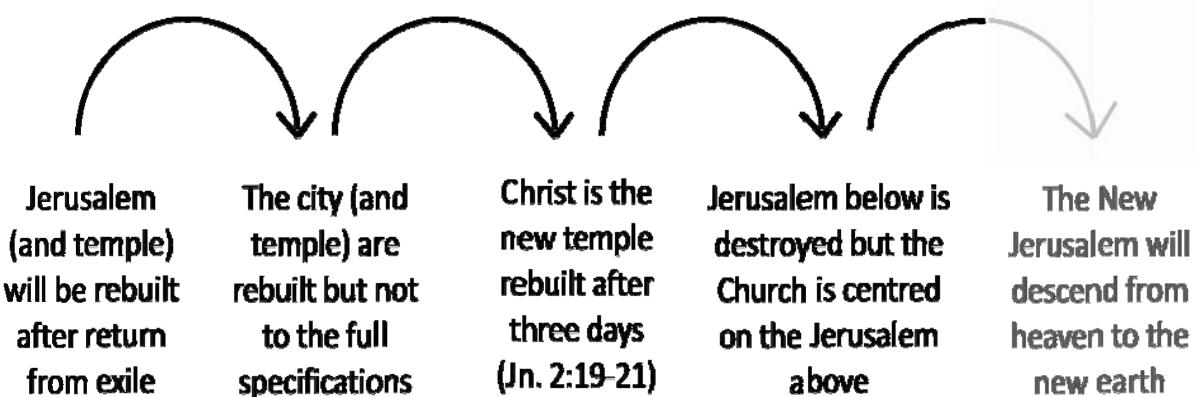
²⁰ For an article identifying these approaches see James T. Dennison, Jr., "Building the Biblical Theological Sermon, Part I: Perspective" in *Kerux: The Journal of Northwest Theological Seminary*, available at <http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N3A3.asp>

²¹ This interpretation was popularised in the 1970 publication of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, by Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carson.

However, it is also true that the immediate fulfilments do not always live up to the glorious promises and in this way point to a further fulfilment. It is in such situations that we must apply the biblical theological method of the redemptive-historical approach. Here are some examples, beginning with the promises of the new covenant as found in Jer. 31:31-34 and Ezek. 36:24-28:

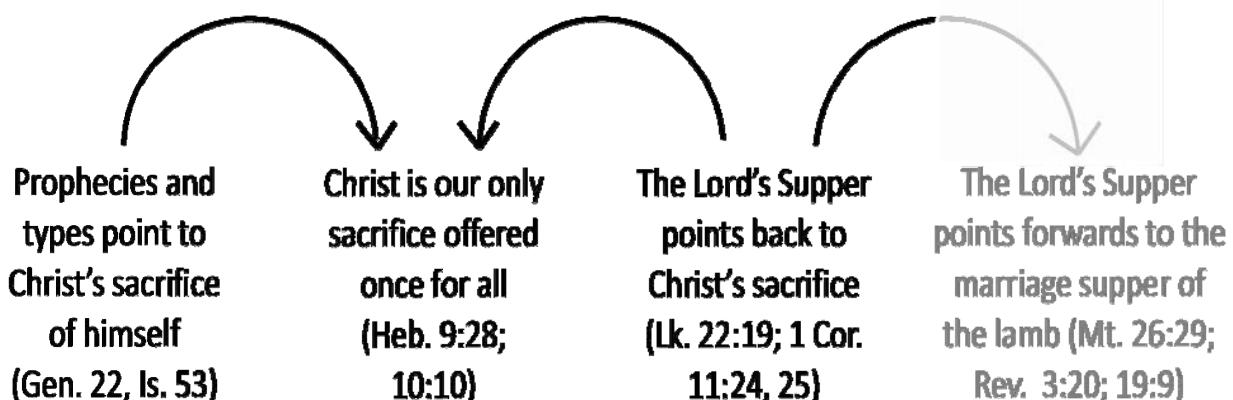


We find a similar pattern when we look at prophecies of restoration, such as Jer. 31:38-40, Mic. 4:1-2 and Zech. 4:9:²²



