

DISPENSATIONALISM'S ROLE IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

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After being criticized for years because of its “do-nothing passivity,” Dispensationalism has most recently received criticism for its undue influence on foreign policies of the United States and England. Timothy P. Weber’s case against Dispensationalism relates mostly to the United States, and Stephen Sizer faults the system’s impact on both Great Britain and the USA. The land-promise aspect of God’s promise to Abraham, a promise repeated frequently throughout the OT, is the crux of the issue for both critics: to whom does the land of Israel belong? Covenant theologians, in line with their view that the church has replaced Israel in the ongoing program of God, deny that the land-promise to Israel is still valid. The approach of New Covenant Theology takes the physical land promise as being fulfilled in the spiritual salvation of God’s people. Kingdom Theology takes an “already/not yet” approach to NT teaching about the kingdom, which essentially denies Israel a central role in the future kingdom. Though Progressive Dispensationalism is more “Israelitish” than Kingdom Theology regarding the future kingdom, that system is quite ambivalent on how it sees a fulfillment of the land promise to Israel. Dispensationalism is the only system that takes the land promise in the way that Abraham understood God when He made the promise. It is no wonder then that the USA and Great Britain have been politically favorable to Israel in light of Dispensationalism’s indirect influence on their foreign policies. Dispensationalism has also evidenced a largely overlooked social impact in the public square.

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Dispensational theology has often received criticism for its “long heritage of fundamentalistic application of dispensational eschatology to the prospects of activism within the social order.”¹ As Weber has observed, “Critics charged that dispensationalism inoculated its advocates with a kind of do-nothing passivity,

¹Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004) 67.

mainly because of its pessimistic and fatalistic worldview: Human civilization is doomed to decline, the forces of evil will inevitably overwhelm the forces of good, and there is nothing that anyone can do about it.”² According to Russell D. Moore, “Evangelical theology . . . faces the (often valid) criticisms of both liberation theologians on the left and theonomic theologians on the right that evangelical theology has been hijacked by an eschatology that ignores sociopolitical issues in an apocalyptic flight from the world.”³ In Moore’s estimation, a large share of the blame for fundamentalistic isolationism in the sociopolitical realm lies with Dispensationalism.

On the other side of the ledger, two recent works by non-dispensationalists have called attention to the strong influence on United States foreign policy that Dispensationalism has wielded since the nineteenth century. The two works, authored by Timothy P. Weber and Stephen Sizer, are worthy of brief summaries.

Timothy P. Weber

Church historian Timothy P. Weber has much to say about the effect of Dispensationalism on U. S. policy in dealing with Israel as the subtitle of his book indicates: *How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend*.⁴ Early in the work, he writes,

Dispensationalists interpret Bible prophecy more or less literally and put prophetic texts together in complex ways. They make up about one-third of America’s forty or fifty million evangelical Christians and believe firmly that the nation of Israel will play a central role in the unfolding of end-times events. This book tells the story of how dispensationalist evangelicals became Israel’s best friends in the last part of the twentieth century and what difference that friendship has made in recent times (9).

Weber continues,

For over one hundred years, their insistence on the restoration of the Jewish state in the Holy Land seemed far-fetched and extremely unlikely. But in the middle of the twentieth century, history seemed to follow their prophetic script. After the founding of Israel in 1948 and its expansion after the Six-Day War, dispensationalists aggressively promoted their ideas with the confidence that Bible prophecy was being fulfilled for all to see. Starting in the 1970s, dispensationalists broke into the popular culture with runaway best-sellers, plenty of media visibility, and a well-networked political campaign to promote and protect the interests of Israel. Since the mid-1990s, tens of millions of people who have never seen a prophetic chart or listened to a sermon on the second coming have read one or more novels in the Left Behind series, which has become the most effective

²Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 45.

³Ibid., 69.

⁴Ibid., in the discussion to follow, page numbers from this work will be cited in the text at the conclusion of each quote.

disseminator of dispensationalist ideas ever. How did all this happen? This book seeks to answer that question (15).

Weber recounts how dispensationalists were willing to sit in the bleachers and watch world events while continuing to propound their doctrines of Israel's restoration, but beginning in 1948 they left the bleachers, went onto the playing field, and became active shapers of events (15). Viewed by non-dispensationalists as pessimistic and fatalist in their prophetic views, dispensationalists developed a perspective of passivity in the face of civilization's inevitable decline and yet worked hard to make things better in the time that remained (16, 45-46; cf. 86, 93, 93-94, 95, 96, 106, 110, 112, 128, 130, 153, 157, 160, 168, 171, 186, 187, 198, 200, 201, 202-3).

To explain the growing influence of Dispensationalism, Weber reasons,

The educational and ecclesiastical elite tended to reject dispensationalism as a doctrine, but the conservatives among them usually found a way to welcome dispensationalists into their mounting opposition to theological liberalism and higher criticism. Among the first adopters of the new premillennialism was an impressive group of evangelical movers and shakers, mostly "second-tier" pastors, Bible teachers, and revivalists with large constituencies. This group contained evangelical entrepreneurs who knew how to promote dispensationalism, establish strong supporting institutions, and popularize it among evangelicals in the pew. In this way, dispensationalism often flew under the radar of scholars and church leaders who were out of touch with rank-and-file believers. By the time the elites noticed, dispensationalism was already well established among conservative evangelicals, with vibrant networks of its own. What was the key to their success? During a time of mounting crisis over the Bible's reliability and accessibility to laypeople, dispensationalists were able to "out-Bible" everybody else in sight (26).

Weber's conclusion after amassing a huge amount of detail is that by the 1980s Dispensationalism was a mighty force in U. S. foreign policy.

As the 1984 presidential election approached, political reporters hotly pursued the connection between premillennialism and right-wing politics, especially after Reagan's own dispensationalist beliefs began to surface. . . . Then 175 public radio stations carried a documentary titled "Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Armageddon," which explored similar themes. In October, the Christic Institute of Washington, D.C., presented evidence in a news conference that American foreign policy was being unduly influenced by dispensationalists (201).

