

Part Two: Restoring the Context

Introduction

In our last unit, we began an examination of the roots of the apocalyptic perspective that inspired and gave urgency to the apostolic proclamation and witness. We observed that the apocalyptic structure of first century Jewish belief grew naturally out of the Old Testament concept of the day of the Lord. We pointed out that the church of the last days, armed and animated by a restoration of this perspective, will once more, in the face of the most prolific fulfillment of prophecy in history, “prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (Rev 10:11).

We noted that contrary to popular teaching on the rapture, the church’s last testimony to the nations is carried out during a final worldwide persecution (“until the complete number of their fellow servants and brothers were killed, as they had been” Rev 6:9-11). Just as our Lord lived beneath the shadow of a coming “hour,” so too is the church destined to an ultimate hour of testing and purification (Dan 11:35; 12:10; Rev 12:11; 19:7).¹ This perspective saves the church from a static “all things continue” attitude, and imbues it with a sense of imminent expectancy of both hope and sober preparation for the fiery trial. The very word ‘apostle’ implies a dynamic of urgency as one that is ‘sent.’ Indeed, a church that is ‘apostolic’ moves under a prophetic urgency of stewardship and mission to prepare the way of the Lord. An apostolic church is a church that is in decisive forward motion because the time is short; the hour is ‘at hand.’

However presently secular, and insensible to biblical categories, Jews throughout the nations will be confronted with a mounting body of invincible prophetic evidence that is visibly attested in current world events, and contemporary Jewish experience. The increasing incidence of anti-Semitic outbreaks, and international outrage towards Israel and the Jew will give increasing authority and cogency to the church’s prophetic

testimony of a soon coming time of Jacob's trouble that will sift the Jew through the nations, and test all nations through the "controversy of Zion" (Isa 34:8; Jer 25:31).²

This is why the church must not shrink from confronting Israel with the evidence of prophecy, and of history's witness to the judgment of the covenant (Deut 28-32), regardless of its current state of biblical literacy. The witness of the prophetic Word, and the life that points to that witness, is still the only divinely sanctioned means of evangelism. The lack of Jewish biblical literacy only calls for the church's greater responsibility to educate itself in those critical themes that touch God's own witness and appeal to the erring nation, namely covenant and prophecy. We may be sure of increased opportunity to present that witness as contemporary events compel Jewish consideration of the biblical categories of covenant and prophecy, of judgment and salvation.

The vexing problem of the land, and particularly the city of Jerusalem, will test, not only the nations, but also the church in the nations. God's final appeal to the nations is the prophetic testimony of His divine sovereignty in history as interpreted in the context of Israel's covenants, and reflected in the deepening Mid-East crisis. Apart from this covenantal context, the Mid-East crisis is a meaningless accident of history, explained only in terms of religious and nationalistic aspirations. It is remarkable that this is what most of world Christendom believes. There is tremendous blindness concerning the prophetic significance of the modern state of Israel, even among earnest evangelicals.

How can the church (let alone the secular powers), be expected to ascribe prophetic significance to a modern unbelieving state? What claim can unsaved Jewish people have to the land when even throughout the Old Testament period; possession of the land was conditional on covenant obedience? After all, isn't the covenant that God initiated with Abraham now completely fulfilled in Christ and the creation of the church, the one new

¹ Significantly, the church's final hour of testing stands in remarkable parallel to Jesus' ministry to Israel of an equal 3 ½ year period.

² All of the Old Testament (history and prophecy) gives witness that the nations are held accountable for their treatment of the chosen people both in and out of the land, whether in or out of covenant favor. A literal reading of prophecy profoundly suggests that the millennial fortunes of nations will be greatly

man, where there is neither Jew nor Greek? From this we can begin to see how deeply this question will test the church in terms of its view of Israel. We will show that the church's view of Israel is only as sound as its view of the covenant, and its own place in it.

How the church perceives its relation to Israel in her increasing international humiliation will greatly determine its own ability to resist the infection of worldwide anti-Semitism. Then will come the ultimate form of the "final solution" as the Antichrist enforces his policy of total extermination of the Jews on all nations. Doubtless the "strong delusion" that is divinely sent on all who do not receive the love of the truth will take an anti-Semitic form (2Thes 2:11-12).