Not all prophecies necessarily have a further fulfilment after the ministry of Jesus. This is particularly true of those prophecies and types that picture Christ as God's sacrifice for sin (Gen. 22:8; Ex. 12:22ff.; Is. 53; Jn. 1:29, 36). The author of Hebrews, in particular, shows how this prophecy had a once-for-all final fulfilment in Christ (Heb. 9:26; 10:10). However, Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as a remembrance of his sacrifice (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24, 25). The Supper, in turn, is a type in that it points forwards to the marriage supper of the lamb (Mt. 26:29; Rev. 3:20; 19:9). Note, therefore, the direction of the arrows in the diagram:

²² For the form of these diagrams I am indebted to Sidney Greidanus' book *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: a contemporary hermeneutical method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999). Greidanus gives an example based on Is. 7:14-16.



The book of Hebrews, especially, gives many examples of prophecies fulfilled in Christ. Some, like the example above, are shown to have no further fulfilment. Others have an ongoing fulfilment, like Christ's High Priestly role at the right hand of God (Heb. 8:1). The book is particularly strong in its use of types and examples. Here we can think of the example of the heroes of faith, who looked to a heavenly country, and a city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10, 16). Jerusalem is the type of this city, which is already accessible to NT believers in worship (Heb. 12:22; 13:14, 15). Note that this picture leaves little room for a New Jerusalem on earth, such as we find in many forms of millennialism.

Besides their failure to interpret prophecies through Christ, another reason why popular interpreters are often led astray is that they fail to consider the meaning of the words in the original context. Thus it is wrong to presume that a phrase like “the day of the Lord” meant the same for Judah and Israel (Is. 13:6; Ezek. 13:5; Joel. 1:15) as it does for us today (Acts 2:20; 1 Thess. 5:2). We cannot simply presume, therefore, that OT prophecies using this language refer to the same event NT authors designate as “the Day of the Lord”. It is significant that Paul, writing to NT believers, speaks of the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8).

Even where NT authors deliberately use the language of OT prophets to describe end-time events it is no indication that they are speaking of the same thing. For example, Jeremiah and John describe the fall of “Babylon” in similar language but speak of different events (e.g. Jer. 51:7-8 and Rev. 14:8). In many cases these are examples of what we have earlier identified as using the OT prophetic texts as illustrations and analogies. In the words

of the *Jewish Study Bible*, OT (and NT) authors feel free to “reemploy and reapply biblical paradigms and imagery.”²³

Having looked at some of the issues involved in interpreting OT prophecies we are now ready to apply all this to the issue of the millennium.

End Time Prophecies and the Millennium

The belief in a future time of peace for Christians, lasting a thousand years, is one that already surfaced in the first century. Appalled at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, early Jewish Christians began to apply the promises of hope given at the time of the Babylonian captivity to their own situation. Here they drew on the millennial expectations of Jewish apocalyptic literature. Before 70 AD the Jews had fully expected the second temple to last until the end of the world. However, as this temple had not come with the promised shalom, many looked to a future period of Jewish prosperity under a Messiah before the end time. This period was variously thought of as lasting four hundred years (corresponding to the time Israel spent in Egypt) or a thousand years. For the latter figure appeal was made to the creation week, in combination with Dan. 9 and Ps. 90:4, to argue that a millennium of prosperity and peace would follow six thousand years of toil.²⁴

Chiliiasm (from the Greek word for *a thousand*) took the church by storm, bringing hope in times of destruction and persecution. It was even utilised by Justin Martyr to show the Jews that Christians shared their love for Jerusalem (though Justin does add that not all Christians followed this interpretation). Chiliastic expectations were especially strong in Asia Minor among the heretical Montanists, who believed that Pepuza, the city where Montanus resided, would become the New Jerusalem and centre of a millennial Kingdom. Montanism’s support of chiliiasm soon led the Eastern churches to reject and oppose the doctrine. For a time bishop Dionysius even got the Eastern churches to remove the book of Revelation from the NT canon in a bid to stamp out the chiliasts.²⁵

²³ Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael A. Fishbane, *The Jewish study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press US, 2004), 1865.