Whether the growing influence was caused by "evangelical entrepreneurs who knew how to promote dispensationalism, establish strong supporting institutions, and popularize it among evangelicals in the pew" (26) or by dispensationalists ability to "'out-Bible' everybody else in sight" (26) is a matter of opinion, however. Evidence favors the latter and concurs with Boyer that the influence was more "subterranean

and indirect”⁵ than attributable to the visibility and charisma of certain dispensational spokesmen. Without a long history of dispensational, biblical teaching in local churches, educational institutions, and other outlets, the gifted leaders whose names are well-known would never have gained a hearing.

Stephen Sizer

Stephen Sizer⁶ has undertaken a study of Dispensationalism similar to that of Weber, but from a perspective much more antagonistic toward Dispensationalism. He entitles his work *Christian Zionism: Road-map to Armageddon?*⁷ Sizer traces the origin of Christian Zionism back to the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of literal interpretation among the laity.⁸ Differing with Calvin and Luther, Theodore Beza and Martin Bucer took the name Israel in Rom 11:25 to refer to unbelieving Jews and Judaism.⁹ Editions of the Geneva Bible in 1557 and 1560 adopted that view as did Puritans William Perkins and Hugh Broughton.¹⁰ The view was that the Jewish people would be converted and, before the second coming, would return to Palestine to enjoy a national existence alongside other nations.¹¹ After the demise of postmillennialism, two forms of premillennialism arose: historic or covenant premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism.¹² The former held that “Jewish people would be incorporated within the church and return to Palestine a converted nation alongside other Christian nations,” and the latter that “the Jewish people would return to the land before or after their conversion but would remain distinctly separate from the church.”¹³ In Sizer’s opinion, “The former view became the driving force behind the restorationist movement and British Christian Zionism, while the latter view came to dominate in the United States.”¹⁴

Sizer opines,

Zionism would have remained simply a religious ideal were it not for the intervention of a handful of influential aristocratic politicians who came to share the theological convictions of Way, Irving and Darby and translated them in to political reality. One in

⁵Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) 146.

⁶Stephen Sizer is vicar of Christ Church, Virginia Water, Surrey, and has been Chairman of the International Bible Society (UK).

⁷Leicester Lei 7GP, England: Inter-Varsity, 2004.

⁸Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 27.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 27-28.

¹¹Ibid., 30.

¹²Ibid., 34.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

particular, Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885), became convinced that the restoration of the Jews to Palestine was not only predicted in the Bible, but coincided with the strategic interests of British foreign policy.¹⁵

Sizer mentions a number of prominent political figures in Great Britain and the United States whose evangelical upbringing with a dispensational emphasis played a major role in their country's friendly policy toward Israel. Among them are Arthur James Balfour (1848-1930) in England and Ronald Reagan in the United States.¹⁶ He is particularly pointed in his description of Reagan's impact on the U.S. pro-Israel stance, a stance that has been maintained by the three U.S. presidents after him.¹⁷

Sizer acknowledges the claims of Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell that one hundred million Americans—i.e., Christian Zionists—communicate with and support them weekly. He also acknowledges Halsell's estimate of between twenty-five and thirty million Zionist Christians in America.¹⁸ Whatever figure is correct, operating mostly outside denominational hierarchy and academia, Zionist Christianity (i.e., Dispensationalism) is a powerful force in this country.

Land Promises to Israel as Motivation for U. S. Policy

With a general awareness and widespread agreement that Dispensationalism has impacted U. S. foreign policy in this country's dealings with Israel, one might ask the question, What about Dispensationalism has produced such an effect? And, What has been the impact of other theological systems on U. S. foreign policy? An obvious answer to both questions lies in reflecting on one particular aspect of the Abrahamic covenant.

Without question, God promised Abraham a specific plot of land on the earth as it is currently known, a land that was populated by numerous groups of people:¹⁹ "Now the Canaanite was then in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land'" (Gen 12:6b-7a; cf. references to the land's Canaanite, Hittite, Amorite, Perizzite, Hivite, and Jebusite inhabitants in Exod 3:8). One passage among others in which God's promise to Abraham was confirmed is Gen 15:18-21: "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, From the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the

¹⁵Ibid., 55.

¹⁶Ibid., 63, 86.

¹⁷Ibid., 86-89.

¹⁸Ibid., 23.

¹⁹Ronald B. Allen, "The Land of Israel," in *Israel the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God's Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 21.

Canaanite and the Gergashite and the Jebusite.” The territory thus described has an estimated size of “300,000 square miles or twelve and one-half times the size of Great Britain and Ireland.”²⁰

Through that unilateral covenant God obligated Himself, no one else, to give the land to Abraham, later confirming it as a perpetual inheritance through circumcision in Gen 17:7-11.²¹ God repeated the same basic promise to Abraham’s son Isaac (Gen 26:3) and to his grandson Jacob (Gen 28:4;28:24), whose son Joseph still later alluded to the promise (Gen 50:24).²² Since God swore to Abraham that He would fulfil His promise and then swore by Himself (Heb 6:13, 17-18)—His word in Gen 12:7 and His oath in Gen 22:16-17—God’s gifts to and callings of Israel are irrevocable (Rom 11:29).²³

Various theological systems have explained those land promises differently, but one has impacted public opinion more profoundly than the others in creating sympathy in America and elsewhere for Israel and her right to have sovereign control over the land or a portion thereof promised to Abraham. The following discussion will sample five different systems to see how they interpret the land promises: Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology, Kingdom Theology, Progressive Dispensationalism, and Dispensationalism.

Covenant Theology

In initiating his case for replacement theology, covenant theologian Sizer writes,

While Christian Zionists generally afford Israel a special status above the church, dispensationalists also believe Israel will succeed the church. So it is ironic that they accuse covenantalists of perpetrating a ‘replacement theology’ for suggesting the church has replaced Israel.²⁴

He then proceeds to note, “There is, however, no indication in the text of Genesis 12 that this promise of blessing and warning and cursing was ever intended to extend beyond Abraham.”²⁵

Sizer and covenantalists like him usually point out, “[T]he idea that the Jewish people continue to enjoy a special status by virtue of the covenants made with

²⁰Charles L. Feinberg, *Israel: At the Center of History & Revelation*, 3d. ed. (Portland, Ore: Multnomah, 1980) 168.