Because the question of Jerusalem will increasingly prove to be the question of world peace and stability, the historically intractable "Jewish problem" will once more challenge the church as well as the nations. The church's own self-understanding will be ultimately tested by its attitude towards Israel. Unless the church has understood its own standing with God as based on the same covenant of electing grace and love that requires and assures the salvation of "all Israel," its equanimity will fail through the ultimate provocation that Israel will become.

Why should it be the church's concern to give God no rest till He makes Jerusalem "a praise in the earth?" (Isa 62:7). Such intercession for so 'earthly' a city is only explainable if there is an unconditional covenant that remains steadfast and sure with those who, despite their present opposition, are nonetheless "beloved for the father's sake," because "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." Why else should the church pray and travail over this city? The only church that will have this heart for Jerusalem is the church that is able to recognize Israel's abiding significance in covenant and prophecy, as pertaining to the kingdom of God on earth. It is one thing to talk of a hidden or spiritual kingdom, and this is true, but the ultimate vindication of God in

impacted by their unconscious treatment of the "despised" (Isa 60:14; Jer 33:24; Ezk 28:24-26) race of wandering "outcasts" (Isa 16:3; 27:13) passing through their midst (see also Mt 25:40, 45).

history awaits the kingdom to be established “on earth as it is in heaven.” In Daniel it is called “the kingdom under the whole heaven” (Dn 7:27). Why? Because the earth is the ‘visible’ scene of opposition, and it is the “putting down” of all opposition within the context of history that the mediatorial kingdom of Christ is destined to accomplish (1Cor 15:24-25). This “literal” approach to prophetic interpretation is called “pre-millennialism,” and is seriously opposed by many evangelical leaders, and lightly dismissed by others. But what will such indifference and opposition mean for the church in the days ahead?

The issue of Jerusalem is the issue of the Davidic covenant, which is an extension of the “unconditional” (Ps 89:19-36; Isa 55:3) promise of a messianic king from the royal line of Judah (Gen 49:10; 2Sam 7:12; Ps 2; Isa 9:6-7; Mic 5:2). Do the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants unconditionally guarantee an everlasting inheritance of physical Jewish lineage in the land and kingdom of Israel? The church’s answer to this question will be decisive in its last day’s outlook and activity. A dispensation of divine requirement is at hand for the world and the church that will turn the age old “Jewish question” into an ultimate question. What for many has remained on the ‘backburners’ of theological hair splitting will soon be required of every believer.

The issue of Jerusalem is the issue of God’s sovereign choice of Jacob, (even before Jacob becomes Israel!). Jerusalem is the issue of the divine sovereignty in history, the rule of God. This is known by the evil ‘rulers’ of this world’s darkness; and it is why they rage against the promise that God’s anointed king will yet rule all nations from Jerusalem (Ps 2). The very name of God is bound up with the fate of this all too earthly city. This is why His “servants take pleasure in her stones, and favor the dust thereof” (Ps 102:14). This is why Nehemiah wept, and why the church that “understands” (Dn 11:33; 12:10) will also travail (Rev 12:2).

Jerusalem is the chosen place of God’s rest, because it signifies the ultimate vindication of His promise and rule. The spiritual liberation of Jerusalem marks the day of God’s open vindication “in the sight of all nations” (Ps 98:2; Isa 26:11; 40:5; 52:10; 62:2 Ezk

39:2; Mic 7:16-20). The millennium of Sabbath rest comes when the crucified “King of the Jews” returns to the place of His rejection to rule all nations from “the city of the great king” (Ps 48:2; Mt 5:35; Ps 132:14; Isa 62:1-7; 66:1; Jer 30:10; Zeph 3:16-17).

Jacob will be embraced in the humiliation and terror of his extremity by a church that understands its own destiny as inextricably bound with his. Indeed, God’s eschatological purpose for the church as a prepared and purified bride (Eph 4:13; Rev 19:7; Dan 12:10) is inextricably linked to His covenant promise concerning the spiritual transformation of the natural born sons of Abraham. This transformation comes as the result of “Jacob’s trouble” (Jer30:7).³

Before we plunge into the issue of covenant and related themes that seem most crucial towards the church’s vision and preparation for last days witness, there is one more preliminary matter that has already seriously compromised the church’s readiness towards Israel. This will in turn explain the pains that we feel must be taken to establish a foundation of context and framework for the enormously significant questions that the church is already beginning to face.