²⁴ See Adolph Harnack, “Millennium” in *Love to Know Classic Encyclopedia* (based on the 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica*), at <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Millennium>

²⁵ *Ibid.* The book of Revelation was eventually restored to the Eastern canon.

In the Western churches there was more support for chiliasm, though it never became a major doctrine. Ironically, here the fact that the heretic Marcion was against chiliasm may have encouraged the Western church to support it. With the Christianisation of the Empire, however, the appeal of chiliasm soon faded. With Augustine's identification of the Kingdom with the Church all millennial hopes evaporated. They did not rise again until persecuted groups, like the Anabaptists, revived these expectations of a better time on earth.

From the start Christian chiliasm found support for its millennial expectations in Rev. 20. Here the thousand years of satanic inactivity fitted in precisely with the timetable received from Jewish chiliasts. In their eagerness to adopt this vision few theologians asked how this fitted in with Jesus' own teachings about the end times and his return. Instead they followed the Jewish interpreters in applying the OT prophecies of the hope in restoration directly to their own times, ignoring the NT assertions that these prophecies had already started to be fulfilled in the ministry of Christ and his Church.

We find this chiliasm continuing in today's millennial defenders, especially those who hold to dispensational premillennialism. Following the scheme laid out by John Nelson Darby, dispensationalism divides all of history into seven distinct epochs (labelled *dispensations*) in the following manner:

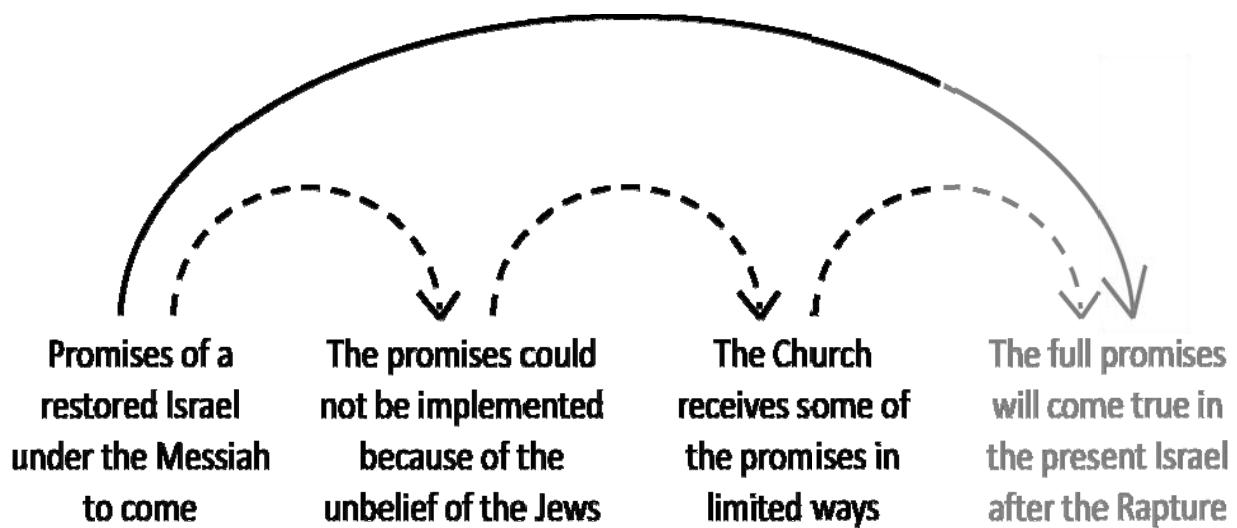
1. Of innocence (before the Fall)
2. Of conscience (the Fall to Noah)
3. Of civil government (Noah to Abraham)
4. Of promise (Abraham to Moses)
5. Of law (Moses to Christ)
6. Of grace (Pentecost to the Parousia)
7. Of the millennial Kingdom (1000 years)

