

## **THE POSTMODERN ABANDONMENT OF ISRAEL**

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**“..men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do...” --1 Chronicles 12:32**

**“You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times...” --Matthew 16:3b**

**“An understanding of Christian prophecy will be more needed, not less, in the next few years, as ‘signs of the times’ are read by everyone under the**

**impending deadline of a millennium (2000)”**

**--Professor Garry Wills, Northwestern University, *Under God*, 24**

The whole idea of predictive prophecy has always been under attack - fulfilled prophecy is too powerful an apologetic for Satan and his minions to tolerate. The Enlightenment project was predicated on the notion that human progress is inevitable and that heaven is on earth and virtually reachable now through human genius.<sup>1</sup> All kinds of prophetic futurism are mocked by the realized eschatologies of C.H. Dodd, N.T. Wright, Graeme Goldsworthy<sup>2</sup> and the varied kinds of preterism. Contemporary evangelical aberrations like “Openness of God” theology are engulfed by Alfred North Whitehead’s “process philosophy” and deny that God knows the future and like ourselves is limited to projections of probability. The so-called “emergent church” movement is all over the map but generally dismisses

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<sup>1</sup> Crane Brinton, *The Shaping of the Modern Mind* (New York: Mentor, 1953) 142. Builds his case on Carl Becker’s *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*.

<sup>2</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 2000) argues that “ALL (his) prophecy was fulfilled in the gospel event at the first coming of Jesus,” 93. Really?

eschatology.<sup>3</sup> This is a splash at the shallow end of the pool. The “two covenant” idea regarding the Jews and the Church has always had some devotees but now Replacement Theology or Supersessionism is sweeping through evangelicalism like a plague of locusts. These are all more subtle or less subtle attacks on Biblical

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supernaturalism, intended or unintended.

Classical dispensationalism in its continuity with the early church’s insistence on the imminent and premillennial return of Christ (and its implicate a two stage parousia) has been built on the validity of predictive prophecy and an effort to maintain a consistent hermeneutic. “The powers of the age to come” have begun to break into this present evil age (Hebrews 6:5) but history is moving in linear fashion toward what our Lord termed “the consummation of the age.” Harold O.J. Brown argues incisively that J.A. Bengel’s Wurtembergian pietism with its Biblicism and its millennialism was a major force in combatting the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> B.H. Carroll of Southwestern Seminary maintained that premillennialists don’t become modernists. The issues are drawn here and the stakes are high.

Classical dispensationalism has championed the clear distinction between Israel and the Church, on exegetical, theological, historical and logical grounds. This is more than asserting that God has something special for Israel at the end of the age (“as any fool can plainly see” to use L’l Abner’s vernacular) - amillennialists like Augustine and Martyn Lloyd-Jones

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<sup>3</sup> Brian Maclaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Overtly pro-Palestinian.

<sup>4</sup> Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 392.

conceded that; the postmillennialist Charles Hodge said Romans 11 could not be avoided. We believe that Scripture drives us to proclaim a distinct national and landed future for ethnic or geo-political Israel at the end of the age: her rebuilding the temple, her conversion and world-wide witness.

In more recent years, a hydra-headed, many-pronged movement has arisen which would tear Romans 11 and all relevant passages out of Scripture and with its

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mounting ascendancy and increasingly pervasive influence must be carefully examined and I would do so with particular reference to postmodernism's abandonment of Israel.

### **I. THE POSTMODERN ASSAULT ON TRUTH**

In my view, postmodernism incorporates key elements of Enlightenment rationalism such as secularism, narcissism, relativism and pluralism. But like romanticism earlier it has found the rationalism of modernism sterile and unsatisfying. That it has lost confidence in human reason as sufficient has caused some premature elation among some among us who celebrate postmodernism. That is like rejoicing that Stalin won over Hitler, but one oppression and tyranny are only replacing another. In jettisoning rationalism, pomo also throws overboard rationality (which is an essential aspect of the imago dei). In denying objective truth and any absolute moral values, pomo makes human beings simply social constructs. Postmodernism climaxes the Nietzschean crusade to banish God from human thought. Its denial of any universal truth is fatal.