Before we can be what God intends towards Israel, the church itself must be prepared for the unequalled deception that is already presenting itself in certain trends. Although the church has triumphantly weathered many an historic crisis that has tested her to her foundations, and though the ‘gates of hell’ will never ultimately prevail against the “remnant according to the election of grace” (Mt 24:24; Ro 11:5, 7), the church’s greatest test comes with a deception so great as to cause a final “falling away,” a fateful time of ultimate division that will pass throughout all the ranks of professing Christendom (cf. Mt 24:24; 2Thes 2:3; 1Jn 2:18-19). It is sobering to consider that some of the same questions

³ The term ‘Jacob’s trouble’ derives from the terror that the patriarch faced when he knew that his outraged brother Esau was approaching with four hundred armed men (Gen 32:6-31). That night, at the ford Jabbok, Jacob ‘wrestles’ with the angel of the Lord in the dread of almost certain death unless the angel can be constrained to bless him. This he receives, but only after he is ‘touched in the thigh of his strength.’ Through the transformation of this crisis, Jacob’s name is changed to Israel (“a prince having power with God”). From this time, Jacob walks with a limp, symbolic of the end of self-sufficiency, a sign of the weakness and brokenness of the flesh that must attend spiritual transformation and authority.

that will ultimately test all nations already sharply divide opinion among evangelicals. Here is where we must be sure of the ground under our feet, not only for our own spiritual survival, but for all that it may be our privilege to help, because even the elect will only narrowly escape the deception that is coming (Mt 24:24).

It is necessary to remember that the Lord's first response to the disciple's question ("what shall be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?") is warning against unparalleled deception: "Take heed that no man deceive you!" No other theme is so reiterated throughout the balance of the Lord's Olivet prophecy. It is the same urgency observed in Paul when he learns that error is spreading concerning the order of apocalyptic events: "Let no man deceive you by any means!"

A new dispensation⁴ of stewardship (responsibility and accountability) is at hand for the church! A certain fullness of time will bring a convergence of insight and prophetic fulfillment that will shake not only earth, but also the heavens (Hag 2:6-7; Dn 12:4,8-9). This is the time of the church's final travail that climaxes with Michael's eviction of Satan. This event in the heavens sets in motion the final 3 ½ years of great persecution that ushers in the kingdom of God (Rev 12:10; 11:15). It is then that Israel's deliverance is accomplished as "the Lord roars out of Zion" (Ps 14:7; 50:2; 110:2; Joel 3:16; Ro 11:26 with Dan 12:1-2).

[This is simply, and unmistakably, the point of Christ's return, "immediately after the tribulation of those days" (Mt 24:29-31), "at the last trump" (1Cor 15:52) to destroy the man of sin (2Thes 2:8). It is the Day of the Lord; and *nothing is more abundantly revealed in scripture than the time of Israel's final and everlasting deliverance*. The Day of the Lord marks the beginning of Christ's thousand-year reign. "From that day and forward" (Ezk 39:22), or "in that day," is the point after which Israel lies down in safety and none shall make them afraid "anymore" again "forever" in final fulfillment of the covenant. Conditions that are described as proceeding from this point are unequivocally those of the millennial reign of Christ, the goal of the covenant.]

⁴ 'Dispensation' comes from the Greek word 'oikonomia,' hence, the English 'economy.' An example of the term in the New Testament describes the management of a household (Lk 16:2-12). A steward is evaluated according to his faithfulness in the management of a trust, a certain prescribed responsibility. In biblical usage, "a dispensation is an era of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some definite revelation of God's will" (The New Unger's Bible Dictionary).

A dispensation is a stewardship of responsibility that implies a trust and its corresponding requirement. Yet it is not so much that the requirement is new, but that the time of fulfillment and revelation has arrived. This is not to suggest ‘new’ revelation, but rather a deepening understanding and apprehension of what is already “noted in the scripture of truth” (Dn 10:21). It is actually revelation of revelation, and includes nothing that is not verifiable in the prophetic writings (compare Acts 26:22; Ro 16:25-26; 1Pet 1:10-12).⁵ It should be well known that the scripture promises greater insight into Daniel’s sealed vision towards the end (Dn 12:4, 8-9). The hour of fulfillment brings a special dispensation of requirement and urgency that demands decision. Hence, nothing can remain the same.

