Am I a Dispensationalist?

By Matt Waymeyer

As a pastor at a Bible-believing church, one question I'm often asked is whether or not I am a dispensationalist. The question causes me to hesitate, because even though I am decidedly dispensational on several of the key issues, I like to think of my theology as being driven by biblical exegesis rather than by a system imposed on Scripture. My reluctance to use the term, however, has much more to do with several beliefs often associated with the system, beliefs that I reject.

For example, it is often said that dispensationalists dismiss the relevance of the Old Testament and the gospels for today's church. A few dispensationalists have suggested the existence of two new covenants—one for Israel and one for the church. It is said that others have taught that the cross was Plan B in God's economy; that Old Testament Jews were saved by works; that Israel is God's earthly people while the church is His heavenly people; that Paul's gospel is not the same as the one taught by Jesus; and that Israel will be saved apart from believing in Christ. Others are Arminian or antinomian, or both. Still others have become obsessed with identifying the antichrist, pinpointing the date of the rapture, and making sensationalistic connections between current events and biblical prophecy. None of these are part of the dispensationalism I embrace, and if they are required to be considered a dispensationalist, I simply do not qualify.[1]

Ironically, my dispensationalism has much more to do with the biblical covenants—and how and when they will be fulfilled—than it does with any so-called dispensations. More specifically, at the heart of my own dispensationalism is the conviction that the ethnic nation of Israel has a future in the plan of God in which He will restore her to the Promised Land in fulfillment of the covenant promises He made in the Old Testament. Let me explain what I mean.

In the book of Genesis, the Lord made a covenant with Abraham in which He promised to bless Abraham, to make his name great, to make him a great nation, to give his descendants the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession, to establish a relationship with those descendants, and to bless the nations through Israel (Gen 12:1-3, 7; 15:7-21; 17:1-21). Although some aspects of this covenant have already been fulfilled, the ultimate fulfillment God's promise to give Israel the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession is yet future.[2] This is evident, in part, because of the nature of the covenant the Lord made with Abraham.

At the risk of oversimplifying, a covenant is an agreement made between two parties. When the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, He instructed Abraham to bring to Him various animals, which He cut in two, laying each half opposite the other (Gen 15:9-10). This was in

[1] The dispensationalism I affirm is most clearly articulated by Michael Vlach in his excellent book, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*. The strength of this book is the way in which Vlach is able to distinguish clearly between core essentials of dispensationalism and possible applications of the system. If Vlach's explanation were the commonly agreed upon understanding of the system, I could wear the label proudly.

[2] This promise of the land is referred to throughout the Pentateuch: Gen 12:1, 7; 13:15, 17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 22:17; 24:7; 26:3-5; 28:13, 15; 35:12; 46:3-4; 48:4; 50:24; Exod 3:8, 17; 6:6-9; 23:23-33; 34:24; Deut 1:8, 36; 6:10, 18, 23; 7:13; 8:1; 9:5; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 19:8; 26:3, 15; 28:11; 30:20; 31:7; and 34:4.

keeping with the custom of the Ancient Near East in which both parties of a covenant would ceremonially walk between the pieces, saying, in effect: "If I fail to keep my half of the agreement, may it happen to me what happened to these animals!" Because God alone passed between pieces of the animal (Gen 15:12-17), He made it clear that He had obligated Himself to keep His promise to Abraham and his descendants. The covenant, in other words, was an irrevocable and eternal promise of God that He would be sure to fulfill.

Does this mean that the Lord placed no conditions whatsoever on the sons of Israel? Not at all. After delivering the nation from bondage in Egypt, He established another covenant with Israel—this one through Moses—in which He gave to the nation the various commandments recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. This covenant—often referred to as "the Mosaic Covenant," "the Mosaic Law," or simply "the Law"—would serve a different function than the covenant with Abraham, but the two were not unrelated.

The purpose of the Mosaic Covenant was to serve as the means by which the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant would be administered. If Israel obeyed the Mosaic Law, she would experience Abrahamic blessing (Lev 26:1-13; Deut 28:1-14), but if Israel disobeyed the Law, she would experience curses (Lev 26:14-46; Deut 28:15-68). With regard to the Promised Land, if Israel was not faithful to keep the Mosaic Covenant, she would be dispersed from the land (Lev 26:32-33; Deut 28:63-64), but if she was faithful to the Mosaic Covenant, her days in the land would be blessed and prolonged (Lev 26:5-6; Deut 28:8).

In this way, God's promise that the nation would possess the land was certain and eternal (the Abrahamic Covenant), but the occupation of the land and enjoyment of the blessings by any given generation of Jews was conditioned upon obedience to the Law (the Mosaic Covenant). Put another way, adherence to the Mosaic Covenant would enable a given generation of Israel to experience the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant, but unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant would postpone the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises until a later time and a later generation.[3]

This leads to a very critical passage in my understanding of God's plan for Israel's future—Deuteronomy 30:1-10. Moses and the people of Israel are on the plains of Moab, on the verge of taking the land the Lord promised her. He has just warned Israel that if she is not faithful to keep the Mosaic Law, she will be torn from the land she is about to enter and scattered among the nations (Deut 28:63-64). Then, in Deuteronomy 30—prior to her entrance into the land—the Lord makes it clear that this will indeed happen: Israel *will* be unfaithful to the Mosaic Covenant and will therefore be dispersed from the land and scattered among the nations (Deut 30:1; also see Deut 31:14-22 and Josh 23:16).