²¹Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Land of Israel and the Future Return (Zechariah 10:6-12),” *Israel the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises* 211.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 146.

²⁵Ibid., 148.

the Patriarchs is in conflict with the clear and unambiguous statements of the New Testament."²⁶ To support such a statement, he cites Acts 3:23, "Anyone who does not listen to him [Christ] will be completely cut off from among his people" (NIV), and concludes that if Peter's Jewish listeners "persisted in refusing to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, they would cease to be the people of God."²⁷

Sizer also cites Peter's encounter in the house of Cornelius and Peter's words, "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35), using them to prove that "it cannot logically be presumed that Jews continue to enjoy a favoured or exclusive status."²⁸ He even goes so far as to agree with Bass' view that Dispensationalism's distinction between Israel and the church may be seen as heresy.²⁹

Sizer cites James' use of Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:16-18 to demonstrate that James is "spiritualizing" the OT text to vindicate "the universality of the gospel and the results of the first-century mission."³⁰ In doing so, he denies that James has any reference to a predetermined and futuristic plan for national Israel, separate from the church.³¹ He refers to other Scriptures such as Matt 8:10-12 and Luke 14:14-24 to show that believing Gentiles will replace unbelieving Jews in the future kingdom.³² In these passages, Sizer's use of proof-texts leaves much to be desired.

In advocating that Israel ceased to be the people of God because of her rejection of Jesus as the promised Messiah, what Sizer misses is a point that Beecher made over a hundred years ago:

So far forth as its benefits accrue to any particular person or generation in Israel, it is conditioned on their obedience. But in its character as expressing God's purpose of blessing for the human race, we should not expect it to depend on the obedience or disobedience of a few.³³

In Kaiser's words, "The conditionality was not attached to the promise but only to the

²⁶Ibid., 149.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., 150.

²⁹Ibid.. See Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 27-29, who says that Dispensationalism is a departure from historic Christianity.

³⁰Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 157.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 158-59. Among the Scriptures used by Robert L. Reymond to demonstrate that ethnic Israel has no claim on the land promises made to Abraham are the following: Matt 21:33-45 = Mark 12:1-12 = Luke 20:9-19; 1 Thess 2:15-16; Rom 9:27-29 ("Who Really Owns the 'Holy Land'?" Part 2," *The Trinity Review* 257 [July 2006]:1-2).

³³Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905; reprint, Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002) 220.

participants who would benefit from these abiding promises.”³⁴ By this Kaiser meant that participation in the blessings depended on an individual’s spiritual condition.³⁵ A future generation will arise who will obey and be spiritually prepared to inherit precisely the land that God promised to Abraham. The validity of God’s promise does not depend on Israel’s obedience. It depends on God’s faithfulness to His covenant.

One wonders whether those who think the land promises to Abraham will go unfulfilled because of Israel’s faithlessness would say the same thing about God’s promise of making Abraham a blessing to all nations. Genesis 12:3c records, “And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.” Would they say that this promise has also been abrogated by Israel’s lack of faithfulness? This promise of spiritual blessing to Abraham of being a spiritual blessing to all nations is still in effect and will be fulfilled to the letter just like another aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the land promise. Thus, Sizer is quite mistaken when he writes, “Subsequent to Pentecost, under the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the apostles begin to use old covenant language concerning the land in new ways.”³⁶

New Covenant Theology

New Covenant Theology handles the land promises to Abraham differently. That position starts by affirming that the promises were fulfilled when Israel under Joshua’s leadership conquered Canaan. Michael W. Adams quotes the OT book of Joshua on this point:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. *Not one of the LORD’S good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled. Joshua 21:43-45, Emphasis Added.*³⁷

From this passage he surmises, “It seems quite clear from Joshua 21 that under Joshua’s leadership, the nation of Israel experienced rest from oppression on every one of their borders. We do not know how long this rest lasted, but the Joshua passage makes it very evident to us that they *did* rest.”³⁸

Adams acknowledges that the rest did not last and then cites Heb 4:8-9: “For if Joshua *had given them rest*, God would not have spoken later about another day.

³⁴Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 94.

³⁵Kaiser, “Land of Israel” 212-13.

³⁶Sizer, *Christian Zionism* 169.

³⁷Michael W. Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant: A Theological Response to Richard Barcellos’ Book, In Defense of the Decalogue: A Critique of New Covenant Theology” (<http://www.ncbf.net/PDF/Defense.pdf>, 8, accessed 8/7/06). [emphasis in the original]

³⁸*Ibid.*, 9. [emphasis in the original]

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.”³⁹ He points out that the only way to avoid a contradiction between the two passages is to see the author of Hebrews as viewing the physical picture of Israel in the land as finding “its true fulfillment in salvation, resulting in heaven for every believer.”⁴⁰ In other words, the land promises to Abraham are a physical picture of a spiritual truth that would never have been known from the OT alone. The NT gives completely new information on the subject.

John G. Reisinger follows a similar line of argument in pointing to Luke 1:68-79 to prove that the promise to Abraham remained unfulfilled throughout the OT. When Christ came, its fulfillment came and was spiritual in nature.⁴¹ He acknowledges the correctness of dispensational teaching that throughout the OT the land promise had to do with physical land, but says that Luke totally spiritualizes that promise. In speaking of dispensationalists, he states, “Their adamant ‘naturalizing’ of specific things that NT Apostles spiritualize make those NT passages impossible to understand.”⁴²

He summarizes,

The NT Scriptures never once interpret the covenant with Abraham to deal with the land of Palestine, let alone make the land the primary part of the promise. The exact opposite is true in the OT Scriptures. The land is the heart of the covenant promise to Abraham from Genesis 15 to the end of the OT Scriptures but stops at Malachi. The ‘land promise’ is never repeated in the NT Scriptures.⁴³

He continues his criticism of Dispensationalism's view of physical land promises:

They must also *naturalize* the blessing promised to Abraham that Peter clearly *spiritualizes*. . . . It has always amazed me that the people that insist on a literal interpretation of the *words of Scripture* will not do that very thing when a New Testament Apostle literally *spiritualizes* an Old Testament prophecy.⁴⁴

Reisinger basically agrees with Dispensationalism regarding OT interpretation but feels that the NT alters that interpretation:

I personally believe the NT Scriptures make the physical land to be a type of spiritual rest and the Israelite to be a type of a true believer. However, we could not come to that conclusion from anything in the OT Scriptures. If all we had was the OT Scriptures, it would be very easy to hold the same view of Israel and the Land of Israel as that held by

³⁹Ibid. [emphasis in the original]

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹John G. Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* (Frederick, Md.: New Covenant Media, 1998) 89-91.