Pomo denies objective history - there is no such reality as a world-view. There is no connecting of the dots. There is no over-arching meta-narrative, no remedies, no hope.<sup>5</sup> This creates an incredible quagmire. At the bottom line pomo destroys text and Scripture becomes like Aesop's Fables. Reader response is everything (and originality and plagiarism become meaningless). Pomo is presently the engine force driving change in our culture at the highest levels and it is having a permeating effect. Yet - beware. There is still Enlightenment rationalism (modern science), New

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Age ideology, old-fashioned romanticism, post World War II existentialism. The average preacher is still preaching to 75% or more of the congregation who are still very much traditional hearers. Pomo is the trend, it is the tilt and the tendency enervating our culture. It is another log on the fire of infidelity. When implied or applied, it bears an immense impact on the validity of our claim for Israel's future.

## **II. THE TRUTH WE LOVE: GOD'S COVENANT FIDELITY TO ISRAEL**

Our whole case for a distinctive future for ethnic Israel is based theologically on our view of the character of a covenant-keeping God and our commitment to historical-grammatical exegesis and a concern for the human author's intention in the writing of divine revelation. In other words, God meant what he said and both the judgments on Israel and the promised blessings are to be literally understood. Not only does the Old Testament commit to Israel's

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<sup>5</sup> Heath White, *Postmodernism 101* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006). On the whole a helpful handbook.

survival, but her eternal landedness and her possession of and prosperity in that land (these last contingent on her obedience), her return to the land and her conversion and world-wide witness.

Neither John the Baptist nor the Lord Jesus redefined kingdom promise nor did they transfer it or cancel it for Israel. Here is a world-view and in the face of the denial of even the possibility of such a meta-narrative, we cannot surrender. Whatever or whenever alien ideologies have been propounded, our contextualization of the message cannot be a capitulation or an accommodation. Liberation Theology maintained we had to accommodate Marxism - and where is Marxism today? We are steadfastly pre-modern and fault Rene Descartes and John Locke for making no appeal to supernatural revelation. Like Kant's denigration of the cognitive, this would sound the death knell for Biblical faith and we would become apostate.

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Look at the evidence on which we stand: Jesus never countermanded or concluded the hope of Israel. In fact, he would "save his people from their sin" (Matthew 1:21, in its strict contextual reference, describing Israel). An ultimate evangelization by a remnant in the end-time will take place "going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:23). If Israel is now the church, by the way, who is Ishmael today? The promised future ministry of Elijah (Malachi 4:5) becomes critical as the Lord Jesus indicates John the Baptist could be Elijah "if" they were willing to hear him (Matthew 11:14) but that in fact John the Baptist had been rejected in the Elijah role (Matthew 17:11) and "the restoration of all things"

had then to be deferred. I don't see how we can make sense out of these passages without the postponed kingdom concept which has commonly been accepted among us. Let's hold on to it. This matter of "the restoration," i.e. the Theocratic Kingdom and its deferral is a critical piece of evidence.

Later Jesus refers "to the renewal of all things" (Matthew 19:28, NIV) and how his apostles would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." So, has God obliterated and superseded ethnic Israel? He indicates that the Jewish temple would be left desolate - "for I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Matthew 23:39). A future generation of Jews would "see him again." He speaks to his listeners and by prophetic telescoping reaches forward to an end-time population. Similarly the Olivet Discourse has at points a distinctly Jewish cast ("not on the Sabbath") and a testimony which the end-time Jewish remnant would render (Matthew 24:14). None other than Dr. Luke affirmed that "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (21:24). Something in the end-time. At

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the judgment of the living nations at Christ's return in power and glory, at issue will be treatment of the Savior's "brothers" (Matthew 25:34-35) out of great tribulation.

The book of Acts does not admit as the last word that "Israel has failed."

Indeed

the kingdom would be "restored" to Israel (1:6) and again, Christ would remain in heaven "until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he

promised long ago through his holy prophets” (3:21). The rebuilding of “David’s fallen tent” and its restoration will be effected in order “that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things that have been known for ages” (15:16-18). God called Jonah a second-time.

