

Israelology: A Biblical-theological perspective of the past, present and future of Israel

By Jacob J. Scholtz¹

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This article is dedicated to Dr Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum and Ariel Ministries.

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¹Affiliation: Old and New Testament, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. The author can be contacted at jacojanscholtz@gmail.com

Abstract

Israelology, the study of Israel, is necessary for any theological system. In the past, God made unconditional covenants and other promises to Abraham and his descendants through Jacob. Not all Jews appropriate these blessings from God in faith. There has always been, however, a faithful remnant in Israel who believed the revelation and promises of God. Despite idolatry and repeated failure, even the unpardonable sin, God is faithful and has not cast away – not even temporarily – his people whom He foreknew. During the Church Age, the Jewish remnant is not only part of the Church, but also of the nation of Israel. New Testament revelation does not cancel, change, transcend, spiritualise, or idealise unconditional and still-unfulfilled promises of God to Israel. The term ‘seed of Abraham’ has multiple senses, and the fact that it can refer to the spiritual descendants of Abraham of non-Jewish descent does not change or cancel the promises that God made to the believing Jewish descendants of Abraham. Because God is faithful, Israel has a future. The present worldwide regathering of Jews to their homeland is happening in preparation for the judgement of the Tribulation Period. Christ will not return to the earth, however, until a future Jewish generation repents and calls on the Lord. Then, a second worldwide regathering of faithful Jews to Israel will take place, this time for the blessings of the messianic kingdom. During the Millennium, God will fulfil all outstanding covenant promises and prophecies, and in the same realm where both the first Adam and seventy nations once failed, the Last Adam will successfully rule over Israel and the nations to the glory of God. Israelology, the doctrine of Israel’s past, present and future, is the missing link in Biblical and Systematic theology.

1. Introduction

Israelology is not currently an academic discipline in its own right within the framework of Biblical and Systematic theology. Ecclesiology and eschatology, for instance, form part of theological thinking and research, but Israelology, the Biblical doctrine of Israel, receives little to no mention in theological textbooks. And yet, for several reasons, theological systems (and churches) differ based on their views of Israel.

One view is that the Church has permanently replaced Israel (Reymond 2015:49). The doctrine of Israel then becomes at best a subdivision of ecclesiology as a relic of the Church’s past. A variation of this idea is that Jesus, as the Servant of the LORD and a true Israelite, fulfilled the prophecies regarding Israel and that New Testament believers can now be identified as Israel because of their unity with Christ (Riddlebarger 2003:69–70; Strimple 1999:87–90). According to this first view, the Church is the new, true or spiritual Israel of God.

A second view is that the Church does not replace Israel, but from Pentecost Israel has been transformed to include Gentiles (Brand & Pratt 2015:238). Israel played a part in God’s plan before, but this is not the case in the present or the future. As is the case with the first-mentioned view, proponents of this second view also hold that even if a great number of Jews are saved at the end of this age (αἰών), Israel no longer has any role except as part of the Church (Riddlebarger 2003:194; Brand & Pratt 2015:266).

A third view is that the Church is not a new or eschatological Israel, but that Israel and the Church are distinct (Saucy 2015:193). According to this view, Israelology is the theological field within

Biblical and Systematic theology that focuses on Israel's past, present and future. Table 1 provides an overview of the presuppositions that underlie the above views.¹

Table 1: Presuppositions that undergird different views on Israel and the Church

	Traditional covenant theology	New (or progressive) covenant theology	Progressive and traditional dispensationalism
Relationship: Israel and the Church	The Church has permanently replaced Israel (Reymond 2015:49). Christ is the fulfilment of Israel – Jesus is the true Israel – so everyone who is in Christ, is Israel (Riddlebarger 2003:69–70; Strimple 1999:87–90). The Church is the true, new or spiritual Israel of God.	The Church did not replace Israel, but at Pentecost Israel was transformed to include believing Gentiles (Brand & Pratt 2015:238).	The Church is not the new or eschatological Israel; Israel and the Church are distinct (Saucy 2015:193).
Beginning and end of the Church dispensation	From Old Testament times to the second coming of Christ (Riddlebarger 2003:118).	From Acts 2 until the second coming of Christ (Reisinger 1998:70)	The era of the Church stretches from Acts 2 until the rapture.
Covenant views and baptism	Covenants such as the Abrahamic, Davidic or New Covenant are all subdivisions or forms of the one covenant of grace (Osterhaven 2001:303; cf. also Reymond 2015:26–28). Baptism replaces circumcision – therefore infant baptism (Reymond 2015:27).	Theological covenants (redemption, works and grace) are not accepted (Reisinger 1998:129–139). God's plan of salvation is viewed as the progressive revelation of Biblical covenants that culminate in Jesus Christ and the New covenant (Gentry & Wellum 2015:251–256). Baptism of faithful disciples (Brand 2015:15).	Emphasizes interplay between conditional (Mosaic) and unconditional (Noahite, Abrahamic, Land-, Davidic and New) covenants. Baptism of faithful disciples.
Biblical theology and the relationship between the two testaments	NT takes priority over the OT (Gentry & Wellum 2015:28; Reymond 2015:43; Riddlebarger 2003:36–38).		From OT to NT. The meaning of the OT is determined by the context of the OT (Thomas 2015:116–118; Vlach 2010:92–104).
Will Israel be saved as a nation in the future?	Jews can be saved individually. Even if many Jews will be saved at the end of the current age, Israel has no special role that is separate from the Church (Brand & Pratt 2015:266; Riddlebarger 2003:194).		The entire (national) Israel will be saved and will fulfil a prominent role in future (Thomas 2015:114–115).
Will Israel be restored in their land?	Israel's future is inextricably linked to the Church. Israel's land has been transcended and spiritualized in the New Testament and refers to the new heaven and the new earth (Du Toit 2016:7–8; Strimple 1999:86).		Israel will be restored in their land as a nation (Saucy 2015:173, 198).
The Church and Israel in the Millennium and the eternal state?	There is no distinction between Israel and the Church in the Millennium (if there is one) or in the eternal state (Brand 2015:15).		Israel and the Church are distinct in the Millennium as well as in the eternal state (Thomas 2015:135).

¹ There are undoubtedly individual views and nuances that transcend the sharp boundaries of Table 1. Differences between progressive and traditional dispensationalism are for instance not indicated in Table 1.

If Israel's national role in God's plan is viewed as something of the past, or if Israel has been redefined in the New Testament, why still focus on Israelology? Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Jews jealous but not so that the 'wild olive branches' can be arrogant towards the natural 'branches' (Rom 11:11–24). As seen from Table 1, a focus on Israelology cannot but raise foundational theological questions. Israelology undoubtedly influences a theologian's choice of theological system. Israelology furthermore plays a significant role in the eschatology and ecclesiology (Fruchtenbaum 1989:7). For these reasons, it is important to undertake an inductive study of what Scripture teaches about Israel.

This article aims to show that Israel has a past, a present and a future in God's plan. The title suggests the contours of the argument: First, the article addresses the covenants of God with Israel and the question "Who is a Jew?" followed by an analysis of the descendants or seed of Abraham under the heading 'Israel's past'. This section ends with a discussion of the resulting theological implications, which provides the basis for the rest of the article. Jesus's first coming and the unpardonable sin, as well as the Jewish remnant in the Church are discussed under the heading, 'Israel's present'. Lastly, the section, 'Israel's future', focuses on the current restoration of the Jews in the land of Israel, the basis of the second coming of Christ and the messianic kingdom, and the eternal state. However, a short explanation of the author's presuppositions is necessary before the discussion can continue.