⁴²Ibid., 28.

⁴³Ibid., 39-40.

⁴⁴Ibid., 41. [emphasis in the original]

Dispensationalism.⁴⁵

His position is, "I believe the Dispensationalist is wrong in not seeing that the NT Scriptures spiritualize the land promise, but the answer is not to deny what the Old Testament Scriptures clearly say."⁴⁶

All this brings Reisinger to conclude, "[W]e must realize that there is not a single repetition, or mention, of the land promise in any passage in the NT Scriptures including Romans 11 and the entire book of Revelation."⁴⁷

His interesting proposal raises questions, however. To what land was Jesus referring when he spoke of the future repentance of the city of Jerusalem (Matt 23:37-39)? Is it not the city that most prominently represents the land promised to Abraham? Zion is a name often assigned to Jerusalem. The NT is not void of references to geographical Zion, is it (cf. Rom 9:33; 11:26)? The book of Revelation has frequent references to Jerusalem and therefore to the land of Israel. Revelation 11:1-13 tells of the measuring of the temple and two witnesses active in Jerusalem, and a revival that will take place in that city following a great earthquake. Beale in his commentary on Revelation follows an eclectic philosophy of hermeneutics.⁴⁸ In his commentary, Osborne does the same except when he combines not just idealism and futurism. He also mixes in a bit of preterism.⁴⁹ Through their combining of idealist, futurist, and even preterist interpretations, both men shy away from understanding "Jerusalem" in a geographical sense. Yet the language could hardly be clearer. John has in mind the earthly city as he records the vision given him. Aune agrees with Osborne that the temple refers to the heavenly temple, not the earthly one, but he does so under the assumption that the earthly temple will not be rebuilt.⁵⁰ Yet he later acknowledges that the temple described in 11:1-2 is most definitely the earthly temple in Jerusalem.⁵¹ He also believes that "the holy city" is a clear reference to the earthly city Jerusalem that is referred to again in 11:8. Through a combination of source and form critical explanations of the passage, Aune is able to combine literal-futuristic interpretations of the passage with allegorical-idealistic explanations.

Other references in Revelation to the land promised to Abraham include Rev

⁴⁵Ibid., 84.

⁴⁶Ibid., 91.

⁴⁷Ibid., 92.

⁴⁸G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The International Greek Testament Commentary, eds. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 48-49.

⁴⁹Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 21-22.

⁵⁰David E Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, vol. 52b of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 596-97.

⁵¹Ibid., 605.

16:16 and 20:9. The former refers to a place called Harmagedon where a future battle will be fought. The “Har” prefix probably refers to the hill country around a town called Megiddo. Megiddo was a city on the Great Road linking Gaza and Damascus, connecting the coastal plain and the Plain of Esdraelon or Megiddo. The reference in 20:9 speaks of “the camp of the saints and the beloved city,” most clearly a reference to the city of Jerusalem. Regarding “the beloved city” Aune comments, “Since the heavenly Jerusalem does not make its appearance until 21:10 (aside from 3:12), ‘the beloved city’ cannot be the New Jerusalem but must be the earthly Jerusalem.”⁵² Yet one should not conclude that Aune interprets Revelation futuristically. Because of his source and redaction critical assumptions he simply assumes that the final editor of the Apocalypse incorporated earlier traditions and/or myths into the passage. In addition, Rev 16:12 mentions the Euphrates River which was one of the boundaries of the land promised to Abraham (cf. Gen 15:18). That is the river the kings from the east must cross to get to Harmagedon.

Reisinger’s claim that no land promise occurs in the NT falls short by not recognizing that the land promise is assumed in the NT. It is a holdover from the OT, never having been abrogated. Interestingly, this same gentleman allows for an ongoing distinctiveness of Israel as a people, however: “I personally believe that Israel, as a people, is still a unique people in God’s purposes. However, as a nation, they do not have any spiritual or eternal purposes independent of the church. . . . It is one thing to think of Israel as a physical nation with national and earthly distinctions and another to think of Israel as a people with God’s peculiar mark upon them.”⁵³ His is a strange position, admitting that Israel is a unique people in God’s purposes and yet denying them the role of a chosen nation, strange indeed in light of Paul’s words “who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh” (Rom 9:4-5a). Paul unequivocally speaks of Israel as a people unique in their relation to God.

New Covenant Theology forfeits its credibility by failing to do justice to God’s follow-up to His promise of giving Abraham the land “[f]rom the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18).

Kingdom Theology

Kingdom Theology lays heavy emphasis on the centrality of the Kingdom in the Bible. Russell D. Moore represents the cause of Kingdom Theology [hereafter KT] and places the blame for the failure of evangelicals in the sociopolitical arena on an inadequate evangelical theology of the Kingdom: “[T]he failure of evangelical politics points us to something far more important that underlies it—the failure of

⁵²David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, vol. 52c of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas, 1998) 1098-99.