This judgment, however, is not the final word, for in the verses that follow the Lord declares that some time after Israel's dispersion, He will grant her repentance and a circumcised heart, and she will therefore be restored to the land and experience the blessing originally promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (Deut 30:2-10). Why is this so important?

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[3] In my understanding, the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant are all eternal covenants, the "covenants of promise" referred to in Eph 2:12. In contrast, the Mosaic Covenant is neither eternal nor characterized by promise. Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant—also known as "the *Old* Covenant"—would eventually be replaced by the *New* Covenant.

Because it sets the stage for God's plan for the nation—Israel will be dispersed from the land, but then one day she will be restored to it. And that day is yet future.

To understand why this restoration must be future, it is helpful to revisit the remainder of Israel's history as recorded in the Old Testament. In the book of Joshua, immediately following the prophecy of Deuteronomy 30, Joshua leads the people into the land. After his death, however, a generation of Israelites arises that does not know the Lord, and the nation falls into blatant idolatry (Judg 2). This leads to a cycle in the book of Judges in which the Lord raises up twelve judges—one after another—to deliver Israel from the oppression of other nations, only to have Israel return to her idolatry each time (Judg 3-16). After the period of judges, Israel demands to be governed by a king (1 Sam 8), and Saul is appointed to the throne. He reigns for forty years (1 Sam 9-31) and is followed by David, who also reigns for forty years (2 Sam 1-24).

During this reign, the Lord establishes a covenant with David, a covenant that consists of a reaffirmation and expansion of the promises made to Abraham.[4] In this covenant, Yahweh promises to make David's name great, to restore Israel to the land of Canaan and preserve her there in peace and security, to preserve the line of David's descendants, and to establish one of David's descendants as king over His kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:8-16; 1 Chron 17:7-15). Once again we see the promise that the nation of Israel will be given the land of Canaan to enjoy in peace and security. At this point in Israel's history, however—in light of Deuteronomy 30—we are still waiting for her unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant to result in dispersion from the land (which will eventually be followed by her repentance and restoration to the land). This dispersion will come soon enough.

After the reign of David, Solomon assumes the throne, and he too reigns for forty years (1 Kings 1-11). At the end of his reign, however, the nation is divided into the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom (1 Kings 12-22; 2 Kings 1-25). During the divided monarchy, a series of nineteen kings reigns in the Northern Kingdom, and a series of twenty kings reigns in the Southern Kingdom. Most of them are wicked. Idolatry runs rampant among the Jews both north and south. In response, the Lord sends various prophets to warn the nation to repent lest she come under the judgment of God. She refuses and, as a result, the Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17:6), and the Southern Kingdom falls to Babylon in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1-21; Jer 39:1-10). This is exactly what the Lord predicted in Deuteronomy 30:1 (and Deut 31:14-22)—Israel has broken the Mosaic Covenant, and as a result she has been dispersed from the Promised Land.

This, however, is not the end of the story. During the period of time leading up to and following the fall of Israel, the Lord spoke through the prophets of a "New Covenant," a covenant that He would one day establish with His chosen people. In the New Covenant, Yahweh promised to Israel the spiritual transformation of a new heart, the forgiveness of her sins, the re-gathering of the people to the divinely renewed and prosperous land of Canaan, and the consummation of a relationship in which He will be their God and she will be His people (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 36:24-38).

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[4] This is why Walt Kaiser refers to it as the "Abrahamic-Davidic Covenant" or the "Abrahamic-Davidic promise."

In other words, just as the Lord indicated back in Deuteronomy 30, the divine judgment on Israel for her apostasy and unfaithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant will some day give way to a restoration of the nation in fulfillment of the covenants of promise—the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant. In addition to these formal covenant promises, the Old Testament prophets contain numerous predictions of a final restoration of nation Israel, predictions that have not yet been fulfilled.[5]

But here's where the rub comes. In the view of some theologians, these promises to Israel find their fulfillment in the Old Testament (in the entrance of the land under Joshua and/or the returns from exile in Ezra and Nehemiah), in the present salvation of the church (as believers are saved through Christ), in the eternal state (as believers inherit the new heaven and earth), or in some combination of the three. These same theologians deny that these promises find their fulfillment in an eschatological restoration of Israel. But I am fully convinced that their view cannot be sustained exegetically, and for this reason I await the day when the Lord will do what He has promised in these Old Testament passages.