As this approach regards each dispensation as representing a different manner of divine dealings with humankind it consequently downplays the unity, continuity and harmony of God's plan of salvation. This discontinuity is especially marked in the so called Dispensation of Grace which, since Darby, has been identified as "the Great Parenthesis."²⁶ As the name suggests, it marks a kind of "time out" in God's normal dealing with humankind, specifically in his dealings with the Jews. Since the Jews

²⁶ See J.N. Darby, "The Character of Office in the Present Dispensation" in *The writings of J. N. Darby* (STEM Publishing: <http://www.stempublishing.com/>), § 94.

rejected Christ's efforts to set up the Kingdom when he first came to earth, this view regards the Kingdom as delayed until "the time of the Gentiles" and "seven years of tribulation" have passed. It is believed that only then all the prophecies about Israel's greater future will come true.²⁷

This dispensational scheme ignores the redemptive-historical approach and omits the requirement (after the example of Scripture) that the fulfilment of OT prophesies be seen and interpreted through the NT testimony from and to Christ. Diagrammatically this position could be drawn as follows:



Here the dotted lines show the failure of the implementation of the promise and the alternative arrangements. The solid line shows how the prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. This "direct approach" in applying prophecy not only ignores the redemptive-historical context of the prophecies and their earlier fulfilment, but also fails to pay heed to those prophecies and types which the NT cites as fulfilled in Christ and his Church. As an example we can take the OT description of Israel as a chosen people, a holy nation and royal priesthood belonging to God (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6). Peter and John find the antitype to Israel in the Church, made up largely of Gentiles who formerly had no share in the promises to Israel:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Rev. 1:6)

²⁷ After its demise with the end of the Cold War, Dispensational Premillennialism has again been popularized in the publication of the 16 *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (Cambridge: Tyndale House, 1995-2007).

It is important that we see this verse in its historical framework. Christ came and preached the Kingdom to the Jews (Mt. 15:24; cf. 10:6). However, anticipating their rejection he taught that the Kingdom would be given to others and taken away from the Jews as a nation (Mk. 8:31; 9:11-13; 12:1-11; Mt. 8:12; cf. Acts. 13:46). As the Jews, the invited guests, ignore the invitation to the feast others are invited to take their place (Mt. 22:1-10). When two non-Jews ask to see Jesus he predicts that he will be lifted up and draw “all men” to himself (Jn. 12:20-32).

Significantly it is not all the Jews who reject Christ, but the leaders who represent the nation. Initially the Church consists wholly of Jewish believers and proselytes and it is only through the intervention of the Spirit that it is enlarged to include Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 8 & 10). It is clear many Jewish Christians initially looked upon the Church as a Jewish institution, requiring converts to join on the same basis as proselytes joined Israel in the past (Acts 15). But this requirement is not sustained by the Spirit-led church (Acts 15:29). Paul, especially, is used by the Spirit to teach that there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentiles (Rom. 10:12). **Those who were once excluded from citizenship in Israel are now included**, because the dividing wall of hostility has been broken down through the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-14).

The above provides the biblical theological framework by which the prophetic passages about Israel must be interpreted. Those who ignore this framework will fail to do justice to the biblical picture of the Church as the new Israel, in which Gentiles are grafted on to the people of God (Rom. 9:25, 26; 11:17- 24). When, therefore, Peter identifies the Church as the new people of God this is not a mere metaphor, but a new reality. Claims by dispensational authors that Peter’s application of the OT passages to the Church only indicate that “the redeemed of the Church, **like Israel**, are ‘a people that are his very own’” (my emphases)²⁸ fail to see the point that the Bible identifies the Church **as Israel**. The fact that Christian Gentiles have their citizenship in Israel (Eph. 2:11-14) can only mean that they are now to be counted among those who constitute Israel.²⁹