⁵³Reisinger, *Abraham’s Four Seeds* 44.

evangelical theology.”⁵⁴ The position places heavy emphasis on the work of Carl F. H. Henry, particularly in his *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.⁵⁵ As seen by Russell D. Moore, Henry was a leader in the new evangelical movement right after World War II that sought to cure evangelicalism of its fundamentalistic isolation from the activity of contemporary society and politics:

Henry's *Uneasy Conscience*, after all, was not first of all a sociopolitical tract. Instead, it served in many ways to define theologically much of what it means to be a “new evangelical,” in contrast to the older fundamentalism. Along with Ramm, Carnell, and others, Henry pressed the theological case for evangelicalism in terms of a vigorous engagement with nonevangelical thought. As articulated by Henry and the early constellations of evangelical theology, such as Fuller Theological Seminary and the National Association of Evangelicals, evangelicalism would not differ with fundamentalism in the “fundamentals” of doctrinal conviction, but in the application of Christian truth claims onto all areas of human endeavor. Henry's *Uneasy Conscience*, which set the stage for evangelical differentiation from isolationist American fundamentalism, sought to be what Harold J. Ockenga called in his foreword to the monograph “a healthy antidote to fundamentalist aloofness in a distraught world.” Thus, the call to sociopolitical engagement was not incidental to evangelical theological identity, but was at the forefront of it. Henry's *Uneasy Conscience*, and the movement it defined, sought to distinguish the postwar evangelical effort so that evangelical theologians, as one observer notes, “found themselves straddling the fence between two well-established positions: fundamentalist social detachment and the liberal Social Gospel.”⁵⁶

“In addition,” Moore continues, “evangelicalism was divided into two camps, the covenantalists and the dispensationalists with their differing view of the Kingdom, a division that hindered evangelicalism from having a united impact on the secular world.”⁵⁷ Henry considered the debates between premillennialists and amillennialists that divided evangelicalism as secondary issues. As Moore puts it,

Henry's *Uneasy Conscience* waded into the Kingdom debate as an incipient call for a new consensus, one that was a break from the Kingdom concept of classical dispensationalism and also from the spiritual understanding of many covenant theologians. Henry was joined in this by the exegetical and biblical theological syntheses of George Eldon Ladd, who went even further in calling for a new evangelical vision of the Kingdom, usually riling both dispensational premillennialists and covenant amillennialists in the process.⁵⁸

In Moore's estimation, the consensus for which Henry pled has begun to emerge:

⁵⁴Moore, *Kingdom of Christ* 11.

⁵⁵Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947.

⁵⁶Moore, *Kingdom of Christ* 19.

⁵⁷Ibid., 21.

⁵⁸Ibid., 22.

Remarkably, the move toward a consensus Kingdom theology has come most markedly not from the broad center of the evangelical coalition, as represented by Henry or Ladd, but from the rival streams of dispensationalism and covenant theology themselves. Progressive dispensationalists, led by theologians such as Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy, have set forth a counterproposal to almost the entire spectrum of traditional dispensational thought. With much less fanfare, but with equal significance, a group of covenant theologians, led by scholars such as Anthony Hoekema, Vern Poythress, Edmund Clowney, and Richard Gaffin, has also proposed significant doctrinal development within their tradition.⁵⁹

In the absence of an adequate theology of the Kingdom, Moore sees promising signs of an emerging consensus that would place KT as the central focus of evangelicalism. He promotes inaugurated eschatology along with an anticipation of a future Kingdom as the means to bring evangelicals together, i.e., the “‘already/not’ eschatological framework of Ladd.”⁶⁰ He commends progressive dispensational theologians for systematizing an inaugurated eschatology with a clear “already” facet that is quite similar to the one proposed by Henry and constructed by Ladd.⁶¹

In the covenantal camp of evangelicalism, Moore thinks that the emerging consensus was not as noticeable: “The move toward an ‘already/not yet’ framework of eschatology by evangelical theology’s covenantal Reformed tradition was not as noticeable as the developments within Dispensationalism.”⁶² Covenantalists already had a theory of an inaugurated eschatology. Their move came in recognizing that the present soteriological stage of the Kingdom is an initial stage of a future eschatological consummation:

Thus, for Gaffin and likeminded Reformed theologians, the Kingdom present is not an exclusively soteriological matter pointing to an eschatological consummation. It is itself a manifestation of an initial fulfillment of the promised eschatological hope. “A global, elemental consideration, that comes from taking in the history of revelation in its organic wholeness, is the essentially unified eschatological hope of the Old Testament, a hope which, to generalize, has a single focus on the arrival of the Day of the Lord, inaugurated by the coming of the Messiah,” Gaffin asserts. “From this perspective, the first and second comings, distinguished by us on the basis of the New Testament, are held together as two episodes of *one* (eschatological) coming.”⁶³

Moore laments the fact that both dispensationalists and covenantalists miss the major point in identifying the seed of Abraham:

⁵⁹Ibid., 23.

⁶⁰Ibid., 39.

⁶¹Ibid., 40.

⁶²Ibid., 44.

⁶³Ibid., 47.

Until this point, both dispensationalist and covenantal evangelicals discussed the issue as though it could be abstracted from the purposes of God in the true Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth. . . . Both sides miss the impact of the mystery Paul is unveiling when he argues against the Judaizers that the “seed of Abraham” who inherits the kingdom promises is not plural but singular (Gal. 3:16a). Indeed, Paul explicitly identifies the “offspring of Abraham”—the Israel of God—as Jesus of Nazareth (Gal. 3:16b).⁶⁴

He criticizes dispensationalists for giving Israel a major role in the future millennium: “Dispensationalists, even progressives, mistakenly speak of the millennial Israel as having a ‘mediatorial’ role in dispensing the blessings of God to the nations. . . . The identification of Jesus with Israel—as her king, her substitute, and her goal—is everywhere throughout the apostolic understanding of the Old Testament promise.”⁶⁵ He criticizes covenantalists for their use of “replacement theology”: “As with the doctrine of salvation, this tension is resolved not by arguing for a ‘replacement’ of a Jewish nation with a largely Gentile church, but by centering on the head/body relationship between the church and Jesus, the true Israelite.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, he still has no place in his Kingdom program for a special role of national Israel.