2. Presuppositions

The author's understanding of Israelology is firstly based on the grammatical-historical method of Biblical exegesis. Whatever the relationship between the two testaments, the meaning of Old Testament scriptures can be found by applying the principle of normal, literal interpretation – the meaning should not be searched for primarily in the New Testament (Vlach 2010:3–5). New Testament revelation is indeed new, but it does not contradict Old Testament revelation. Based on Peter's treatment of the Old Testament in Acts 2, Ladd (1994:373; cf. also Riddlebarger 2003:37) is of the opinion that Old Testament prophecies should be radically reinterpreted. NT Wright (1997:471) similarly believes that Jesus's ministry redefines the meaning of the kingdom, because Jesus 'refused to give up the symbolic language of the kingdom, but filled it with such a new content that, as we have seen, he powerfully subverted Jewish expectations'. The fact that the majority of Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah during his first coming, is indeed unexpected from a human perspective. However, God was not least caught off guard by these events and there is no need at all to radically reinterpret God's inspired Old Testament revelation and his kingdom plan. In his discussion of the mystery of Israel's temporary and partial hardening, Blaising (2016:94) rightly says: 'There is a twist in the plot, but not a metaphysical shift in narrative reality'. New Testament revelation makes additional applications and adds referents (*referentes plenior*), but this still does not change the meaning of the relevant Old Testament scriptures in their original context (Scholtz 2016:8). This article presupposes that the New Testament does not reinterpret, change, cancel, spiritualize, transcend or idealize the meaning of Old Testament texts.

Second, the author is of the view that all Old Testament promises or prophecies that were unconditionally given to specific persons or groups of persons and which remain unfulfilled in the New Testament era will still be fulfilled directly to those to whom it was promised (Feinberg 1988:76). Even if God made an unconditional promise only once in the Old Testament, that promise does not have to be repeated in the New Testament to still be valid (*ibid*:76). Suppose for argument's sake that the New Testament says nothing about Israel's land. This still does not mean that the

unconditional and yet-unfulfilled land promises that God made in the Old Testament to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and his descendants will not be fulfilled. Typological, analogical or summative fulfilments cannot eliminate the unconditional promises or prophecies made to Israel (Scholtz 2016:8). The author holds the view that a New Testament antitype does not change or cancel the meaning of an Old Testament type, unless the New Testament explicitly says so (Feinberg 1988:79).

Third, the author presupposes, as will be discussed in detail later, that a spiritual or figurative sense of a term does not cancel the other (literal, ethnic, national, etc.) meaning(s) or senses of such term (Vlach 2010:3). Even though there is, in Christ, a spiritual unity between Jews and Gentiles in the Church since Acts 2, there are different referents for a term like the 'seed or descendants of Abraham'. There is only one way of salvation, but soteriological unity in Christ does not mean that all ethnic, national, functional and gender differences between the children of God have been abrogated.

Fourth, the author holds the view that some prophecies and covenant promises of God is unconditional. Even though it is difficult to pinpoint the Old Testament concept of *covenant* etymologically, Busenitz (1999:175; cf. also Gentry & Wellum 2015:48–49) defines the term *covenant* as follows: 'Covenant in the OT essentially incorporates a legally binding obligation'. In the case of unconditional, one-sided or unilateral covenants, God promises that he will establish or do certain things (cf. Busenitz 1999:180). This does not mean that human beings should not show obedience as part of unconditional covenants, but that even if they should fail (and with the exception of Christ in his humanity all humans have failed), God will still do what he promised (Fruchtenbaum 1989:571). In the case of conditional or bilateral covenants, the covenant can end because of one of the parties to the covenant fails to meet the agreed requirements. Busenitz (1999) explains the difference between an unconditional and a conditional covenant as follows:

Conditionality was an integral aspect of every bilateral covenant. Failure of one of the parties to carry out the specified conditions rendered the agreement null and void. Unilateral covenants, on the other hand, wherein the LORD is the sole party responsible to carry out its obligations, are unconditional, depending totally on His faithfulness for their fulfilment. It should be noted, however, that this does not deny the possible need for consequent obedience. But it does establish the fact that obedience is *not* a contingency for its fulfilment. (p. 180)

Fifth, the author believes that the 'New Perspective on Paul' and the 'Radically New Perspective on Paul' do not really shed light on the scriptural doctrine of Israel. John the Baptist and Jesus (Matt 3:7–9; 12:7; 15:6; 23:13–36; John 5:45–47; 8:37–40) both show that much of Judaism at the time of Jesus's first coming was not in agreement with the Old Testament revelation of God (Thomas 2005:299–301; cf. also Sibley 2002:30–31). Barrick (2005:282) rightly indicates that 'Sanders' picture of first-century Judaism contradicts that of Jesus. That factor alone should destroy permanently the foundational premises supporting the NPP'. This article therefore does not emphasize the work of proponents of the 'New Perspective on Paul' or the 'Radically New Perspective on Paul'.

With the above-mentioned presuppositions in mind, the discussion of Israel's place in God's plan in terms of the past, present and future can continue.

3. Israel's past

The term 'Israel's past' is understood to refer to the events from Genesis 12 up to Jesus's first coming, although there are of course applicable New Testament scriptures that shed light on this period.

3.1 God's covenants with Israel amidst the nations

The reference to *nations* occurs for the first time – and in a positive sense – in Genesis 10:5, 20, 31 and 32. Seventy nations biologically come from the offspring of Shem (26 nations), Ham (30 nations) and Japheth (14 nations). Even though nations only developed after the fall of man and the great flood, there is no indication that the concept of different nations is unspiritual or wrong; in fact, it is part of God's plan (Deut 32:8–9; Acts 17:26; Vlach 2010:169). Only at the tower of Babel (Gen 11) are the 70 nations judged for their rebellion against God. It is in this context that God creates a new nation through one of Shem's descendants. Wright (2006:455) writes: 'God's mission is what fills the gap between the scattering of the nations in Genesis 11 and the healing of the nations in Revelation 22'. He also maintains that 'God's mission in relation to the nations ... provides the key that unlocks the biblical grand narrative' (*ibid*:455). Within the elect and chosen nation, the priestly tribe of Levi must represent Israel before God (Fruchtenbaum 1989:820), but as a kingdom of priests, Israel must represent the other nations before God (Ex 19:5–6): '[Israel's] role henceforth would be to mediate or intercede as priests between the holy God and the wayward nations of the world' (Merrill 2008:98).

