

Christ Centered Hermeneutics and Jewish Evangelism
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There is an important Christian hermeneutical challenge to messianics and others today who believe in a future for Israel. It is the Christ centered hermeneutic. That hermeneutical challenge is met with the messianic retort that this hermeneutic is supercessionism and therefore illegitimate. I not know how often I have heard this label presented by well-meaning messianics and others as if this label answers the challenge.

I will get right to my thesis which is that calling that Christocentric view supercessionism is not a good enough nor a full enough response to what this view is raising. The “supercessionist” reply to such labelling is that this supercessionism is (1) endorsed by Scripture because (2) the blessing of eternal life and hope comes through Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone. The claim is that supercessionism obscures the fact that Christ centered hermeneutics is a hermeneutic of fulfillment that Scripture underwrites and affirms. I am going to argue that this theological premise is right in what it claims but is lacking in the supercessionism it is said to imply.

The fundamental reasons for this failure are two-fold.

First, there is the issue of God being faithful to his own Word as he originally presented it when the Israel originally addressed was the people Israel and not a theological cipher for the people of God regardless of nationality or even later potential use of that expression more broadly. God made promises to that group that were about shalom and restoration. If and whatever God does with the term Israel later, and that is also debated, even any development of the term or progress in its use does not nullify commitments he made to this group as a part of that work to come. The veracity of the Word of God is at stake when from the blessing announced earlier the original recipients can somehow now be excluded.

Second is my major point in this presentation. It is even if there is a Christ centered hermeneutic, and I think there is, it does not exclude national Israel in the process. The irrefutability of a Christ centered hermeneutic emerges clearly from texts like Galatians 3. It emphatically shows that blessing comes only in Christ and not by racial default. But IF THERE IS A CHRIST CENTERED HERMENEUTIC, THEN WHAT THAT CHRIST TAUGHT IS A PART OF THAT WAY OF READING SCRIPTURE and a hope for Israel is what the Christ affirmed. He affirmed it, and the apostles confirmed, it by appeals to the Old Testament hope. It is to this scriptural idea that I want to turn to sustain the thesis I am raising.

If I am correct, then we who are concerned about Jewish evangelism need not try to shun a Christ centered hermeneutic nor deny the existence of a fulfillment reading of the biblical text, we simply must insist that the fulfillment be fully described including all the elements the Fulfiller Himself and his chief representatives proclaimed. That message included a hope for national Israel and an anticipation of her response to Messiah that would bring her back into the fold of blessing.

The Texts

Two Until Texts

We are arguing that to point to Israel having a national future is not to deny the centrality of Jesus to the promises of God. As already noted, the case for Israel in the land is tied to speech acts of God made to the nation as a whole. Ultimately the blessing for this gift of land is realized in the Messiah, who is also Israel's Messiah. Even if those blessings are shared with others, as some argue, it does not exclude the original promissaries. More than this, Jesus' own remarks about the nation and her future show she has not fallen off God's radar in terms of his program. When those who reject a national future for Israel argue that the promises belong to Jesus or that national Israel has disqualified herself from access because of her lack of belief in Messiah as the key to promise, they fail to integrate into that claim these other features of Jesus' and the New Testament's teaching and thus miss the biblical mark of how it articulates Israel's hope as a nation. So what are these texts?

The bulk of Jesus' teaching here is found in "until" texts tied to the gospel of Luke. Jesus did teach a judgment on the nation for her refusal to believe in Him, a judgment that makes evangelism of the Jewish people part of the Great Commission. Israel is judged *until* she says "[Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord](#)" (Luke 13:34-35). This is a vitally important text. It presents Israel's rejection as temporary and assumes that one day she will turn back to God. One does not say until unless there is a time limit on what is being described. The picture is of an exilic-like judgment as the desolate house is language from Jeremiah 12:7 and 22:5-6. The picture is of Jerusalem under judgment [and](#) overrun. It is the realization of the threat made in [Luke 13:6-9](#), that if the nation did not bear fruit she would be cut out of the garden. In context, she is unprotected as she failed to allow God to gather her under his protective wings. Exposed, because of unbelief, she is under and succumbs to pressure from the nations. This is not just the temple that is in view. The context here, throughout Luke 13, is of the nation's lack of response.