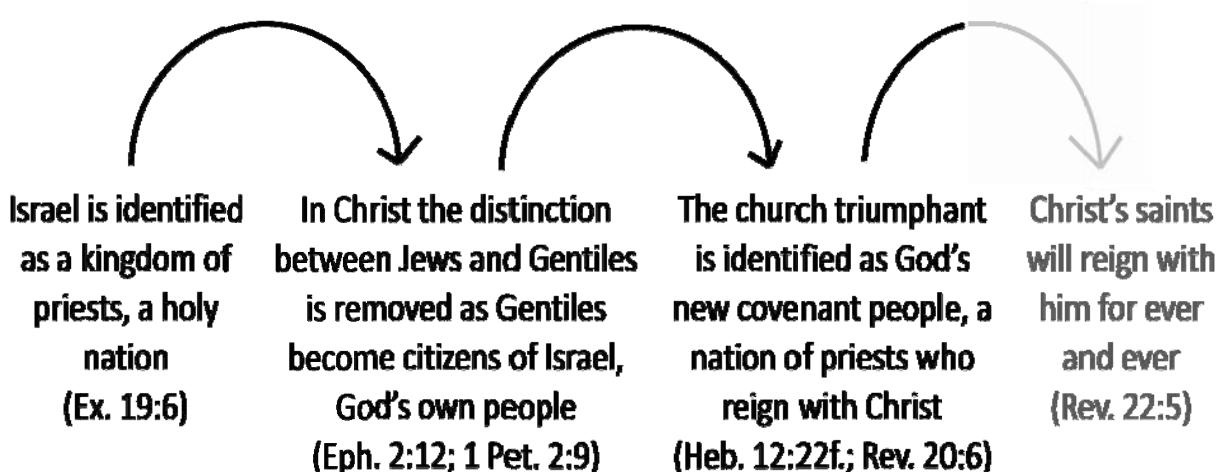
²⁸ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 189; 206.

²⁹ Saucy’s claim that this cannot mean that the Church is identified as Israel, because Israel always means the physical Israel, begs the question; *Ibid.* 160, 161.

Using the diagrammatic form employed above we can compare the Direct and the Redemptive-Historical approaches to the Israel→Church typology as follows:

The Direct approach:

The Redemptive-Historical approach:



Note that the “direct approach” omits the all-important second step found in the redemptive-historical approach, that of confirming the promises in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Hence it fails to do justice to the NT typological interpretation of Ex. 19:6 and places all the emphasis on Israel as a future millennial identity. Where millennialists do acknowledge the OT picture behind 1 Pet. 2:9 and Rev. 1:6 this is not seen as a greater fulfilment of a type but a mere metaphor or analogy. At other times these references to the NT priesthood are spiritualised, in terms of Christians offering spiritual sacrifices, without any acknowledgement that this is a reference to Ex. 19:6.³⁰

³⁰ One website entitled “The Dangers of Reformed Theology” attacks the identification of the Church with Israel by claiming that the Church **is** a priesthood, whereas Israel **had** a priesthood.

There are many other NT typological events that are ignored or misinterpreted in what I have here labelled the “direct approach”. Included are the fulfilment of the year of Jubilee in the Kingdom of God (the “year of the Lord’s favour”, Is. 61:1f.; Lk. 4:18-19); the Jewish festivals, and many other such OT types. For examples I refer the reader to my study of Pentecost as an antitype to the establishment of the covenant at Sinai;³¹ and a study of the significance of Israel as a type by Christopher Wright.³² Wright applies the relationship between God, the people, and the land of Israel in a paradigmatic manner (God, mankind, the earth), a typological manner (God, Church, *koinonia*) and finally an eschatological manner (God, redeemed humanity, the new earth). My article and Wright’s book both feature the redemptive-historical or biblical-theological approach.

It might be argued that what counts for typology, which requires some guidance to avoid misinterpretation, does not count for what we earlier identified as “direct prophecies”, because their directness is less open to misapplication. Are there no prophecies in the OT which are so clear that they need no further confirmation, such as prophecies that concern the final judgment or the end of the world? The answer is no, since such prophecies must still find their “Yes” in Christ. It is not hard to show that even such prophecies can be misapplied by ignoring the NT.³³

To complete this study we will examine one such passage: Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the new heavens and the new earth (Is. 65:17ff.).³⁴ Since the days of Justin Martyr, Isaiah’s description of a better life to come has frequently been interpreted as predicting the millennial kingdom.³⁵

(<http://www.middletownbiblechurch.org/doctrine/danger10.htm>) Such a distinction cannot be justified on any exegetical basis .