Any nation needs a land, people and political organization. God made eternal and unconditional personal, national and international promises to Abraham (Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–17; 15; 17:1–21; 22:15–18). The Abrahamic covenant is unconditional, because when it was cut, only God moved between the pieces that were used (Gen 15:17–18; König 1986:106–109; Schreiner 2010:243; Showers 1990:62). *Personal* promises to Abraham include a great name, a son, a large (physical) posterity, land and blessing. *National* promises include the nation of Israel – from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's descendants – and this Jewish nation's promised land. Some Arab nations are also descendants of Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant also contains an *international* promise: all the families of the earth (generations or nations) will be blessed through Abraham – a promise that refers to the blessing of salvation in Christ (Gen 12:3; cf. also Gal 3:8). The promises in the Abrahamic covenant do not only focus on a land and a people, but also looks ahead to the Messiah and his kingdom. According to McAvoy (1996), the Abrahamic covenant forms the basis for God's plan with Israel and the nations:

The essence of God's covenant with Abraham consists of three basic aspects: *land, seed, and blessing*. ... Each of the divine covenants that follow are [sic] the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant. The Palestinian covenant (Deut. 28–30) amplifies the *land* aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. The Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:8–17) amplifies the *seed* aspect, and the new covenant (Jer. 31:27–37; Ezek. 36:22–32) amplifies the *blessings* aspect. ... The Abrahamic covenant, then, is determinative for the entire outworking of God's program for both Israel and the nations and is the key to biblical eschatology. (p. 27)

In the four eternal, unconditional covenants that God made with Israel – the Abrahamic, Land (Deut 29:1–30:20), Davidic and New covenants – God commits unilaterally to do what he promises.² The fulfilment of every unconditional covenant promise depends alone on the faithfulness of God. These covenant promises will therefore be fulfilled in history. This does not mean that unconditional covenants cannot have conditions, but rather that even if there are conditional aspects to these

² A possible priestly covenant (Num 25:10–13) is not discussed in this article.

unconditional covenants, God will still see to it that the unconditional covenants are fulfilled (Benware 2006:43; McAvoy 1996:30). Israel's disobedience to certain stipulations does not end the unconditional covenants (Rom 3:3–4; Showers 1990:60–68). After the rebellion in the wilderness, after the Babylonian exile and after 'this generation' in Israel blasphemed the Holy Spirit by rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, Peter confirms that the Jews still are (in the present time) the children of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with Abraham (Acts 3:25–26; Showers 1990:66). Paul says the same in Romans 9:4–5 and 11:1–12.

One important principle is that if an individual Jew wants to ultimately share in all the blessings of these unconditional covenants, such a Jewish person must believe the gospel (Benware 2006:43, 48; Feinberg 1988:79–80). Non-believing Jews are part of the Abrahamic covenant (Rom 9:3–5) and can perhaps share in physical blessings temporarily, *if* the nation is obedient to God. Such Jewish non-believers do, however, lose the spiritual blessings because they do not believe and are therefore not saved. For example, not all Jews were saved during David and Solomon's rule in Israel, but they temporarily shared in the physical blessings of that kingdom. In contrast, Daniel was a believing Jew (Dan 12:13), but because the nation had been disobedient, he did not share in the physical and national blessings of Israel's unconditional covenants. However, Daniel was spiritually saved and he will share in the messianic kingdom and all the blessings of the unconditional covenants. In other words, some Jews believe and trust in the Messiah, but other Jews do not believe. This does not mean that the unconditional covenant promises (physical or spiritual) are cancelled, changed, transcended or idealized to something else. Why not? Just like a person's will remains unchanged once it has been ratified, the unconditional terms of the covenant that God has ratified or confirmed with an oath remain the same (Gal 3:15–20; Showers 1990:23, 62). God will do for Israel what he unconditionally promised them.

At Mount Sinai, God made a conditional (the Mosaic) covenant with Jacob's descendants: God will do what he promised *if* Israel does what they promised (Ex 19–24; Schreiner 2010:243). If Israel keeps the Mosaic covenant, they will as a nation enjoy the blessing of the four unconditional covenants together with the blessing of the Law of Moses. If Israel is disobedient, the people will come under the curse of the Law of Moses. Stated positively: Christ has fulfilled the Law of Moses (Matt 5:17–19; Gal 3:19; Heb 7:11–16). Stated negatively: due to Israel's disobedience over a long time, the conditional Mosaic covenant became inoperative at the cross (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:1–3, 24–25; Heb 8:13). Peterman (2014:1835) says about Galatians 3:23–4:7 that 'believers are no longer under the chaperone, the law'. Concerning Galatians 3, Schreiner (2010) remarks as follows:

Paul has emphasized the temporary role that the law played in salvation history ... [the law] functioned as the pedagogue or custodian until Christ came ... The Judaizers, who insisted on circumcision, failed to see that the Mosaic law was not designed to be permanent. Now, however, a new era in the history of salvation has commenced. (pp. 248–249)

If the conditional Mosaic covenant ended at the cross, was it also the end of the four unconditional covenants? No, not at all. When God made the covenant with Abraham, he promised Abraham a specific piece of land – and Abraham has not yet received this land (Gen 15:18–21). For example, Genesis 23 shows that Abraham had to buy a piece of land in that area to bury Sarah. This shows that Abraham had not yet received the land. When God confirmed the Abrahamic covenant with an oath to Isaac, he similarly promised the land to Isaac, but Isaac has not received the land either (Gen 26:3). The same is true for Jacob (Gen 26:3) – and therefore God will still resurrect these patriarchs and give them the land. Sin cannot wipe away the promises of the Davidic covenant. God

promised in the Davidic covenant an eternal dynasty, eternal rule and an eternal 'seed', namely the eternal God, the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Sam 7:11–17; 1 Chron 17:10–15; Fruchtenbaum 1989:585).

When Christ rules Israel one day, will it be a faithful nation, or one that repeatedly stands and falls like in the Old Testament? According to Jeremiah 31:31, the New covenant was promised to Israel and Judah (cf. also Heb 8:6–13); it is *not* a renewed Mosaic covenant (Jer 31:32–33). As will be discussed in more detail later, all Israel will be saved (v. 34; cf. also Isa 59:20–21). The New covenant is an unconditional, eternal covenant (Jer 31:35–40) in terms of which God gives his law and writes it on believers' hearts; the Holy Spirit provides the power or ability to keep the law (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27). The New covenant does not only promise spiritual blessings for individual persons, but also for nations (Jer 31:34; Rom 11:25–27).

Where will Israel live? Deuteronomy 29:1 specifically indicates that the Land covenant is a separate, unconditional covenant (cf. Cranfield 1979:462). Moses speaks prophetically about Israel's future disobedience to the Law of Moses and Israel's consequent scattering over all the earth (Deut 29:2–30:1). Since AD 70 the Jews have indeed been scattered over the earth. However, Deuteronomy 30 also prophetically indicates that Israel will repent (v. 2), that they will return (v. 3a), will be gathered (vv. 3b–4), they will physically take the land (v. 5), will be renewed (v. 6), that their enemies will be judged (v. 7) and that Israel will be blessed abundantly (vv. 8–20). The enjoyment and blessing of the land depends on Israel's obedience, but the reality of their unbelief and disobedience throughout much of history does not change the fact that God unconditionally gave the title deed of the land to them (Benware 2006:56). There will come a time when all the unconditional promises that God made to Abraham and Israel will be fulfilled, namely when all of Israel will be saved (Isa 59:21; Jer 31:34; Rom 11:25–27), they will be established in the land and they will be ruled by the King of the Jews.

One can now ask: "Who is a Jew?" and "Who are the descendants or seed of Abraham?" The reason why these questions are important is that it indicates that non-Jewish believers who are spiritually the seed of Abraham are not the descendants of Jacob (Israel) and therefore do not share in the unconditional physical or national covenant promises that God made to Israel — and these non-Jewish believers also do not take these promises over.