Romans 11 is a clear passage clearly showing that while the natural branches were cut off, God has not rejected his people (11:1). They will yet find restoration which is “life from the dead” (11:15, clearly building on Ezekiel 36 and 37). The natural branches will “be grafted into their own olive tree” (11:24). This is not simply Jewish individuals baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ. Indeed “Israel’s hardening in part” (as a nation) will continue only “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in...and so all Israel will be saved” (in a great final people movement to the Savior) in fulfillment of the promised New Covenant with God’s ancient people. Israel’s distinctive identity is sub-merged in this church age (1 Corinthians 12:13), and in the church age all believers “partake of the root and fatness of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17), and as such beneficiaries arrogance and condescension toward Israel are most unfitting and unbecoming (11:18, 21). God’s call to them is “irrevocable” (11:28). The natural branches are not made into wild olive branches. Ethnic identification is not altogether and forever superseded.

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Even in the face of the inclusive nature of the church in this age, there is the “promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled” (Acts 26:7) and James writes

to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (1:1). Not once in the fifty four references to Israel in the New Testament is the church called Israel - the point-of- reference in each case being ethnic Israel even in Galatians 6:16 where Paul speaks of “the Israel of God.” There is no reason this is not a reference to ethnic Israel as are all of the other references. Even in the gospel dispensation Israel has a certain identifiable priority - “to the Jew first” (Romans 1:16, 2:10) - incomprehensible unless Israel has a special status in the on-going plan of God. And when John in the Apocalypse describes “how every eye will see him” in his coming in power and glory to set up the Kingdom, “all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him” but special mention is made of “even those who pierced him” (1:7). How could it be argued that “God has rejected his people? BY NO MEANS”? (11:1).

In the Book of Revelation we have “the saints of God” (8:3-4, 11:18, 13:7,10, 14:12, 16:6, 17:6) who are to be seen as Jews who are saved in the Tribulation and Gentiles who are saved largely through their witness (the antecedent reference must be Daniel 7:18, 22,25 where the “saints” must be seen as Israel). I do not believe the church is to be found on earth in the tribulation (cf 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 5:9). The church age is detailed in Revelation 2-3, the twenty four elders are in heaven (chapters 4-5)<sup>6</sup> during the Tribulation (chapters 6-19). The true church which enters God’s open door of service (3:8) is promised extrication from “the hour of trial” (3:10) and enters the open door of heaven (4:1).

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<sup>6</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 190. Tenney holds the 24 elders represent Old Testament saints and the Church - they have crowns and reign with Christ.



Thus the church as such is a non-factor on earth during the penultimate rebellion of the unholy trinity, since the “Man of sin” sets himself up to be worshipped in the temple which can only mean that a substantial “restoration” has taken place (2

Thessalonians 2:7-9). Israel has not disappeared or been absorbed in the church, but is a primary player and actor on the stage of tribulation trauma as described in Revelation. The 144,000 are sealed “from all of the tribes of Israel” (7:1-8). They are not the Seventh Day Adventists or the elite of the Jehovah’s Witnesses elect or the church (as George Ladd and so many other surmise). They are Jews and the vanguard of “all Israel” that shall be saved. Through their witness “a great multitude” comes “out of the great tribulation” from all the nations (7:9-17). The conversion of the 144,000 is I believe described in 11:1-13, where in response to the Elijah ministry predicted in Malachi 4 (the two witnesses), they are converted. Inhabitants of Jerusalem “give glory to God” (11:13) which is repentance and conversion language. As represented in 14:1-5, the 144,000 are the “firstfruits” of a great harvest. In chapter 12 Satan makes war against the woman who gives birth to a Son (this woman is Israel, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given,” Isaiah 9:6). The dragon greatly enraged also makes “war against the rest of her offspring” (her spiritual progeny, saved Gentiles), many of whom will be martyred because they will not take the mark of the beast (12:17).

We must remember also that Armageddon which figures largely in the end-time finale is placed in the land promised to Abraham. The New Jerusalem descending (the home of the church) exists in relation to the earth (the home of restored Israel) like a gigantic space module. Even in the millennium and in eternity future there will not be a fusion of Israel and the Church. Yet fascinatingly on the gates of the New

Heaven are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. To the last page of Scripture geo-political Israel survives and thrives as an identifiable entity. No replacement theology or supersession here. And the reason for this is anchored in the very nature and character of God, as Malachi 3:6 states so lucidly: "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. And indeed they shall return physically to the land and spiritually to our Lord Jesus.