Because the issue of Israel so thoroughly embodies the great issues of God’s sovereignty in covenant, election, and grace, it also becomes a last day’s expression of the same offense inherent in the gospel. We have from the first suspected that the issue of Israel will not only sift and try the nations, but also the church to its very foundations. Just as the crisis of Israel will refine the church and compel it towards a final stature of maturity that will in turn move the natural branches to jealousy (Ro 11:11), even so will the same crisis prove a sifting mechanism towards exposing and separating the remnant of faith from the ravages of the “great falling away.”

The mystery that constituted Jesus as a “stone of stumbling” to first century Israel will have a yet further fulfillment as the eschatological “rock of offense” that will again confront both Israel (see Isa 28), and a humanistic Christendom that will also stumble because of the same mystery.⁶ Such stumbling by the professing church reveals an

⁵ The Qumran sectarians, the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, also believed that the prophetic writings of the Old Testament concealed apocalyptic secrets that would be revealed to the righteous remnant of the last days. Such ‘revelation’ becomes authoritative interpretation only so far as it manifestly agrees with what is at least implicit in the written text of the Old Testament. This perspective manifestly derives from the community’s preoccupation with the books of Daniel, Habakkuk, and the concept of the “secret of the Lord” in Amos 3:7.

⁶ We speak of the ‘centrality of Israel’ only so far as the revelation of the mystery that concerns Israel reveals and preserves, as nothing else, the centrality of the cross as more than a single historic event. The cross represents the divine pattern that pervades all of redemptive history. “Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?” It is the pattern observed in the Lord’s ‘way’ of

especial blindness since the mystery is now a potentially open secret in contrast to its pre-Pentecostal status as the mystery hid in other ages (Eph 3:5; Ro 11:25; Co 1:26). Still, it remains hidden from the wicked (Mt 11:25; Dan 12:10). God has not made it easy! He has certainly not made it natural. He continues to hide “these things” from the wise and prudent. Nothing is so spelled out as to fail to sift and test the heart. It is the same mystery, the same rock of offense, that watchman on the walls of Jerusalem declare (with initial rejection) to the apostate leadership of Jerusalem who are facing the imminent onset of Jacob’s trouble (compare Isa 28 and Rev 11).

The crisis of Israel will search and expose the presumption of humanism in both Israel and the church as nothing since the judgment that descended on 1st century Israel in the form of the “messianic secret.” We are obliged to declare our unequivocal assurance that the mystery of Israel must prove a critical stone of stumbling to the apostate church and world of the last days precisely because Israel is appointed to embody in its humiliation and offense the great principles of the cross and the sovereignty of the God who elects.

God deals in mystery because He deals in judgment. To those who understand, it is the mercy and the miracle of revelation, “which God ordained before the world unto our glory” (1Cor 2:7), but to the self sufficient, it is hidden for judgment (Jn 12:40; Ro 11:7).

“The God of Israel, who saves his people, is a God who conceals himself” (Isa 45:15).

It is ever “precept upon precept; line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken” (Isa 28:13 KJV). It is as much God that hides as God that reveals.

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no

humiliation, affliction, and death before resurrection, exaltation, and glory as exhibited in the lives of Job, Abraham, Joseph, David, a motif evident throughout all of redemptive history, and particularly reflected in Israel’s eschatology.

man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him. (Matt 11:25-27 KJV)

To illustrate our meaning concerning a new dispensation (stewardship) that is especially required at a particular point of time (Greek = *ho kairos*; ‘appointed time’ Mk 1:15; Ezk 7:12; Dn 12:4, 9; cf. Eph 1:10), we should consider Israel’s spiritual condition before the first advent of Christ. The veil of religious piety and seeming devotion masked the real extent of the nation’s apostasy, and covenant infidelity. Those secure in their “own righteousness” through the law fully expected to comprise the righteous remnant in the Day of the Lord. It was considered that only ‘sinners’ had cause to fear the Day of the Lord. But Paul suggests that before Israel stumbled at the mystery embodied in the person of Jesus, the nation had already stumbled in its presumption that the righteousness of the law could be humanly attained apart from the regeneration of Spirit, “as if it were by works” (Ro 9:32).⁷