3.2 Who is a Jew?

Is a Jew someone who supports a certain religion or political party and who lives in a certain geographical area, or is a Jew defined differently in the Bible (Sibley 2002:25–27)? As mentioned earlier, since the great flood every human being biologically descends from Shem, Ham or Japheth (Gen 10–11). The biological children of Abraham, a Semite, are obviously the 'descendants or seed of Abraham'; therefore Ishmael, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah are definitely all part of the biological descendants (or seed) of Abraham (Gen 17:18–22; 25:1–4). However, the unconditional covenant that God made with Abraham was confirmed with only one of Abraham's sons, namely Isaac (Gen 17:19; 26:1–5). Isaac's twin sons, Esau and Jacob, are definitely also the biological 'seed of Abraham', but God confirmed the Abrahamic covenant only with Jacob, who later received the name 'Israel' (Gen 28:13–15; 32:28). The Abrahamic covenant was also confirmed with the descendants of Jacob, i.e. the nation Israel (Gen 50:24; Neh 9:8; Ps 105:8–11). A Jew is therefore a biological descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob/Israel (Ger 2004:224–226). Israel is the nation that consists of Jews. According to Fruchtenbaum (2016:305–309; cf. also Ger 2004:224), the ethnic and tribal line was determined by the biological line of the father and not that of the mother, with one important exception: the Jewishness and tribal line of the Messiah was transferred by the

mother through the seed of the woman — this was prophesied even before there were any human offspring (Gen 3:15; cf. also Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23).³ In his discussion on Romans 9–11, Blaising (2016:94) writes that ‘the term Israel here has not been resignified. Paul is speaking of ethnic Jews, “Israelites,” his “kinsmen according to the flesh”’.⁴ In his exposition of Acts 13:15-48, Coetzee (1965; own translation) makes it clear:

There is a direct link and an uninterrupted continuity between the *λαὸς Ἰσραήλ* of the OT and the *λαὸς Ἰσραήλ* of the New Testament time after the crucifixion. And the connection: *the natural line of descent*. “This *λαὸς*” is linked to the Old Testament *λαὸς* in that the then *λαὸς* was “our fathers.” The uninterrupted line between the Old Testament people of God, Israel, and the New Testament people of God, Israel, in the present is the line of descent from “the fathers” to “we, their children” (verse 32). The current Israel is the people of God, Israel, as “children of the line of Abraham” (*υἱοὶ γένους Ἀβραάμ* – verse 26). The historical-ethnic, concrete national character of the Israel that was also God’s people in the time of Paul, cannot be expressed in any stronger terms. (pp. 135–136)

3.3 Who are the descendants or seed of Abraham?

If someone is a biological descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, does that mean that this Jew is automatically saved from his or her sins? Nationality or religious tradition does not save any Jew (or Gentile) from his or her sins (Coetzee 1965:130, 137). Israel is a chosen people and elect nation (Ex 19:5; Deut 7:6–7) and Jews are special in God’s eyes (Zech 2:8). National election, however, does not mean that every individual Jew will be saved. For all times and for all people, salvation is by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone. The gospel of Christ is ‘a *power of God* for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also for the Greek’ (Rom 1:16).⁵

The Lord tells the Jews through Moses: ‘Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your hearts, and be no longer stubborn’ (Deut 10:15–16). Many years after Moses, a downhearted Elijah received the following answer from the Lord: ‘Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him’ (1 Kings 19:18). After the Babylonian exile a remnant returned to the land of Israel, but it is clear that in the time of Malachi not every Jew was a believer, because only a remnant of Israel feared the Lord and honoured his Name (Mal 3:16).

The New Testament uses the term *Israel* more than 70 times, but each of these texts still refers to the covenant people of Israel (Fruchtenbaum 1989:684–690; cf. also Saucy 2015:193). There are different interpretations of a few of these texts. In a context where the focus is clearly on Jews (‘But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God’ – Rom 2:17 and onwards), Paul distinguishes between believing and non-believing Jews (Coetzee 1965:78; Murray 1965:9): ‘For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God’ (Rom 2:28–29). The verses that follow make it clear that Paul is speaking about Jews in this passage of Scripture (Rom 3:1–8). Paul is merely confirming what Moses learned and what was illustrated in the days of Elijah and Malachi, namely that only a remnant of the biological descendants of Jacob (Israel) are born again believers whose hearts the Spirit had circumcised.

³ According to Fruchtenbaum (1989:170, 748–750), the child of a Jewish woman and a Gentile man can choose whether he or she wants to be viewed as a Jew — as Timothy did and who was then circumcised in terms of the *Abrahamic* covenant (Hand 16:3).

⁴ There are different historical, literary and other contexts in which the term *Israelite*, *Jew* and even *Hebrew* are used with special and separate nuances, but broadly speaking, a Jew still remains a biological descendent of Jacob (Israel).

⁵ This article makes use of the English Standard Version of the Bible.

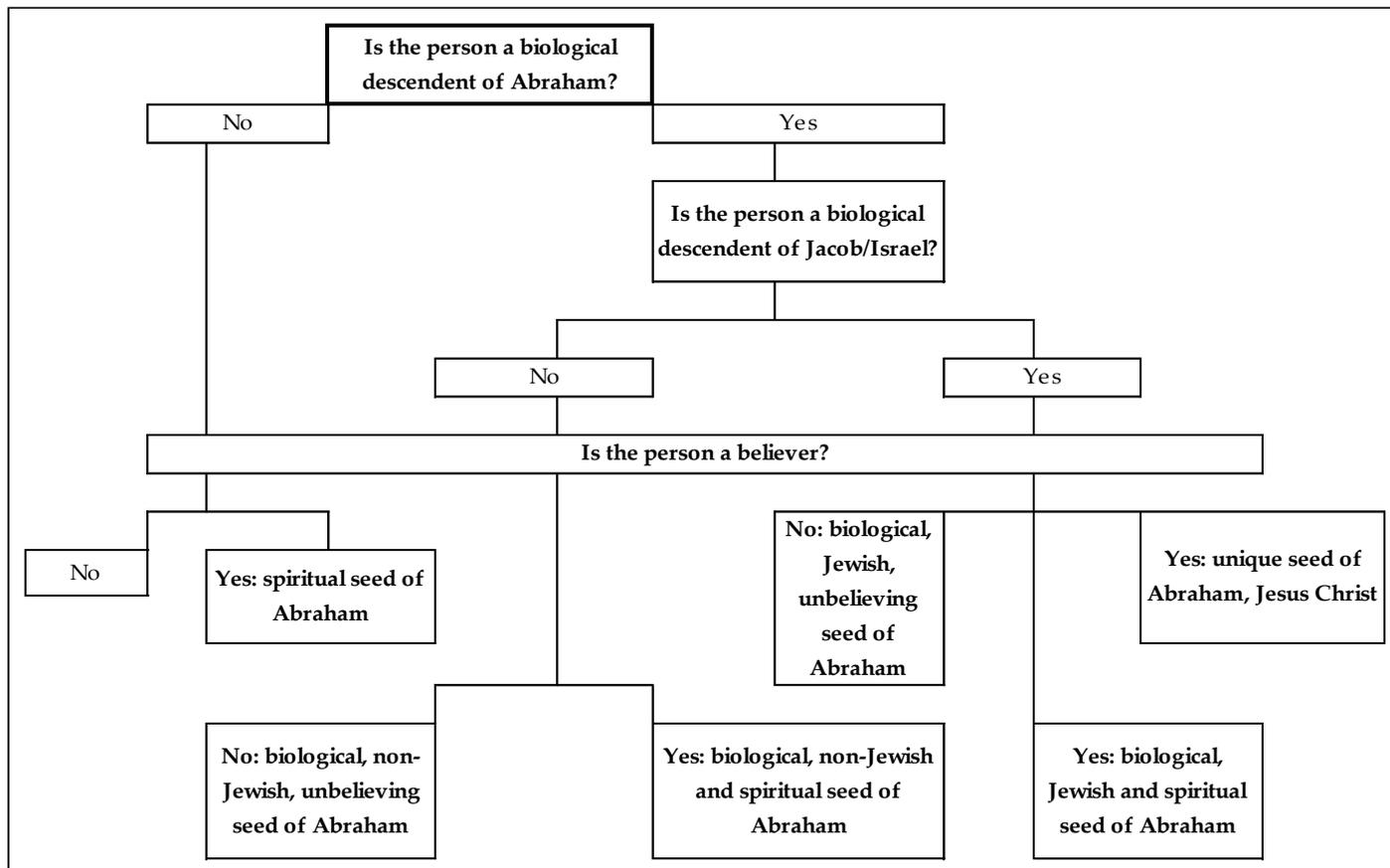
If all biological Jews are not also the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who or what is the true Israel? Paul writes the following about his fellow Jews – ‘my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh’ (Rom 9:3–4): ‘...For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel’ (Rom 9:6). Within ethnic Israel there is a smaller group of Jews who are believers (Coetzee 1965:162–175; Cranfield 1979:473–474; Murray 1965:9). The true Israel consists only of believing Jews; they are the Jewish remnant chosen by grace (1 Kings 19:18; Rom 11:5). The ‘Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16 refers to Jewish believers who live according to the rule mentioned in Galatians 6:15 (Betz 1979:323; Coetzee 1965:224; Johnson 2009:41, 49; Vlach 2010:143–145).