These truths are a rich corpus and are precious to us as to many before - Joachim of Fiore, the Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic, the continental Pietists, to Lutherans like George Peters and J.A. Seiss, to Presbyterians like James Brooks, Donald Grey Barnhouse and James Montgomery Boice, to Methodists like William E. Blackstone, to Congregationalists like C.I. Scofield and D.L. Moody, to Baptists like W.B. Riley, W.A. Criswell and Adrian Rogers, to Plymouth Brethren like John Nelson Darby and Walter Scott, to Christian and Missionary Alliance like A.W. Tozer, Anglicans like Griffith Thomas and on through that constellation of editors, teachers like A.C. Gaebelain, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Wilbur M. Smith and John Walvoord. Like every revealed truth in Holy Writ, this truth is under postmodern assault - "they have taken away our Lord." We must not and shall not give way. The fact is that Jesus is alive and he is going to win!

### **III.A STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH POSTMODERNISM**

Beyond the faithful exposition of the truths of the Blessed Hope and God's purpose for his ancient covenant people, I would offer the following observations:

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1) as God's people have withstood all kinds of spiritual assault in past ages, we cannot expect to be exempt. But, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" As mainline denominations have apostatized in Europe and North America, the fast-growing Anglican churches in Africa, for instance (where Nigeria will have 500,000,000 people before this century is over, if the Lord tarries) through their leaders are saying to the West: in your denial of Scripture, your radical feminism and your espousal of the gay rights agenda, you are dying. Wake up! Liberalism lost out by accommodating Enlightenment categories and evangelicalism will lose out if it mistakenly supposes that cozying up to postmodernism and giving way is the answer. This is to court total disaster. We shall not win people to Christ by aping the culture which is in decadence and a serious moral free fall. We must not be diverted from the Great Commission by secondary involvements which have validity and value but which can consume our attention and our energy. The current observable horizontalizing of evangelicals is undercutting the primacy of the supernatural Gospel. The Gospel is more than a cultural artifact - it is God's power for salvation!

2) systems come and go. We must not panic and become spastic before formidable adversaries. Anti-cognitive movements have arisen - even in Greek philosophy we have the cynics and the sophists - but intermittently in

the history of God's people grave threats to the faith have arisen. Gertrude Himmelfarb has pointed out that already in Europe we have post-postmodernism which insists that today's postmodernism is not sufficiently activist on social and justice issues. 9/11 has been hard on postmodernists. Again, the two thirds world is not pomo. Heath White argues that postmodernism may mutate.<sup>7</sup> Who can say what course all of this will

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take - trying to get hold of postmodernism is like a hen trying to lay an egg on an escalator. It is all over the map. It may well collapse under the weight of its studied ambiguities. Such subjectivity quickly lands you on the reefs and shoals of nihilism.

3)postmodernism has nothing to say to anti-Semitism, one of the most virulent tools which Satan has. Stanley Fish, one of the doyens of postmodernism was pressed by Larry King: "Do you believe that the Holocaust was evil?" He stuttered and stammered but would not commit himself. But can people live in this suspended animation indefinitely? Even Fish in publishing his new book on John Milton opined that he hoped that people would now finally understand what John Milton really meant. Richard Rorty the pomo guru just retired from Stanford has made it clear that he wants to live his life by the Golden Rule and the second table of the Ten Commandments. Pomo is an unsatisfactory solution - it is flawed and flat. This quintessential moral

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<sup>7</sup> op. cit. 158. Through it all Augustinian and Thomistic metaphysical realism has survived and thrived.

relativism is in fact incoherent. It is nonsense. It is doomed although it may inflict incredible damage before it collapses.