Moore disapproves of interpreting Abraham’s land promises to refer to the “spiritual” blessings of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.⁶⁷ He prefers rather to side with Justin Martyr who saw “all the promises to Israel—both material and spiritual—as belonging to Jesus the Israelite—and therefore by legal inheritance to those who are united to Him as His ‘brothers’ (John 20:17, ESV; Heb. 2:11, ESV).”⁶⁸ When the disciples asked Jesus when He would restore the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), according to Moore, Jesus did not dodge their question. Rather, “He is the ‘Immanuel,’ the temple presence of God with the people (Matt. 1:23; John 1:14; 2:19-21).”⁶⁹ National Israel has no future Kingdom, but Jesus does. Moore asks, “What does the resurrected Jesus inherit?” and answers, “The promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Acts 13:32-33). Thus, when dispensationalists speak of the ‘future’ of Israel, they should speak of it in terms of the ‘future’ of Jesus—a future He promises to share with His ‘friends’ (John 15:14-15).”⁷⁰

From the above survey, that Kingdom Theology has no place for referring Abraham’s land promises to a plot of ground on the surface of the present earth is evident. Moore’s case built on the new evangelicalism that arose after World War II is extremely interesting, but its use of Scripture is careless. It is another example of “hopscotch” exegesis, hopping from one text to another, never taking time to

⁶⁴Ibid., 117.

⁶⁵Ibid., 118.

⁶⁶Ibid., 149.

⁶⁷Ibid., 119.

⁶⁸Ibid., 120.

⁶⁹Ibid., 119.

⁷⁰Ibid.

investigate the contextual meaning of each verse cited. His case is primarily lacking in its failure to examine the Gospels carefully to delineate in detail the different ways that Jesus spoke of the Kingdom during His time on earth.

Progressive Dispensationalism

The similarity between Progressive Dispensationalism (hereafter, usually PD) and the covenant premillennialism of George Ladd has frequently been noted.⁷¹ Yet Nichols sees the millennium of PD as far more "Israelitish" than that of Ladd.⁷² In investigating the land promise to Abraham, one must ask, How much more Israelitish than covenant premillennialism is Progressive Dispensationalism? One feature that PD does have in common with the modified covenantal position is its willingness to combine the millennium and the eternal state into one dispensation, speaking of them as two phases of the one, final, future Kingdom.⁷³ What have they done with Israel's land promise?

Apparently, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock merge Gentiles with Israel in Israel's future inheritance:

We can illustrate this progressive dispensational view of the church in the case of Jewish Christians. A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel's future promises. Jewish Christians will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel. Gentile Christians will be joined by saved Gentiles of earlier dispensations. All together, Jews and Gentiles will share the same blessings of the Spirit, as testified to by the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the church of this dispensation. The result will be that all peoples will be reconciled in peace, their ethnic and national differences being no cause for hostility. Earlier forms of dispensationalism, for all their emphasis on the future for Israel, excluded Jewish Christians from that future, postulating the church as a different people-group from Israel and Gentiles.⁷⁴

In its emphasis on only one people of God, PD must make everyone, including Gentiles in the church and saved Gentiles from other dispensations, inheritors of Israel's promises. That does not make for a very "Israelitish" millennium. It rather merges everyone into the inheritance promised to Israel, or else it denies Israel what God had promised her.

From his perspective, covenantalist Vern S. Poythress notes the dilemma of

⁷¹Ibid., 208 n. 126. See also Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R, 1994) 137, who writes, "The forces that their [i.e., progressive dispensationalists'] own observation have set in motion will most likely lead to covenantal premillennialism after the pattern of George E. Ladd."

⁷²Stephen J. Nichols, review of *Progressive Dispensationalism*, by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *TrinJ* 15 (1994):255.

⁷³Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993) 101-2, 116-23.

⁷⁴Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 50.

progressive dispensationalists:

The issue is whether it [i.e., the future “physical kingdom on earth”] is for believing Gentiles also. Do believing Jews at some future point have some distinctive priestly privileges or religious blessings *from which believing Gentiles are excluded*? Does the phrase “for Israel” in actuality mean for Israel and *not* for Gentiles”? Or does it mean, “for Israel and for believing Gentiles also, who inherit such blessings through union with Christ”? Classic dispensationalism insists on the former meaning. Covenant theology insists on the latter.⁷⁵

At this juncture, it appears that Progressive Dispensationalism agrees with covenant theology.

Poythress continues,

Let us be more specific about the implications. Theoretically, one might imagine a situation where, in the future kingdom, Jewish Christians live predominantly in the land of Palestine, whereas Gentile Christians live predominantly elsewhere. Such geographical distinctiveness does not in and of itself create a problem. However, dispensationalists want to find particular religious significance in one special land, the land of Palestine, as distinct from other lands. Canaan undeniably had such significance in the Old Testament period, because, I would argue, it typified the inheritance of the world in Christ (Rom. 4:13; Heb. 11:16).⁷⁶

Apparently, PD again falls into the same position as covenant theology. Poythress does not distinguish between the millennium and the eternal state. Neither do Bock and Blaising, but George Ladd does.

Covenant Theology has no place for Israel’s inheriting the land that God promised to Abraham. Neither does PD, apparently. The response of PD to the land-promise issue is either silence or a mixture. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum has sought information from PD advocates regarding their understanding of God’s land covenant with Israel (Deut 29:1–30:20), and has found nothing.⁷⁷ Blaising and Bock view the land covenant as part of the Mosaic Covenant.⁷⁸

Robert Saucy discusses the land promise extensively as part of the Abrahamic Covenant, but is inconsistent in his application of it.⁷⁹ He expands the “seed” promise to Abraham to include all those in union with Christ.⁸⁰ He then ties

⁷⁵Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 135.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁷“The Land Covenant,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2005) 96-97.

⁷⁸Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 142-43.

⁷⁹Ron J. Bigalke Jr., *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis* 53.

⁸⁰Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progresssive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 44.

the land promise to the seed promise as a land needing occupants.⁸¹ From that point, he develops extensively the position that the land promise must refer to the geographical territory originally promised to Abraham.⁸² In concluding his discussion of the land, he writes, "Thus the land aspect of the Abrahamic promise retains validity in the New Testament. . . . There is no evidence that the promise of the land has been either completely fulfilled historically or reinterpreted to mean a symbol of heaven or the blessing of spiritual life in general."⁸³ Yet he then goes on to say, "The spiritual position of being 'in Christ' in no way cancels out the reality of a real material universe, which is also the inheritance of the believer with Christ."⁸⁴ What is the land, then? Is it what God promised to Abraham, or is it the whole earth? Who are the "seed" of Abraham who will inherit the land? Abraham's physical descendants or all who are in Christ?