What about Gentiles, can they become the descendants or seed of Abraham? Abraham is the father of all those who believe, the circumcised and the uncircumcised (Rom 4:11–12). Non-Jewish biological descendants of Abraham, for example the descendants of Ishmael and Esau, can also be the descendants of Abraham in a spiritual sense if they believe in Christ, but this does not make these Ishmaelites or Edomites suddenly Jews (Fruchtenbaum 1989:702). The descendants of Ham, Japheth or those of Shem who do not descend from Abraham biologically, can also become descendants or seed of Abraham in the spiritual sense if they believe in the Messiah, but this does not make these Gentiles suddenly Ishmaelites, Edomites or Jews. In discussing Romans 4 and Galatians 3–4, Coetzee (1965; own translation) states the following:

This text undoubtedly says that believers from heathen nations can become spiritual children, spiritual seed of Abraham through faith in Christ. Here people are indeed called children and the descendants of Abraham based on their faith alone and without any ethnic link. But! This is not spiritualising the descent of Israel from Abraham, of the covenant of God with Israel, of the people of Israel! (pp. 172–173)

Six kinds of *seed* or posterity of Abraham can be identified. Jesus Christ is in the first place the unique *seed* or descendent of Abraham (Matt 1:1; Gal 3:16). In his humanity, Jesus was and remains a Jew (Matt 1:1–17; Rom 9:5). In the second place, believing Jewish descendants of Abraham are biologically and spiritually the seed of Abraham (Rom 4:12). Third, the fact that many Jews are not believers in the Messiah do not change the fact that they are still biological, Jewish seed of Abraham (Luke 16:24; John 8:37; Acts 13:26; Rom 4:12; 11:1). Fourth, there are believing, non-Jewish, biological descendants of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:29): this category includes believers from the descendants of Ishmael, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, Shuah and Esau. Fifth, there are non-believing, non-Jewish, biological descendants of Abraham. These people are only the descendants of Abraham in a biological sense. Sixth, there are believers who have no biological link to Abraham. These believers are the descendants or seed of Abraham in a spiritual sense only (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:29). Table 2 provides a schematic representation of the above categories.

Table 2: Different kinds of *seed* or descendants of Abraham



3.4 Theological implications

Six theological implications can be deduced from the above. First, and positively stated: Christ is the unique seed of Abraham (Matt 1:1; Gal 3:16) but there are also other ‘seeds’ or ‘descendants’ of Abraham (cf. Gal 3:29). Vlach (2010:3; cf. also König 1986:104) also states the negative: even if Christ is the unique seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16), this does not mean that the other ‘seeds’ or ‘descendants’ of Abraham merely disappear in a Hindu or Platonic fashion. Similarly, even if Jesus Christ can, as the Servant of the LORD, be viewed as the ‘true Israel’, this does not mean that all identities or all prophecies disappear or are transformed in Christ as the ‘true Israel’ (in contrast and in disagreement with Brand & Pratt 2015:239; Riddlebarger 2003:70; Strimple 1999:89). The fact that soteriological unity in Christ exists does not mean that all identities in Christ are revoked or fall away. On the contrary, not only does Isaiah 49:3–6 distinguish between the Servant of the LORD and Israel, but this Servant is in fact the *basis* of Israel’s future restoration (Saucy 2015:171).

Second, there are different referents and meanings of ‘the descendants of Abraham’, but one referent or meaning (for instance the spiritual) does not cancel the other meanings or referents, or their implications (Feinberg 1988:71–73; Vlach 2010:3). Most cars have four wheels, but it is a logical mistake to argue that everything on four wheels are cars. If all who belong to Christ are children of Abraham, does this mean that all Abraham’s children belong to Christ? No, not at all. Believers who have no biological connection to Abraham do not share in the physical or national promises that God made to the descendants of Ishmael or Esau (see Gen 17:20; 27:39–40). Fruchtenbaum (1989:702–703; my emphasis) rightly points out that *non-Jewish believers who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham are not the descendants of Jacob (Israel) and they therefore do not share in the unconditional physical or national covenant promises that God made to Israel, and they do not take these over*. However, non-Jewish believers do share in the spiritual covenant promises that God made in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8, 16; Eph 3:6). The spiritual referent or meaning of the

'descendants or seed of Abraham' does not cancel, change or transcend the other referents or meanings of this concept.

Third, all believers have soteriological unity in their Redeemer, but not all believers belong under the banner of *Israel*. There was a congregation or *qāhāl* (קהל) in Israel in the Old Testament and yet not all Jews were saved. Furthermore, not all Old Testament believers were part of Israel's *qāhāl*. One has to at least concede that the men of Nineveh and the queen of Sheba were saved (John 3; Matt 12:41–42), but they were not part of the *qāhāl* in Israel. In addition, Old Testament believers who lived before Abraham – for example Enoch and Noah – were not part of the Israel or of Israel's *qāhāl*. Have all the differences between Jews and Greeks, men and women, or employers and employees been erased (cf. Gal 3:28–29)? No, they have not (cf. also Coetzee 1965:192). Soteriologically speaking, there is no distinction between Jew or Gentile in justification, sanctification and glorification: every believer is saved by God's grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone (without adding anything further). Soteriological unity in Christ does not abrogate all ethnic, national, functional or gender differences.