Religious Israel stumbled, not in the first place because of the mystery surrounding Jesus, but because of an inherent humanism reflected in the nation’s approach to the law (Ro 9:31-10:3). Through Jesus, the divine controversy with the nation reached ultimate crisis, but through the mystery, the truth is divinely guarded from “the wise and prudent.” With Jesus’ announcement of the imminence of the kingdom (Mk 1:15; some passages present the kingdom as present; see Mt 11:12; 12:28, 34; 23:13; Lk 17:21), the ‘*kairos*’ had

⁷ It is pitiful theology that imagines that the new birth is strictly a New Testament phenomenon. Jesus appropriates the language of Isaiah and Ezekiel’s prophecy of Israel’s eschatological new birth (Isa 66:8; Ezk 36:25-27), and reprimands Nicodemus for being a teacher in Israel and failing to apply this principle to the individual. The language of new birth as applied to the individual may be original with Jesus, but the concept of spiritual renewal is pervasive throughout the Old Testament. Regeneration of the Spirit is essential in any dispensation, because “the natural man cannot receive the things of the Spirit” (1Cor 2:14). From the beginning God is “not the God of the dead, but the God of the living” (Mark 12:27). Whether Abraham or Nicodemus, whether nation or individual, apart from the quickening of the Spirit, and the receiving of a new nature, one is as dead in sin as destitute Israel in Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones (Ezk 37 with Eph 2:1). Throughout the Old Testament a number of terms are used that indicate the regeneration of the remnant of faith: the law in the heart, circumcision of the heart, a clean, or perfect heart, and so on. The prophets were certainly no strangers to the law written in the heart, or of the Spirit’s abiding (Ps 37:1; 40:8; Isa 51:7; 1Pet 1:11), but they recognized that the covenant is never fulfilled by a mere remnant, but anticipates a completely regenerate nation that can keep the covenant forever, and so inherit the land everlastingly (compare Jer 31:34; Isa 59:20-21; Ro 11:26-27). This event of national regeneration occurs at great Day of the Lord (see Ezk 39:22-29).

struck (the crisis hour of decision). And with the new divine initiative comes also a new standard of requirement, test, or stewardship, thus a new dispensation.

Before the new act of God in the works and words of Jesus, one could boast in his expectation of the coming Messiah and be considered pious. But because of the new revelation (Mt 16:17), there is a new dispensation (“upon this rock I will build my church”), and thus a new criterion for distinguishing the remnant, the true eschatological Israel of God (Ro 9:6; Gal 6:16). To continue now to look for Messiah becomes a damning rejection of the divine testimony. A new touchstone of division has come, and nothing can be the same. This is what is meant by the arrival of a new dispensation.

It is important to understand 1st century Israel’s rejection of Jesus as it reveals the point of divine contention that continues to blind Israel. Paul insists that righteousness was never to be sought “as if it were” (Ro 9:32 NIV) a work of the law. It was always by faith, always “by my Spirit says the Lord.” Even before Jesus, Israel’s “zeal of God” was “not according to knowledge” (Ro 10:2-3), because it assumed that justification could be won by an obedience that is possible to man (Mt 19:26). This is what so radically distinguishes biblical, and Christian repentance from Judaism, Islam, etc. Biblical repentance is transcendently more than reformation; it is a miracle of divine grace, a revelation / resurrection event of spiritual regeneration that comes only to those who despair of their own ability. It is a divine gift of sovereign initiative, “if God peradventure will give” (2Tim 2:25). It comes by a quickening, convicting, revelation of the Spirit (Jn 14:7; 16:8; Zech 12:10).

Thus, Jesus’ rejection by the nation did not lie merely in its ignorance of the divinely guarded secret (Mk 9:9; of this, the disciples were also ignorant until the appointed time of revelation; see Lk 18:34). But rather, the reason for Jesus’ rejection lay in the nation’s natural enmity towards God, (Jn 15:24). Jesus did not cause this enmity; He rather aroused, and exposed a condition that already existed. Through His words and works, the cloak that hid the extent of Israel’s apostasy is removed (Jn 15:24). Such is the nature of a

new dispensation. It is essentially a period of divine testing that is calculated to expose and make manifest.