In addition, I also believe that the New Testament also teaches an eschatological restoration of the nation of Israel in fulfillment of God's covenant promises. A key passage in this regard is Romans 11. In this chapter, the apostle Paul addresses the question of whether or not God has permanently rejected His chosen people, the nation of Israel. Not only has she broken the Mosaic Covenant and therefore been dispersed among the nations, but now she has also rejected the promised Messiah. Is there any hope for her as a nation in the plan of God? Paul's answer in Romans 11 is an emphatic *yes*.

According to Romans 11, Israel has indeed stumbled as a nation, but not so as to fall into irretrievable spiritual ruin (v. 11). Her present unbelief and hardening, Paul says, will one day be reversed when her "transgression" and "failure" give way to her "fulfillment" (v. 12); her "rejection" by God gives way to her "acceptance" by Him (v. 15); and she is grafted in again to the covenant blessings of God (vv. 23-24). The point of Romans 11, then, is that the present hardening of Israel is merely *partial* (vv. 1-10) and merely *temporary* (vv. 11-32). But when that divine hardening is removed at the end of the present age (v. 25), the nation of Israel will be saved (v. 26) in fulfillment of the New Covenant promised in the Old Testament (vv. 26b-27).

To drive this point home, Paul continues by describing Israel as both *enemies* of God because of her rejection of the gospel and yet *beloved* by God because of His faithfulness to the covenant promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (v. 28). One day He will remove the partial hardening and save the nation of Israel, Paul says, because His promises to the patriarchs of Israel are "irrevocable" (v. 29).[6] In this way, Romans 11 clearly predicts

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[5] These include Isa 2:2-4; 11:1-16; 14:1-2; 27:1-13; 35:1, 10; 43:5-6; 49:8-13; 59:15b-21; 62:4-7; 66:10-20; Jer 3:11-20; 12:14-17; 16:10-18; 23:1-8; 24:5-7; 30:1-3, 10-11; 31:2-14; 32:36-44; Ezek 11:14-20; 20:33-44; 28:25-26; 34:11-16, 23-31; 36:16-36; 37:1-28; 39:21-29; Hos 1:10-11; 2:14-23; 14:4-7; Joel 3:18-21; Amos 9:11-15; Obad 17, 21; Mic 4:6-7; 7:14-20; Zeph 3:14-20; Zech 8:7-8; 10:6-12; and 14:11.

[6] For a closer look at this passage, see Matt Waymeyer, "The Dual Status of Israel in Romans 11:28," *MSJ* 16/1 (Spring 2005) 57-71.

the eschatological salvation of the nation of Israel in fulfillment of the Old Testament covenants of promise.[7]

At this point, the picture comes into focus. The New Covenant, in which the Abrahamic Covenant and the Davidic Covenant find their ultimate fulfillment, will be fulfilled when God saves the nation of Israel at the end of the present age. This eschatological restoration will include the fulfillment of the various elements of the covenant promises: the Lord will forgive the sins of Israel and give her a new heart; He will restore her to the Promised Land where she will dwell in peace and walk in obedience; and the Davidic King, Christ Himself, will reign over His kingdom, for He will be their God and they shall be His people. This brings me full circle to the core conviction of my dispensationalism—the ethnic nation of Israel has a future in the plan of God in which He will restore her to the Promised Land in fulfillment of the covenant promises of the Old Testament.

The timing of this fulfillment is found in Revelation 20. At the end of Revelation 19, we see the Second Coming of Christ, which is then followed by the events described in chapter 20. Revelation 20:1-6 sets forth a thousand-year period during which Satan will be bound in the abyss (vv. 1-3) and Christ will reign over the earth (vv. 4-6; cf. Rev 5:10). During this thousand-year period—often referred to as the millennial reign of Christ—Israel will dwell securely in the land and enjoy the covenant blessings promised years ago as her King rules in justice and righteousness (Jer 23:5-8). Then, when the thousand years are completed, Christ will bring final judgment to Satan and the nations (Rev 20:7-15), and this judgment will give way to the eternal state of the new heaven and new earth (Rev 21-22).[8]

As Jesus said, the kingdom of God was taken away from Israel because of her unbelief and rejection of Messiah (Matt 21:43), and during the present age she exists in a state of partial hardening (Rom 11:25). But one day, when that hardening is removed, she will turn to Christ and be saved (Rom 11:26), the kingdom will be restored to her (Acts 1:6-7; cf. Matt 19:28; Luke 13:34–35; 21:24; 22:28–30; Acts 3:19–21), and she will enjoy the covenant blessings of a God who is faithful to keep His promises. And in this way, the holiness of Yahweh will be vindicated among the nations of the world (Ezek 36:16-23).

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[7] I am well aware of the fact that some interpreters see the salvation of "all Israel" in Romans 11:26 as either the salvation of the church throughout the present age or the salvation of the believing remnant of Jews throughout the present age. In fact, I wrote my Th.M. thesis at on this very subject. Suffice it to say that my study has left me convinced that neither of these interpretations is plausible and that Rom 11:26 very clearly predicts the salvation of the nation of Israel at the end of the present age.

[8] For a discussion of the different millennial views of Revelation 20, see Matt Waymeyer, "What About Revelation 20?" in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, eds. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 123–40.