Fourth, do non-Jewish believers not perhaps become 'spiritual Jews'? A believer who walks in the Spirit is 'spiritual', whether such person is a Jew or a Gentile (Gal 5:16–25). Non-Jewish believers can be regarded as the spiritual descendants or seed of Abraham (Rom 4:11; Gal 3:29), but the Bible does not teach that Gentile believers become a spiritual descendent of *Jacob (Israel)* and his 12 sons. The idea that the Church is the new, true or spiritual Israel can therefore not be supported. In the Old Testament, the people of Nineveh did not become spiritual Jews (Matt 12:41); proselytes are not described in this fashion anywhere in the Bible. Distinctions remain: after Christ started building his Church, the New Testament still teaches that the apostle Peter is a Jew (Gal 2:14), James (1:1) wrote a letter to believing and non-believing Jews (Allison 2015), and the apostle to the circumcised (1:1; 2 Pet 3:1) wrote letters to believing Jews (Couch 1996:300; Fruchtenbaum 1989:186–189). Non-Jewish believers do not become 'spiritual Jews'; in Romans 2:28–29 the distinction is between believing and non-believing Jews.

Fifth, can spiritual promises cancel, change or transcend physical promises? The analogy of faith does not mean that Scripture reinterprets Scripture by giving new meanings to original texts and in the process making normal principles of interpretation invalid. Claiming that unconditional promises made to Israel are in the New Testament changed, cancelled, spiritually transcended or idealized into the eternal state is a denial of the hermeneutical principle of normal interpretation and the grammatical-historical method.⁶

Sixth, prophetic fulfilment and typology is important to Israelology, but typological, analogical or summative fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New Testament cannot eliminate the unconditional, Old Testament covenant promises or prophecies that remain unfulfilled in the New Testament era (Scholtz 2016:8). A New Testament antitype does not change or cancel the meaning of an Old Testament type, unless the New Testament indicates it explicitly (Feinberg, 1988:79). As mentioned earlier, the term *Israel* is used more than 70 times in the New Testament to refer to the covenant people of Israel. Israel is therefore not explicitly changed or cancelled by an antitype in the New Testament (in contrast and in disagreement with Strimple 1999:86). Israel is not an Old

⁶ Article 7 of the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics* (1982) clearly states that the meaning of a Bible text is singular, specific and fixed, but that the acknowledgement of such singular meaning does not exclude a variety of applications.

Testament shadow-type that is replaced in the New Testament by the Church as an antitype (Vlach 2010:115–117).

4. Israel's present

The term 'Israel's present' includes the period from Jesus's first coming to a time closer to his second coming.

4.1 Jesus's first coming and the unpardonable sin

Jesus's words and actions in Matthew 4–12 confirm that he is the Messiah. During his first coming, the gospel of the kingdom was only proclaimed to Israel (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:5–7; 15:24), because the four unconditional covenants and the conditional Mosaic covenant belong to Israel. If Israel accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the messianic kingdom would have been established on earth in terms of the above-mentioned unconditional covenants and other unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies (Scholtz 2014:3–5). Regardless of whether Israel accepted Jesus as the Messianic king and Redeemer, Christ would still have had to die on the cross during his first coming (Scholtz 2014:4).

In Matthew 12:22–32, Jesus cast out a demon from a man who was blind and mute. The multitudes recognize this as a messianic miracle and ask their leaders: "Can this be the Son of David?" (Matt 12:23). The miracle cannot be ignored but the Pharisees ascribe the work that Jesus performed with the power of the Holy Spirit to Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Matt 12:24). This blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin that 'this generation' in Israel committed. Fruchtenbaum (1989; cf. also Thomas 2015:98–100) says the following:

The content and definition of the unpardonable sin is the national rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus by Israel while He was physically present on the basis that He was demon-possessed. This sin is unpardonable, and judgment was set. The judgment came in the year A.D. 70 with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple and the worldwide dispersion of the Jewish people. It was a national sin committed by the generation of Jesus' day, and for that generation the sin was unpardonable. From this point on a special emphasis is placed on *this generation* in the gospels, for it was guilty of a very unique sin. At this point, His offer of the Messianic kingdom was rescinded. (p. 617)

The establishment of the messianic kingdom in terms of the Davidic covenant was postponed because 'this generation' in Israel's history did not repent and believe in Jesus as the Messiah (Thomas 2015:99). The kingdom was taken away from these religious leaders and their unfaithful followers (Matt 21:43) and it will be given to a future Jewish generation that will put their faith in Jesus as the Messiah (Thomas 2015:105; cf. also Allison 1983:77–81). According to Matthew 23:39, the Jews will not see Christ again until they say: 'Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the LORD'. Regarding Matthew 23:39, Fruchtenbaum (1989; cf. also Allison 1983:78) writes:

Jesus will not come back to the earth until the Jews and the Jewish leaders ask Him to come back. Just as the Jewish leaders led the nation to the rejection of the Messiahship of Jesus, they must some day lead the nation to the acceptance of the Messiahship of Jesus. (p. 307)

After his resurrection, Jesus teaches his apostles about the kingdom of God for 40 days, after which the apostles ask: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:3, 6). Jesus does not correct the apostle's understanding of the kingdom, but says that the timing of the establishment of the kingdom to Israel is determined by the Father (Acts 1:7; Ger 2004:22–24; cf. also Matt 24:36).

As Jesus prophesied, Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed in AD 70 and the Jews were scattered among the nations over the earth (Luke 21:12–24). Since then Jerusalem has been trampled by the nations for almost 1 900 years. However, Jesus implies that when the ‘times of the Gentiles’ have been fulfilled – a phrase that refers to non-Jewish domination of Jerusalem – there will be a future for Jerusalem (Bock 1996:1680–1682). When Peter speaks to the Jews in Acts 3, he confirms that if a future Jewish generation repent, Christ will return and the time of refreshing of all things will commence – a reference to the messianic kingdom (Bock 1996:1682; Ger 2004:64–67).

4.2 The Jewish remnant of Israel in the Church

Jesus promised in Matthew 16:18 that he will build his Church (in the future) and in Acts 1:5 the resurrected Lord promised that he will baptize with the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 3:11–12). These promises are fulfilled from Pentecost on – something that Peter confirms in Acts 11:15–17 after he used the keys of the kingdom of heaven to open the door of Christ’s salvific work for three groups, namely the Jews in Acts 2, the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the Gentiles in Acts 10–11 (Ger 2004:43, 121, 160). Christ was given to the Church as the Head of all things only after his death, resurrection and ascension, and only after that did Christ give spiritual gifts to the Church (Eph 1:19–23; 4:7–12; Col 1:18). The Church started on Pentecost and consists of believers that Christ baptized into his body through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). This ministry of baptism is unique to the Church era: faithful disciples from all nations are not only unified with the Head of the body, but also with other believers who are baptized into the body of Christ (Lightner 1996:172).

Paul confirms that the unconditional covenants and the law (Mosaic covenant) were given to his ‘kinsman according to the flesh’ (Rom 9:3–5; cf. also Eph 2:12). Even if many Jews stumble over the rock (see Isa 8:14; Rom 11:17–20), these covenants still belong to the chosen people of Israel through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, because the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Rom 11:28–29). The fact that Israel is the elect nation does not mean that every Jew is also individually elected. As mentioned earlier, an unbelieving Jew share in the unconditional covenants and such unbelieving Jews may temporarily share in the physical and national blessings of the nation, but they lose spiritual blessings because they do not believe and are not saved.