Despite the mysterious and unexpected character of His mission, Jesus is no less recognized as the Son of God by Nathaniel who was “an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” (Jn 1:47) To know and love the Father was to know and love the Son (Jn 8:19, 42). This is the Lord’s own account of the reason for His rejection by the nation. Israel missed the hour of her visitation because the nation was for the most part destitute of the true knowledge of God, and so it is today (see Ro 10:2-3). “If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also” (Jn 8:19). That is, if Israel had known the Father, they would have recognized His perfect image in the Son (Jn 14:9). “He that is of God hears God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God” (John 8:47). But in order to expose the real cause of Messiah’s rejection (hatred of God), God deliberately hid His secret intention until after the nation had fulfilled its own judgment and the scripture in committing deicide (Zech 12:10; Acts 2:23, 36; 7:52; 13:17; 1Cor 2:8). This is the devastating revelation that broke upon Paul as he found the blood of Messiah and the martyrs on his own hands. This is God’s answer to human perfection. Paul was peerless in zeal and in righteousness, but all that stands in the power of the first creation must meet with divine rejection (Ro 10:2-3).

Throughout the prophets, covenant infidelity is portrayed in terms of adultery, self-will, and faithlessness, all symptomatic of a powerfully entrenched presumption of human self-sufficiency, but the humanism of self-reliance found its ultimate hiding place in the subtlety of religious works. Therefore, in judgment, God visits Israel’s religious pride by means of the mystery embodied in Jesus. It is the wisdom of this mystery that sealed the nation’s judgment in its rejection of the Messiah (cf. Acts 3:17; 1Cor 2:8; Ro 11:11, 15).⁸

⁸ Ironically, the same mystery that seals the nation’s judgment also purchases salvation for not only Israel, but also the remnant of the Gentiles (Acts 15:14, 17; Eph 3:6, 8). The same mystery also defeats the powers. We may understand then why Paul so ecstatically exclaims “the riches of the glory of this mystery” (Co 1:27). The wonder of this mystery especially shines through F.F. Bruce’s translation of this passage: “the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, *even in you* Gentiles!” This is the marvelous anomaly of redemptive history! Namely, that Israel’s Messiah should be “made a quickening spirit” (1Cor 15:45), and that through faith alone, apart from the law, the Messiah should indwell Gentiles through the promised Holy Spirit that He is. “Now the Lord is that Spirit” (2Cor 3:17).

And so it will be at the end of this age. It is, so to speak, the second stage of the same mystery that sifted Israel on the basis of what was hidden at Christ's first advent that will once again sift not only Israel, but also the professing church in the nations. However, it is remarkably ironic that this time it is particularly those events that were well known and generally believed by 1st century Israel that are now completely hidden and unanticipated by the world, and most of the church of today (Dan 12:10).

“Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you. (Acts 13:41 KJV)

“Behold ye among the nations, and look, and wonder marvelously; for I am working a work in your days, which ye will not believe though it be told you. (Hab 1:5 ASV)

Notice here Paul's use of Habakkuk in combination with Isa 29:14. Through the phenomenon of prophetic 'foreshortening,' the prophet sees against the backdrop of the imminent invasion of the cruel Chaldeans, and through the image of the king of Babylon, Israel's final suffering under the antichrist (Hab 2:2-4ff), and the eschatological salvation that follows his destruction (Hab 3:3-13). Habakkuk's vision (Hab 2:2) incorporates much of the same language as Daniel's (Dan 12:4). Paul thus applies the eschatological vision that will test, and confound all nations (see also Isa 29:14) to the current crisis of decision that the mystery of Christ constitutes for 1st century Israel. The pattern of the mystery as a stone of offense applies equally to the conditions surrounding both advents of Messiah. The rock of offense will once more demand of all nations a fateful response as Paul's 1st century appropriation of Habakkuk's vision implies.

Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men that rule this people, which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place (Isa 28:14-17).