There is more to that judgment than a building; a nation is at risk *until* she returns to embrace the sent Messiah as the one to come sent by God. However, the very fact that an "until" is uttered shows Jesus anticipates such a turning back one day. In Acts 3:18-22, Peter issues a call for such a turn to Israelites [living in](#) the time of Jesus. Nothing about what is said here allows for any form of a dual covenant that says Jews [are](#) blessed as a people simply because they are Jewish. To share in redemption, they must respond to the redeemer and Savior-Messiah God has sent. This is why Jewish evangelism remains a crucial part of the call of believers as they bring the message of the gospel to the world.

A second Lucan "[until](#)" text adds to this picture. In Luke 21:20-24, Jesus declares that Jerusalem will be trampled down *until* the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled, a remark that suggests that there will be a future time when Israel will again be front and center in God's program. In the Bible the contrast to Gentiles is the Jews, so that the end of a Gentile time implies the arrival of a time when Israel will again enter the picture more centrally. There is no other way to explain this "until." The two "until's" together show Jesus anticipated a time when Israel would respond saying, "Blessed is the One who Comes in the name of the Lord." If Jesus as the fulfiller taught a hope for Israel and her return, then even in a fulfillment, Christ centered hermeneutic there is a hope for Israel's future.

Other Texts

This fits well with other texts placed alongside these “until” passages. Here I have in mind Acts 1:6-8 and Acts 3:18-22. These texts point to kingdom consummation hope and allude back to Hebrew Scripture ideas. In addition, Romans 9–11 has to be about ethnic Israel for Paul is discussing those he weeps over and longs to see saved. These texts cannot be about a redefined or broader believing “Israel” in any sense. Let’s take a look.

A crucial text in thinking about the restoration is part of the last topic Jesus addressed before his ascension. In Acts 1:6-8, the apostles ask Jesus if this is the time he will restore the kingdom to Israel. The very fact this question is asked [reveals](#) what Jesus has taught the apostles, for they ask it having spent 40 days with Jesus and with him having expounded the hope of the Hebrew Scripture about the Christ to them (Luke 24:44-49). There [is](#) a [strand](#) of interpretation that argues that this question expressed the wrong hope, that it is misguided and in error. In this view, the idea that the kingdom and Israel had a future missed the boat on where Jesus was taking the kingdom program. The question, however, is a natural one given what the Hebrew Scripture taught about the consummation and Israel (Isaiah 2:1-4; 19:18-25; 42:1; 44:3; 59:21; Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37: 14; the dry bones of chapter 39; Joel 2:28–3:1). Craig Kenner gets this right in his commentary when he says, “Some view this question as shortsighted, but the context specifies the problem is with timing (Acts 1:7), not with content.” He goes on to note a series of texts in Luke-Acts that affirm hope of Israel’s restoration (Luke 1:32-33; 54-55, 68-74; 2:32, 38; 22:15-16, 30; 24:21) and to argue Luke’s view of eschatology is shared with Paul (Rom 11:15-26).¹ In making this solid list he misses the key “until” texts I have just noted. Luke sees a restoration for Israel.² There is no indication in Luke that this was a wrong question or inference about the kingdom program.

In fact, Peter’s [Spirit](#)-inspired speech in Acts 3 reinforces this view as he preaches a hope for Israel. In 3:18-22 he calls Israel to repent so that the time of “refreshing” can come to the nation *in alignment with what the prophets of the Hebrew Scripture teach*. Nothing about what Peter says suggests this reading of hope for Israel needs reframing and applies rather to others. In fact, Peter is saying if you want to know about what is to come just go back and read the prophets. Here it is texts like Isa. 2:1-4 and 19:18-25 that are in view. What is anticipated is a shalom that includes formerly hostile nations like Egypt and Assyria. Here are Jew and Gentile side by side in reconciliation as we already noted above.

What is at stake here is the promise, word and faithfulness of God. God made covenant commitments to national Israel. Even though it is clear [that](#) the gospel, kingdom, and salvation benefits extend to the nations, and fulfillment comes through Christ alone, nothing in making

¹ Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids; Baker, 2012), 683. So also Eckhard Schnabel, *Acts*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 76, esp. n. 37. He also lists a series of Hebrew Scripture texts (Isaiah 2:2-4; 49:6; Jeremiah 16:15; 23:8; 24:6; 31:27-34; Ezekiel 34–37; Hosea 2:3; 11:11; Amos 9:11-15; Ps 14:7; 85:2

² *Ibid*, 687, “Jesus does not deny that Israel’s restoration will come.”

that affirmation means Israel has lost her place and the potential for hope in that program. It is an aspect of the program God initially committed himself to in the covenants He made with them. Gentile inclusion does not mean Israelite exclusion. One can have both. Scripture affirms both. So does the Christ who stands at the center of all fulfillment. A Christ centered hermeneutic affirms this through the teaching of the Fulfiller. A Christ centered hermeneutic does not allow for supersession, but reconciliation.