What is the relationship of the Church to the unconditional covenants that still belong to Israel? Paul emphasizes that the non-Jewish believers are *fellow* heirs, members and partakers in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:6). However, the Church does not take the unconditional covenant promises over (cf. Rom 9:4–5; 11:28–29). Jewish believers share in all the promises of the four unconditional covenants with Israel; non-Jewish believers share in the spiritual promises of these covenants (for instance Gen 12:3; Gal 3:8). Non-Jewish believers will be on earth during the Millennium and the eternal state; Jewish believers will inherit the land of Israel.

If the covenant with Abraham is still valid – and it is (Gal 3:8, 15–20; Coetzee 1965:175) – then the sign of the Abrahamic covenant is also still valid (Gen 17:9–14). Who then has to be circumcised? Jewish boys still have to be circumcised on the eighth day in terms of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant (Fruchtenbaum 1989:630; Ger 2004:223–226), but no Jew should be circumcised in terms of the Mosaic covenant (Gal 5:2–4). Should non-Jewish boys or men be physically circumcised? No, neither in terms of the Abrahamic covenant nor in terms of the Mosaic covenant (Gal 5:2–4; Fruchtenbaum 1989:170). Why not? The covenant with Abraham was confirmed with his Jewish descendants through Jacob (Israel), not with any other nation. Furthermore, Christ fulfilled the Law of Moses and the middle wall of separation was broken down; there is therefore no reason for a

person (Jew or Gentile) to be circumcised in terms of the conditional Mosaic covenant (Gal 6:12–13; cf. also Acts 15:1–34).⁷

Proponents of Covenant Theology and of New Covenant Theology deny that the promises that were made to Israel as a nation are still valid. Dispensationalists make a distinction between Israel and the Church, but they are sometimes reluctant to say that Jewish believers in the Church are still part of Israel as a nation. However, Fruchtenbaum (1989; cf. also Ger 2009:248–250) rightly remarks:

[I]n Israel, past, present, and future, it is the remnant that is faithful to the revelation of God. ... The remnant is always within the nation, not outside of it; the Messianic Jews, the present-day remnant, are part of Israel and the Jewish people. Their Jewishness is distinct. It is true that Jewish believers are part of the Church. But the Jewish believers are also the Remnant of Israel, which is always part of the nation of Israel and not separated from it. Jewish believers are part of the Church *and* part of Israel (p. 757).

If Jewish believers during the Church era are part of both the Church *and* the nation of Israel, are non-Jewish believers who are part of the Church not also part of a non-Jewish nation? Non-Jewish believers during the Church era are indeed part of the Church *and* also part of their respective nations (Coetzee 1965:180–181). The Church is not, however, a nation, but rather is an international body that is tied to the Head. Yet every member of the body of Christ remains part of a nation. After all, Jesus's command is to make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:19). In future, Christ will give certain disciples authority over the nations (Matt 25:21–23; Rev 2:26; 3:21).

Does Israel as a nation have a present and a future in God's plan? If Israel has a future, have they temporarily been rejected in the present? Israel stumbled over the Messiah and they are undoubtedly being disciplined by God, but Israel has not stumbled in order that they might fall (Rom 9:32–33; 11:11). Discipline by means of temporary and partial hardening does not imply rejection (Sibley 2015:575–576). Paul *strongly* rejects the idea that God has rejected Israel for God has not rejected Israel, not even temporarily (Rom 11:1–2; Sibley 2015:577–579). Coetzee (1965; own translation) states it forcefully:

There is, Paul says, absolutely no way that Israel's current state of unrighteous unbelief means that God's word has failed. God has by no means rejected Israel as his nation. God's word remains powerful! Israel remains God's people! Paul leaves no doubt about this. He has nothing more to say about it. The contrary is *impossible!* Why? What is the basis of Paul's claim? *God's covenant loyalty!* (p. 162)

Israel has been hardened temporarily and in part, but this does not mean that God has rejected them (Rom 11:1, 25). The Jewish remnant of which Paul is a part of, proves that Israel has a present and a future (Rom 11:1–6, 25–31; Coetzee 1965:172). Sibley (2015) is correct to write:

Romans 11:15, far from teaching that God has rejected the Jewish people, actually provides the church with a rationale for Jewish evangelism and missions in the present and also anticipates the time when Israel will be spiritually reborn as a nation. The rejection of the salvation which was offered through Jesus the Messiah by the majority of Israel has meant that salvation could be offered to the nations, even as the Abrahamic covenant had promised. In verse 15, Paul argues that if their rejection of salvation has brought such blessing to so many, how much greater the blessing when they accept that salvation, for it will not only mean the salvation of individual Israelites, but the spiritual restoration of the nation (p. 581).

⁷ If a person (a Jew or Gentile) comes to faith in Jesus the Messiah today, Christ baptizes, through the Holy Spirit, that person into His body. Thereafter the believer should as a disciple, in obedience to Christ's command, be baptised by immersion in water (Matt 28:18–20).

5. Israel's future

The world's so-called 'Jewish problem' was seemingly solved when Jews could, from 1948 onwards, return to their land. As mentioned earlier, since theological systems differ with respect to its views about Israel, this indicates that there is apparently still a 'Jewish problem.' 'Israel's future' here refers to the period after the two world wars and ultimately into the eternal state.

5.1 Current restoration in the land of Israel

In AD 70, God judged 'this generation' in Israel who committed the unpardonable sin during Jesus's first coming. In accordance with the prophecies, since then Jews have been scattered across the earth (Deut 30:1; Luke 21:24). Is the return of the Jews to their land since 1948 of any prophetic significance?

The Bible contains prophecies about two physical, worldwide regatherings of Jews to their land. The return after the Babylonian captivity was not a worldwide regathering. According to Ezekiel 20:33-38 and Zephaniah 2:1-2, there will be a worldwide regathering of (predominantly unbelieving) Jews to their land in preparation for the judgement of the seven-year Tribulation Period (Fruchtenbaum 1989:716; White 2014:1401). After the first regathering, there will be a second regathering to Israel (Matt 24:31; Mark 13:27), this time of believing Jews in preparation for the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Benware 2006:319; Rydelnik & Spencer 2014:1027). How does one know that there will be two worldwide regatherings of Jews to their land, and not, for instance, three or seven regatherings? Isaiah 11:11-12:6 speaks of a regathering for 'the second time' and, as can clearly be deduced from the context, this second regathering is for the blessing of the messianic kingdom. There are therefore only two worldwide regatherings (Fruchtenbaum 1989:718). The modern state of Israel that was established in 1948 is therefore no historical accident, but a fulfilment of a Biblical prophecy (Rydelnik 2007:132-134).

Three related matters are relevant to the theme of the modern state of Israel. First, Daniel 9:24-27 (cf. also Isa 28:14-22) explains that the seven-year Tribulation Period will start when Israel makes a covenant with the Antichrist. This implies that a Jewish state must by then exist, that the Antichrist will by then be a person of importance, and that the Second World War and the Jewish Holocaust could not have been the prophesied Tribulation Period. Second, the 'son of perdition' will enter the temple in Jerusalem in the middle of the Tribulation Period and demand to be worshipped (2 Tess 2:3-4; cf. also Dan 9:27; Matt 24:15; Rev 11:1-2). This implies that by the middle of the Tribulation Period, there will be a functioning temple, which further implies that Israel will have control of the Temple mount, at least temporarily. Even if it is possibly only temporary, Israel has been in control of Jerusalem and the Temple mount since 1967. Third, God unconditionally promised the land to Israel so Jews have every right to be there. Does this mean that Christians must overlook the current Israeli government's mistakes or must support or condone everything that Israel does? No. There will only be peace when the Son of David rules Israel, with the twelve apostles ruling the twelve tribes of Israel (Isa 2:2-4; Matt 19:28).