For the LORD hath poured out upon you the spirit of deep sleep, and hath closed your eyes: the prophets and your rulers, the seers hath he covered. And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he says, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he says, I am not learned. Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. ... Is it not yet a very little while, and Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and the fruitful field shall be esteemed as a forest? And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. The meek also shall increase their joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One of Israel. For the terrible one is brought to naught ... Isa 29:10-20

We are greatly unprepared for this “strange work” of providence and prophecy that has descended so gradually on the world of the last generation. But what has developed slowly over the last half century will soon enough break forth with all the suddenness of apocalyptic fury (Ezk 38:8,11,14; Mt 24:15-21; Dn 12:1; 1Thes 5:3). It is a strange test stone - this “strange work ... determined upon the whole earth” (Isa 28:21) - this last days “controversy of Zion” (Isa 34:8; Zech 12:2-3), but it is intended as nothing since the apostolic era to test, judge, and reveal.⁹

Questions that before seemed less than immediately relevant to our personal spiritual pilgrimage, and were perhaps relegated to abstract theological discussion are soon to profoundly challenge the church. For example, of little apparent consequence to the practical life of the church is the debate that rages among evangelicals between the polar extremes of so-called replacement, or covenant theology, and the system of prophetic interpretation called pretribulation-dispensationalism.¹⁰ Even now there is an obscure, but critically relevant debate over the question of “who are the people of God?” Are there two separate ‘peoples’ of God? What is the covenant status of the unbelieving Jew? Does the land belong to the Jews in spite of their national secularism and religious humanism? What is the ground of Israel’s claim to the land, and what is the basis of Jewish appropriation of this claim? What is the legitimacy of the claims made by other native peoples to the land? The age old “Jewish problem” has taken on a new center in the

⁹ This statement, of course, assumes the full context of the mystery inclusive of the incarnation, atonement, and glorious return comprehended in the two advents of Messiah.

¹⁰ Covenant theology, though not to be identified particularly with its approach to prophecy, traditionally has interpreted the prophetic scriptures to apply to the church by a kind of spiritualized metamorphosis. Citing New Testament example, the prophecies of a glorious future for the natural descendents of Isaac and Jacob now find their ultimate fulfillment in Abraham’s spiritual seed. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, boasts of the only “consistently” literal approach to prophecy, and thus argues for a strict “dichotomy” between the church and Israel, requiring the recognition of two distinct peoples of God, each having a distinct inheritance and destiny.

vexing question of the land. How will this question play out, and what will it mean to the church, the Jew, the nations?

Israel is to increasingly prove a vexing international problem that will exasperate the patience, and eventually provoke the contempt of all nations. According as the church understands the nature of its own salvation will be its ability to withstand the deception that must attend 'the controversy of Zion.' Perhaps the greatest challenge that the church must face is its own humanism as it is tested and exposed just here at the point of "this mystery" (Ro 11:25). What should the church's attitude be towards "the natural branches," particularly while they are yet in their 'naturalness'? It is ironic that "this mystery," and Paul's warning concerning it, should come to play such a crucial role in the final test that comes to sift both the church and the nations.

As Jews are more and more troubled by the specter of mounting anti-Semitism, the church will have occasion to present the prophetic key of interpretation that explains not only Israel's present dilemma, but the whole sweep of Jewish history in the light of the covenant. Israel's escalating international predicament constitutes a divinely prepared goad that is calculated to force worldwide Jewry to consider their identity and plight (both now and throughout history) in biblical categories of covenant and prophecy. But it is particularly covenant (as enforced and attested by prophecy) that is the nub of divine controversy and appeal towards Israel.

When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shall be obedient unto his voice; ... The fierce anger of the LORD shall not return, until he has done it, and until he has performed the intents of his heart: in the latter days ye shall consider it. (Deut 4:30; Jer 30:24)

Even when the prophetic testimony is initially spurned as Isaiah 28 indicates, the greatest testimony to Israel will be the fulfillment of the events that take place throughout the great tribulation. The church's testimony, particularly during the 3 ½ years of false "peace and safety" will be powerfully confirmed when the events break in precise agreement with the church's foregoing witness.

The last day's flight of Jews from before the face of the Antichrist that begins with the destruction of the Jewish holy places only 'recently' repossessed (Isa 63:18; 64:11 with Dan 8:11-13; 9:26-27; 11:31; 12:11; and Mt 24:15 with 2Thes 2:4)¹¹ will come as an ultimate shock, and staggering blow to Israel's religious confidence (Lev 26:19; Deut 32:36; with Dn 12:7). The sudden desecration and destruction of the recently restored holy places, and the subsequent Gentile domination of the holy city (Rev 11:2) will rock Jews and Judaism to its foundations, and prepare the way for the witness of a prophetically prepared church who will be cast with 'Jacob' into the same wilderness of flight and refuge. It is in the wilderness that God will once more plead with the nation, and woo them to Himself as in their beginnings. The prophets give ample testimony of a new exodus. Biblical scholars recognize this, but are seldom willing to interpret such prophecy literally. But it is to a Jacob stripped of temple and nationhood, and cast again into the wilderness in flight from the long arm of the Antichrist that the church is sent in final prophetic witness.