At best, PD sends a mixed message regarding the land promised to Abraham. At worst, it denies the fulfillment of the promise altogether.

Dispensationalism

Political Impact of Dispensationalism

The position of Dispensationalism in regard to the land promise made to Abraham has been summed up as follows:

The Abrahamic Covenant, and the sub-covenants of land, seed and blessing, is fulfilled in the thousand-year kingdom period. The Jews will be in the land as fulfillment of the promise. The clear biblical teaching is that the Son of David will be reigning and ruling as promised on the literal throne of David in Jerusalem. Jews and Gentiles, who enter the kingdom in their natural bodies are redeemed and blessed by the earlier work of Christ on the cross.⁸⁵

When God promised Abraham that his seed would inherit *this* land, Abraham understood God's words the same way that Adam understood God's words in Gen 2:16-17: "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die." In a sinless environment, Adam accurately transmitted what God had told him to Eve, because Eve's response to the serpent reflected such accuracy: "From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat from

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid., 45, 47-48, 50-56.

⁸³Ibid., 56-57.

⁸⁴Ibid., 57.

⁸⁵Ron J. Bigalke Jr. and Mal Couch, "The Relationship Between Covenants and Dispensations," in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis* 36

it or touch it, or you will die” (Gen 3:3). In a sinless environment, Eve’s repetition of God’s instructions to her husband could not have been a distortion or an exaggeration. She did not report verbatim what Moses recorded in Gen 2:16-17, but probably chose words from a more extended discussion between God and Adam that was not recorded. She committed no sin of misrepresentation at this point; her sin came a little later when she acted on the serpent’s suggestion in eating the forbidden fruit. Before that suggestion, no distorted interpretation had occurred. The first hermeneutical error in understanding what God had said came in the serpent’s suggestion: “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:4-5). The serpent imposed a certain preunderstanding of the words on Eve, perhaps something like “God just gave you life by creating you; surely He will not take it away.” Unfortunately, Eve and Adam took his bait and the sad result is history.

At that point in history, national Israel had no existence. National Israel came into existence the moment that God said to Abram, “Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father’s house, To the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3). After Abram had obeyed, God became more specific regarding the land: “To your descendants [lit, seed] I will give this land” (Gen 12:7a).

How was Abram to understand God’s words? They were plain enough. Historically, the geographical location was quite specific in this and later wordings of the land promise. Dispensationalism interprets the words as God intended them and as Abram understood them. No typology. No spiritualizing. No symbolism. No preunderstanding of how the words must fit into a system of theology. No reading back into the words a later special revelation. To take the words in any other sense than what God intended and Abram understood is a distortion. Though Abram’s environment was no longer sinless, God was still perfectly capable of communicating clearly. He cannot lie and must be taken at His word. Abram understood God correctly, and so Israel became a nation chosen by God in possession of a particular plot of land on the present earth’s surface.

Poythress, who argues for a heavy use of typology in the OT, would say a conclusion as to how God intended his promise to Abraham must be suspended because Scripture is not that precise and often includes ambiguities that are only clarified later when Scripture is fulfilled. He explains,

In particular, does he [i.e., Ryrie] think that the significance of an Old Testament type may go beyond what can be seen in the original Old Testament context? Some, perhaps most, interpreters with an orthodox view of biblical inspiration would say yes. The argument would be as follows. God knows the end from the beginning. Therefore, as the divine author of the Bible he can establish a relation between the type and its antitypical fulfillment. Since the fulfillment comes only later, the type becomes richer than what is available by ordinary means in Old Testament times. In other words the divine intention for a type may, in certain cases, be richer than what one can obtain by grammatical-

historical interpretation. Such richness, properly conceived, will not *violate* grammatical-historical meaning, or go contrary to it. The richness will arise from the added significance to the type when it is compared to the fulfillment.⁸⁶

Poythress is mistaken in saying that if “the type becomes richer than what is available by ordinary means in Old Testament times,” it does not violate grammatical-historical meaning. He is wrong. Grammatical-historical meaning is set by the historical context in which words are spoken, never to be changed or added to. Adding meaning to the promises God made to Abraham or changing that meaning does violate the grammatical-historical meaning just as the serpent added and/or changed the meaning of the words God spoke to Adam. Poythress' explanation assumes that the promises to Abraham were ambiguous and needed clarification, which they were not and did not.

God's land covenant in Deut 29:1–30:20 with Israel reaffirmed the land promise that God made to Abraham.⁸⁷ The land promise to Abraham receives confirmation throughout the OT (e.g., Deut 30:5; Isa 27:12-13; Jer 31:1-5, 11-12; Ezek 20:42-44; 28:25-26; 34:25-26; 36:8-11, 28-38; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-15).⁸⁸ Even PD advocate Robert Saucy concurs that the NT continues to imply the validity of the land promise though it does not do so as explicitly as the OT.⁸⁹ As noted earlier, New Covenant theologian Reisinger agrees regarding the OT focus on the land promise, but disagrees regarding the NT.⁹⁰ By reading the NT back into the OT—specifically Heb 4:11—he takes the land promise of the OT to be a pledge of something greater, the spiritual rest promised to the believer.⁹¹ To say that the land promise had already been fulfilled in Joshua's day (Josh 21:43-45)⁹² will not suffice because in David's day, a long time later, fulfilment of the land promise was still future (1 Chron 16:13-18).⁹³

If PD and New Covenant Theology agree that in the OT the land promise pertained to precisely the geographical territory that God stipulated to Abraham, that confirms the case for Dispensationalism. The question then turns on whether the NT ever reversed that promise or spiritualized it into something else. Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology, Kingdom Theology, and PD—PD for the most part—say that it did. Dispensationalism would reply that nothing of the sort

⁸⁶Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 90-91.

⁸⁷Fruchtenbaum, “Land Covenant” 88.

⁸⁸Even PD proponent Robert Saucy is specific in noting the continuation of the land promise to Abraham throughout the rest of the OT (Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* 47-48).

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 50-57.

⁹⁰Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* 39-40. See also n. 41 above.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 87, 91-92; cf. also Michael W. Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant” (accessed 7/12/06) 9.