5.2 The basis of the second coming of Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth at a time determined by the Father in his sovereignty and according to the work of the Holy Spirit (Matt 24:36; Acts 1:7). However, both Testaments testify that the second coming of Christ is also linked to Israel's national repentance (Vlach 2016:161).

Leviticus 26:40-45 includes a prophecy that the Jews can, after their scattering across the earth, once more enjoy the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant – especially the land – if they confess their sins and the sins of their nation (Fruchtenbaum 1989:781). Jeremiah 3:12-18 deals with the blessings of the messianic kingdom, but these blessings depend on Israel repenting of a specific sin (Jer 3:13) that the nation committed against the Lord their God (Vlach 2016:168). Hosea 5:15 declares similarly: ‘I will return again to my place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face, in their distress earnestly seek me.’ The Son of God left heaven when he became man and he returned to heaven at his ascension. The Second Person of the Trinity says that He will not return to earth before they [Israel] have acknowledged their guilt and seek His face. What guilt? According to Fruchtenbaum (1989:783), it is the unpardonable sin that ‘this generation’ of Israel committed during Jesus’s first coming.⁸

New Testament texts also testify that blessing will follow Israel’s national salvation. This was the message during the first coming of Christ and it will also be the message just prior to the second coming (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; Scholtz 2014:5). Does this mean that Jews will be saved just because they are Jews? No, not at all. For all times and for all people, salvation is by God’s grace alone through faith in Christ alone. During the Tribulation Period, two-thirds of all Jews will die, but *at the same time*, a third will remain that will in faith call on the name of the Lord (Zach 13:8–9; cf. also Mal 3:2–6; 4:1–2). The majority of the Jewish generation that is still physically alive at the end of the Tribulation Period will therefore have placed their faith in the Messiah and they will call their Redeemer and King with the words: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the Name of the LORD’ (Matt 23:39). All of Israel will then be saved, as is written: ‘“And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the LORD. “And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD.’ (Isa 59:20–21a; cf. also Rom 11:26–27; Coetzee 1965:203–210; Cranfield 1979:574–579).

5.3 The messianic kingdom and the eternal state

Is there an interim period, the Millennium, before the eternal state? Since sin results in death and death is the last enemy that will be conquered (1 Cor 15:26, 56), there will be no sin or death in the eternal state. Zechariah 14:16-21 says that all those left out of all the nations who rose against Jerusalem, will gather to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. This prophecy was not fulfilled in the time of Zechariah after the Babylonian captivity; it was not fulfilled during Jesus’s first coming, and it is definitely not being fulfilled today. Zechariah 14:17-19 furthermore speaks of the disobedience and punishment of certain nations. Since there is no more sin or death in the eternal state, Zechariah 14:16-21 refers to an ‘interim period’, the messianic kingdom. A similar argument can be made for Isaiah 65:17-25: even if there is a new heaven and a new earth, there is still sin and death (v. 20) and this period therefore also refers to the messianic kingdom that will merge into the eternal state (Rydelnik & Spencer 2014:1099-1100). The Old Testament does not say how long the messianic kingdom will continue before it will merge with the eternal state, but the New Testament says this ‘interim period’ will be 1 000 years (Rev 20:1–7).

During the Millennium, God’s plan for the nations will be fulfilled. The last Adam will rule the earth in the same realm where the first Adam failed (Gen 1:28; 3:17–19; Ps 8:4–10; Heb 2:5–9). In the same realm where 70 nations once failed, Christ will rule successfully over the elect nation Israel as well

⁸ Other relevant Old Testament texts include Deuteronomy 4:25–31; 30:1–10 and Zechariah 12–14 (Vlach 2016:166–169).

as over all the other nations (Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–2; Jer 23:5–8; Dan 7:14, 27; Matt 19:28; Luke 1:32–33; Rev 11:15). Israel is not an end, but it has always existed to honour God, to proclaim his glory to the nations and to be a blessing for other nations (Isa 43:10–12; cf. also Matt 20:25–26). During the Millennium, Israel will not be the only nation that will be described as the Lord’s people. It is in the eschatological ‘Day of the LORD’ that Isaiah 11:10 will be fulfilled *directly*, namely when nations *as nations* will ask for the ‘root of Isai’. Both Egypt and Assyria will during that time become nations that serve the Lord (Isa 19:19–25; Vlach 2010:170–171; Rydelnik & Spencer 2014:1033). Still, nations remain distinguishable, because Israel is the inheritance of the LORD of hosts (Isa 19:25).⁹ During the messianic kingdom all unfulfilled, unconditional covenant promises and prophecies will be fulfilled. Even though there is soteriological unity in Christ, Israel (Rev 21:12), the Church (Rev 21:9; 22:17) and the different nations (Rev 21:24, 26; 22:2) are distinct – even in the eternal state.

6. Conclusion

This article shows that Israel not only has a past in God’s plan, but also a present and a future. The core of the argument is that God made certain unconditional covenant promises and prophecies to Israel, and the New Testament does not change, cancel, spiritualize, transcend or idealize these promises. The fact that the term ‘seed of Abraham’ can refer to the spiritual seed of Abraham of non-Jewish descent, does not change or cancel the unconditional promises that God made to the Jewish descendants of Abraham. Despite Israel’s sin and disobedience, God remains true and faithful to his unconditional promises. The fact that there is currently a believing Jewish remnant confirms that God did not reject or cast away his people, not even temporarily. The Jewish remnant in the Church era are not only members of the body of Christ, but they also remain part of the nation Israel. Several unconditional covenant promises and prophecies confirm that Israel has a future as a saved nation. Israelology should therefore be an academic discipline within the framework of Biblical and Systematic theology. Israelology is not only important for ecclesiology and eschatology, but based on the doctrine of Israel, further research may well focus on Israel’s importance in missiology and in the mission directive of Matthew 28:18–20, prophecies regarding Israel that will be fulfilled (ex.: Joel 3:2; Zech 12:2), as well as the doctrine of the nations. The Church is today God’s instrument to make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:18–20). But in the depth of the richness, wisdom, knowledge and eternal glory of God, there will come a time when all followers of the Lord Jesus Christ will see how the so-called ‘Jewish problem’ will once and for all be something of the past. For if Israel’s fall is riches for the world and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness (cf. Rom 11:12, 33–36)!

Dedication

This article is dedicated to Dr Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum and Ariel Ministries.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal connection with any party that could have influenced him positively or negatively in the writing of this article.

⁹ With reference to Romans 4:13, Hsieh (2015:106–110) remarks that κόσμος can refer to people and to land and that κληρονόμος does not always refer to inheriting land, but that it can also refer to inheriting justice, life, people, etc. Hsieh (*ibid*:110) describes this interpretation of Romans 4:13 as Abraham’s ‘inheritance of many nations’, the ideal that Abraham would inherit a great spiritual posterity from all the nations. Seen as such, Romans 4:13 does not deal with Old Testament promises of land that will expand (*ibid*:110). If this interpretation is correct, it has implications for other texts on the debate on the land of Israel (for instance Matt 5:5; Eph 6:2–3; Heb 4:1–11).

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