³¹ See my article “What Do We Celebrate at Pentecost?” *Vox Reformata* #63, November 1998.

³² See e.g. Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 88ff.

³³ The identification of Gog and Magog with former communist Russia and China is an example; see e.g., H. Lindsey & C.C. Carson , *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979)

³⁴ The Hebrew word for heaven, *shāmayim* is plural, and commonly translated that way to denote the universe. Most translators reserve the singular for God’s abode. There is no such convention for the Greek word *oúranós*.

³⁵ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, Ch. LXXXI; for a more modern approach see René Pache, *The Return of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975). 216; 217, 224, 226. In *Three views on the Rapture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), by Gleason J. Archer *et al.*, Archer and Feinberg apply this passage directly to the millennium (72, 120), but Moo is more reluctant to make this identification, admitting

While the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, representing dispensational premillennialism, has the heading “New heavens and new earth” for verse 17, verses 18-25 are entitled “Millennial conditions in the renewed earth with curse removed.”³⁶

It is easy to see why someone committed to a millennial position would gravitate towards this passage. The earthly features of the promised shalom as well as the fact that the passage speaks of death appear to give this interpretation some support. Yet a biblical theological approach shows there are several good reasons why it cannot be applied in this fashion. First, this passage cannot be read apart from Is. 11, where in very similar language (cf. 11:6-9 with 65:25) Isaiah describes the effects of the coming of the son of David, the one anointed with the Spirit of God. Second, both Peter and John apply the passage to the inauguration of an eternal order and not a time-bound epoch, a concluding “dispensation” (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). Here we note that Isaiah makes it equally clear that he is speaking of an enduring order of new heavens and a new earth that will go on forever (Is. 66:22), and not a finite epoch, as claimed by the millennialists.

For these reasons many exegetes follow John Calvin, who looks at the promises as initiated with the coming of Christ, but not fully implemented until the eschaton. Thus Edward Young explains:

With the advent of the Messiah the blessing to be revealed will in every sense be so great that it can be described only as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. The reference, however, is not to be restricted to the first advent but includes the entire reign of Christ, including the second advent and the eternal state. Christ renews the world, and Hebrews speaks of it as the world to come (2:5). In passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, Paul shows how the new creation applies to believers; and Peter sets forth the hope of believers to receive this new heaven and earth (2 Pet. 3:15). In the concept of the prophet, time and eternity, the age of the New Testament and the eternal heaven, are not so sharply distinguished; and believers are already in the heavenlies.³⁷

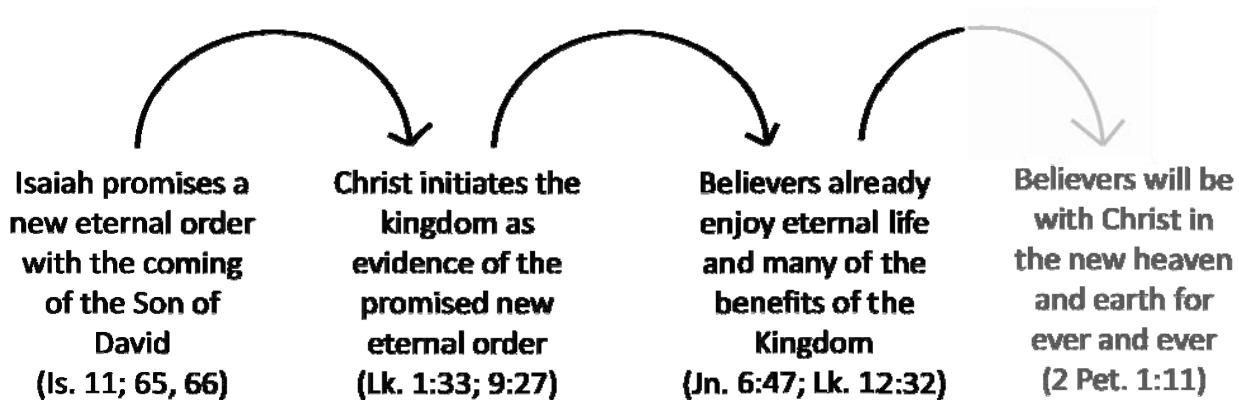
that the mention of the new heavens and earth implies the passage must at least in part be applied to the eternal order (162).