As we already have suggested, Jesus does not put into question the apostles' question. He does not challenge its premise. Jesus merely replies that the issue of timing is the Father's business. He will not tell them when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. God will do it in his time. The disciples are not on a "need to know" basis for this question. The eschatological clock is completely in God's hands.

In the meantime, the disciples have a priority assignment. It is evangelism. It is the mission of believers—their calling. It is to receive the enablement, the power which the Spirit of God will give to them and engage in the mission of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. They are to start in Jerusalem and go to the ends of the earth. The phrase "ends of the earth" has Hebrew Scripture roots from Isaiah 48:20, 49:6—a Servant song, and Jeremiah 10:13. A priority for the disciples over figuring out the timing of the end is mission, taking the gospel into the world, all of it. That message is both for Jew and Gentile. Mission and ministry have a priority over eschatological star-gazing. When it comes to eschatology, one is to stay alert because the end could come at any time. The task is not to seek escape from this world but to engage it with the hope of the gospel. Interestingly, this call to evangelism is Jesus' last word about the kingdom program during his ministry on earth. Making sure eschatology is properly prioritized in relationship to mission was a final concern Jesus left for his disciples.

Conclusion

There are other themes that grows out of these observations that also needs attention in our movement.

First, important to this emphasis is that Gentile inclusion does not mean Israelite exclusion. To expand promise to others does not entail a simultaneous constricting of it. Salvation is not a zero sum gain where the blessing of others means some suffer a loss. What is important not to lose sight of in much recent debate is the idea that the world would be blessed through Abraham's seed was a part of the original promise all the way back in Gen 12:1-3, which means expansion of hope to all was built into the promise from the start. Add to this the Old Testament and New Testament's handling of the seed as both Israel and the Messiah and all who participate in these discussions have much to sort through as we discuss the relationships between all of these pieces.

Second, the case for Israel's future is not as nationalistic as some within the movement present it and as some outside the movement perceive it to be. This is a very important point. In fact, in my view, much more needs to be said here. This is because the hope of life for Israel in the end, as Scripture depicts it, is not only for the land to be a haven of peace for Jews but to be a place of peace and evidence of reconciliation. It is a place where nations will come to share in the worship of the one true God (Isa 2:2-4; 19:18-25). The land may be Israel's but all share in what

it represents, a good, gracious and promise keeping God who brings peace to those who turn to him.

Seen in this eschatological light, how one sees the land changes everything and also explains a question many who do not share such a hope for Israel often ask. That question is why does not the New Testament talk about the land more and more directly than it does? This is a fair question. Two answers are important here. First, the nation is in the land when the New Testament was written, so one need not make a point about it. That is a given at the time. Second, when one contemplates a time of peace and unity, then borders matter less. The difference can be illustrated in our own time. Think of the difference between crossing the German-French border in 1943 during World War II and crossing it today as part of the European Union. Another point emerges from the illustration. One can be European and be German or French. In that observation and in the new way of living versus the former century, one also sees the product of reconciliation. We are one in Christ and yet Jew and Gentile brought together by Him. There can be unity and particularity without hostile rivalry. In fact, in maintaining a sense of the particularity one also is reminded of the beauty of the reconciliation and unity.

Seen in this light, the land becomes a testament to God's faithfulness to his original people. And in this picture of ultimate prospective peace, there is a less nationalistic character to presence in the land for we all share in the presence of the Son there and in the worship He receives there.

If I am right about these themes, the way to engage with those who hold a Christ centered hermeneutic is not to claim their view is wrong, but incomplete. A biblical Christ centered hermeneutic will not exclude the hope of faith for believing Israel now or in the future. It will not cast Israel to the side as a past historical relic of the biblical story. Rather it will embrace her as a key element of the ultimate reconciliation between peoples that Christ brings when He reconciles people to God. By doing so, the need and importance of Jewish evangelism will be affirmed, both at an individual and a corporate level, By doing so, we reaffirm the fullness of hope the Scripture sets out for us all, beginning with the hope of Israel and her seed for the world in the Abrahamic Covenant and extending to the praise of many tribes and nations in Revelation.