4)we must beware of prophetic over-reach. We have a strong case which is vertically consistent and horizontally fits the facts. Let us be cautious in claiming too much, too fast beyond what Scripture really says. Greater Israel as promised to Abram - “from the great river of Egypt to the Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18) and is on the facade of the Knesset in Jerusalem - is millennial in its ultimate scope. “Land for peace” is dangerous, in my view, but Begin negotiated the return of the Sinai to Egypt; Sharon/Olmert the evacuation from Gaza. Abraham although promised the land insisted on paying the Hittites for the burial place of Sarah (Genesis 23:3ff). A defensible Israel is in everyone’s best interest. Petro-politics and the growth of

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Muslim population in the west jeopardizes backing Israel even in our own country. Yet Islamo-fascism is terrifying many thoughtful people around the world. Israeli politics are complex and intricate. We should be very careful about asserting that Katrina was God’s punishment on the United States for pressuring Israel on Gaza. Israel was divided and Sharon won every voting round for his policy. We must not be like the “friends” of Job who were so cock-sure they knew why Job suffered.

Pat Robertson feels God sent the stroke upon Sharon because he gave away Gaza.

Woodrow Wilson also had a serious stroke after backing the Balfour Declaration in 1917. What then was the meaning of Tsunami? Or of the Pakistani earthquake which killed 75,000 in a country which has gone out

on a limb to cooperate with the United States when that has not been at all popular? How finely can we ascribe causation to natural disasters - can we infallibly read the mind of God? In dialoguing with students inundated with pomo propaganda and under great pressure, we should heed Peter's words: "Be always ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15). A case in point would be the recent fulminations of the formerly conservative Kevin Phillips in a recent book.<sup>8</sup> He argues that one third of America now believes in the Rapture and provide the power-base which is pushing American foreign policy in the Middle East. A bit over-stated but of considerable interest.

Let us all beware of prophetic over-reach. In what lies ahead, Israel will need faithful friends which does not mean endorsement of everything she does. She too can

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egregiously miscalculate as the recent military action in Lebanon made abundantly clear. There will be dark days ahead for Israel and her friends. But even the UPUSA has backed down from divestment.

5)without remedies or hope, postmodernistic camp followers may be susceptible to the proclamation of the hope we have through the resurrection and in the second advent of our Lord. People cannot live

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<sup>8</sup> Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Viking, 2006). Interviewed, *Jerusalem Post*, May 19-25, 2006, 27.

without hope very long. Experiments show that even rats need hope. We preach faith - we preach love. I am asking ministerial gatherings around the country and abroad: why aren't we preaching hope? 62% of the American people say they believe in the Second Coming and 42% believe Christ could come back in their lifetime. But what do they really know about it? Since pomos are allergic to history and to meta-narrative, we have something to offer. Heath White reminds us that for pre-moderns, texts have meaning; for moderns, texts have multiple meanings; for postmoderns texts have no meaning.

What do they value? Literature is their "master-discipline." They love word games and metaphor.<sup>9</sup> Although their literary deconstruction utterly macerates text, let us tell the story of a small but ancient people. Let us share their age-long hope of returning to their homeland and something of the agonies and suffering of their pilgrimage. Narrative never establishes truth - it can only illustrate it, but this can be the hook. Let us find occasions with young and old to winsomely tell the story of God's ancient and dispersed people and of their new homeland and their struggles.

As the Gulf Stream is not overcome by the ocean, so the Jews have remained distinct and apart and so they always will be - "He who appoints the sun to shine by

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day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar--the Lord Almighty is his name: 'only if these

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<sup>9</sup> I am dependent on HeathWhite at points in advancing this proposal. I think he is right on this.

decrees vanish from my sight,' declares the Lord, 'will the descendants of Isarael ever cease to be a nation before me'" (Jeremiah 31:35-36).

I am a confessed opssimist. I am a short-range pessimist but a long-term optimist. I do not believe we are going to save our culture or transform the world. Tikkun olam or "fixing the world" is not on God's agenda in this age. The tares and the wheat grow together until the end. "Few there be who find it..." God wants people to be saved, including the pomo-imprisoned. And we have hope - a hope that will never disappoint - hope for Israel, hope for the church, hope for this old planet, the hope of eternal life, the blessed hope of Christ's translation of his bridal church. Let us sound the message of hope in an increasingly hopeless age. Maranatha! The Lord is coming!