⁹²Adams, “In Defense of the New Covenant” 8-9.

⁹³Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds* 90-91.

occurred. From Matthew through Revelation God's promises to Israel hold true. The only question is, Which generation of Israel will receive those promises? Certainly not the generation alive when Christ became a man, came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him (John 1:11). Christ Himself told that generation, "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt 21:43). He spoke of a future generation of Israel who will repent and fully embrace Him as the Messiah.

When He offered His contemporary, fellow-Jews the fulfillment of Abraham's promises, they resisted Him, causing Him to broaden His offer of spiritual blessings to the rest of humanity. Paul notes this transition in beneficiaries: "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous. Now if their transgression is riches for the world and their failure is riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!" (Rom 11:11-12).

When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, He worded His explanation of the cup to include not just Israel, but all people: "for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28); "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20); "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor 11:25). That Jesus by this statement expanded the group to be benefitted by the redemptive aspects of His sacrifice is evident from two features. (1) Jesus said His blood of the covenant—the new covenant, of course—was shed for *many*, not just for Israel. The adjective *πολλῶν* has a "comprehensive sense" in Matt 26:28 just as it does in Matt 20:28.⁹⁴ It carries the force of "all" the same as *πάντων* does in 1 Tim 2:6 (cf. Rom 5:15, 19). In wording His statement this way, Jesus thereby extended certain benefits of the new covenant beyond the boundaries of Israel. (2) Paul quoted Jesus' words instituting the Lord's Supper in writing to a predominantly Gentile church (1 Cor 11:25). Here again is another indication of the extension of certain benefits beyond the scope of national Israel. The applicability of that to Gentiles in the church indicated that Jesus was extending those benefits to others who are not Israelites. The extended benefits of the new covenant were not all-encompassing, but rather pertained only to the forgiveness of sins. Jesus never extended the land benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant to anyone else. Those belonged exclusively to the generation of national Israel who at His second coming will embrace Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah.

That fulfillment of the land promises to Israel remains in place is evident. A future generation of Israel who repent and receive Jesus as the Messiah will enjoy the benefits of that land-promise provision of the Abrahamic Covenant. What then does the land promise have to do with United States foreign policy toward Israel? As noted above, non-dispensational writers have granted that dispensational eschatology

⁹⁴W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997) 3:95, 474; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol 33B of *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1995) 583, 773.

bears much of the responsibility for this aspect of U. S. policy.

Social Impact Added

The social impact of Dispensationalism has also been noticeable even though critics have been slow to acknowledge it. Weber does acknowledge the social exploits of dispensationalists during the twentieth century in their attempts to solve social ills.⁹⁵ He classifies these efforts as “giving the devil as much trouble as we can” before Christ returns.⁹⁶

Jim Owen has a much more extensive listing of dispensational benevolent exploits in society during the 1930s and 1940s.⁹⁷ Regarding Owen's work, mainstream historian Richard V. Pierard writes, “All in all, the most valuable part of the book is his detailed descriptions of what fundamentalists actually were doing in the political and social realms in the 1930s and 1940s. He forces us to reconsider our assumptions about their alleged non-involvement and to nuance our assessments of their work. They may have been doing the right things for the wrong reasons, but they certainly were not passive or indifferent to human needs.”⁹⁸

Owen's book tries in two ways to dispel the picture of fundamentalism as socially and politically isolated from contemporary problems of the 1930s and 1940s. He states,

First, sufficient evidence is offered to show that an important segment of historic fundamentalism was vigorously active in seeking to help alleviate the distress and poverty that attended the Great Depression, and was *anything* but politically moribund. . . . Second, because many historic fundamentalists were involved socially and politically, historians must be questioned as to why they have allowed this important segment of historic fundamentalist's history to be ignored, denied, misinterpreted, reinterpreted or downplayed so that the contributions they did make are never given due consideration.⁹⁹

In the 367 pages of his book, Owen gives numerous examples of “historic fundamentalists” who during the eras after the Great Depression and during World War II served people both socially and spiritually, by tending to their physical and emotional needs as well as their need for a personal relationship with God. He closes his discussion on the following note:

[This study] is a corrective to what has been written about (or perhaps it would be better

⁹⁵Weber, *Road to Armageddon* 56-59.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 54.

⁹⁷Jim Owen, *The Hidden History of the Historic Fundamentalists, 1933-1948: Reconsidering the Historic Fundamentalists' Response to the Upheavals, Hardships, and Horrors of the 1930s and 1940s* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2004).

⁹⁸“Foreword” to *The Hidden History of the Historic Fundamentalists, 1933-1948* x. Pierard is Professor of History Emeritus, Indiana State University and Resident Scholar at Gordon College.

⁹⁹Owen, *Hidden History* xxiv. [emphasis in original]

to say not written about) the historic fundamentalists hither-to-fore. I gladly admit to an agenda—to set the record “straighter” because it has been bent scandalously beyond recognition. However, considering the political correctness of our day (yes, even in evangelical circles) I may be playing Don Quixote to the nearest postmodern windmill. One can still hope, though, that a study such as this will challenge historians to a greater diligence in their research and a greater balance (fairness) in their interpretations. After all, it is the historian’s task, as much as is possible, to help us first know those who came before, before we construct self-satisfying caricatures of them.¹⁰⁰

Dispensationalism’s Role in the Public Square Summarized

The discussion above has shown that in at least one realm Dispensationalism has had a far greater impact on the public square than Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology, Kingdom Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism. As acknowledged by all, it has substantially influenced U. S. foreign policy, particularly in friendliness toward and support for Israel, and in its insistence on the fulfillment of God’s biblical land promises to Abraham. The influence of other theological systems in this realm has been next to negligible. Proponents of the dispensational system have also actively participated in projects of social as well as spiritual efforts to meet the needs of those in need. Yet Dispensationalism has consistently received a bad reputation at the hands of other evangelicals because of its alleged isolation and non-participation in current affairs. Hopefully, Dispensationalism’s antagonists will soon face reality and grant the system its deserved role of importance in the ongoing welfare of the United States of America and the world.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 365.