³⁶ C.I. Scofield, *New Scofield Reference Bible*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

³⁷ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 514.

The redemptive-historical model of interpretation recognises that here again, as with the Kingdom of God, we are dealing with something that has started with the first coming of Christ but will be completed at his second coming. When Jesus himself describes the coming of the new universe in terms of a “renewal of all things” (Mt. 19:28) he uses the same word *palingenēsia*, (*being born anew*) that is elsewhere used for the renewal of believers (Tit. 3:5). For believers their new birth is the beginning of a change that will be completed at their death and resurrection. They have already entered the new life (Jn. 6:47). They are the “first fruit” or “firstborn” out of creation to undergo the promised renewal (Jas. 1:18; Rev. 14:4; Heb. 12:23). The rest of creation will follow. Thus Paul writes how all of creation is eagerly waiting for the “sons of God” to be revealed so that creation itself might be “liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:18-21). Christ’s parables confirm that all this will take place at “the end of the age” (Mt. 13:49; cf. 40-43; 25:31-32).

Diagrammatically we may present redemptive-historical approach as follows:



In view of the above it is clear that we must take Isaiah’s reference to the “new heavens and a new earth” as indicating the promised eternal order, and not a temporary one. That is how John interprets the passage in Rev. 21 and 22. It is also how Peter uses the same expression to describe the final eschaton, which begins with Christ’s return (2 Pet. 3:4-13). Peter writes: “presently ungodly men scoff at the delay of Christ’s return, but when he comes, like a thief in the night, the heavens and earth will be destroyed by fire.” This account leaves no room for a millennial kingdom. Neither does the observation that: “The end of all things is near” sound convincing if we are first to experience a further dispensation.

But how do we deal with Isaiah's apparent reference to death:

Never again will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed. (Is. 65:20)

The significance of this passage is in what the prophets negates and not in what he appears to allow for. He is measuring the future against the standards of Israel in his time: weeping and crying because of high infant mortality (vv. 19-20), loss of homes and produce to hostile raiding parties (vv. 21-22), toiling in vain and raising children to misfortune (v. 23), losing their animals to wild beasts (v. 25). These things will no longer be the case in the new order. We can therefore take the words in verse 20 as describing a hypothetical situation, in the sense of: "If a man were to die..." In negating all that was distressing and evil in the experience of the people of Israel, Isaiah points back to paradise as a place of delight (v. 18), of longevity (v. 20) and of fruitfulness (v. 21); a place without toil (23) or dangerous animals (v.25), and where the serpent eats dust of the ground (v. 25).

Those who belong to Christ, who are citizens of his Kingdom, already have a foretaste of this eternal state. Through their union with Christ they need not fear any of the misfortunes of this earthly life because have passed from death to life (Jn. 5:24; Rom. 6:11, 13; 1 Jn. 3:14), they are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), already seated with Christ in heaven (Eph. 2:6), enjoying God's glorious riches (Phil. 4:19) as heirs with Israel of all the promises of God (Eph. 3:6).

The prophetic passages of the OT can bring great comfort and joy to God's people today, not because they promise a time of peace on this earth, but because they point to God's realisation of his plan in Jesus Christ. It is Jesus the King, who presently reigns at the right hand of God, who will return to usher in the eternal order of shalom. He will rule the new Israel, a people of God among whom all ethnic, social and other divisions and boundaries have been taken away. They will live on the new earth in the New Jerusalem, a city built not by men, but by God himself. The whole history of redemption is pointing to this great and wonderful promise in Christ.