The wilderness of the nations will be the setting for the Lord's final testimony and appeal to bring Israel into the bond of the covenant. The revelation of the gospel does not break on the nation as a whole, however, until the conclusion of Daniel's 70th Week with the return of Christ, which is also the Great Day of God Almighty. Then the sealed vision is opened to all the house of Israel as, "they shall look upon 'me' whom they have pierced" (compare Isa 8:14-17; Dan 9:24; 12:6-9; Zech 12:10; Rev 10:7). But it is the prophetic witness of the church that constitutes the seed that prepares Israel for the revelation of Jesus as Messiah in the same way that Stephen's martyr witness turned Paul's persecuting zeal into "goads hard to kick against" (Act 9:5; KJV; NKJV).

¹¹ Notice in Isa 63:18 that the holy places are only recently restored into Jewish possession when suddenly stripped away for the final disaster of destruction and expulsion. Jesus confirms that the final tribulation begins in "Judea" with the desecration of the "holy place" (Mt 24:15-21). A comparison of Dan 8:11-14 with Dan 12:11 suggest that the sacrifices are only recently restarted when they are stopped by the Antichrist by his violation of the covenant in the "middle of the week" (Daniel's 70th Week, the last seven years). Also, a comparison of the above passages show conclusively that the "sanctuary," or the "holy place" signifies the 'literal' Temple that stands in 'literal' Judea, and is the locus of a 'literal' sacrifice performed by unbelieving Jewish hands, as is evident in the violence of divine discipline that these tokens mark as chronologically imminent.

“So the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day and forward” (Ezek 39:22 KJV).

An ‘hour of temptation,’ a ‘valley of decision’ is at hand, not only for the world, but also for the church. Will we succumb to the international tendency to know Israel “after the flesh” at a time when Israel’s desperate plight reveals her as most conspicuously in the flesh? We are willing for ‘Israel,’ but what of ‘Jacob’? Will we regard Jacob as “beloved for the father’s sake” according to the mystery of election and grace, or will we know the vexing Jacob as Jacob, the “supplanter”? Blessed are those who will not be offended in what Israel must become on her way to national resurrection and glory; because, it is the same way as the pattern Son, the way of humiliation, devastation, and death antecedent to resurrection and exaltation (Isa 53; Ezk 37; Hos 5:14-6:2; Lk 24:26; 1Pet 1:11).¹² Israel in its awkward and despised condition will become a last days rock of offense that will cause the wise to stumble.

We see then how the issue of Israel finds out our very perception of the nature of grace in salvation. The issue at the end of the age is the issue behind God’s original choice of Israel, and of all that it signifies concerning the divine purpose in history. So before we can turn our full attention towards the church’s witness to Israel, it behooves us to lay some critical foundations of context and perspective that are essential to the church’s own survival in order to be a viable source of witness to Israel. Indeed, how can we instruct Jews in the great issues of covenant and prophecy if we ourselves have not understood and appropriated these great verities? Our witness cannot greatly exceed our own understanding and personal appropriation. But if we will defend as well as declare we must be able to show the evidence. Hence our emphasis on context! Because revelation and prophecy are inseparable from history, it is critically important to know something of

¹² It is our persuasion that Israel will be required to fulfill a similar travail of soul before the nation is born in a day (Isa 66:8). Zechariah shows that something unspeakable breaks upon the surviving remnant in the revelation of “me” whom they have pierced (Zech 12:10). This revelation will be all the more acute in view of the nation’s corporate experience of international humiliation (“hated of all nations”) during “Jacob’s trouble.” In that day, Israel will see in the mirror of her own path of national crucifixion, expulsion, and international rejection, the pattern of another’s supreme and willing sacrifice, the “Servant of the Lord” par excellence (Isa 52:13 – 53:12).

the background, or ‘life setting’ of God’s revelatory acts that are necessarily interpreted in the context of history.¹³

We labor the issue of context and careful examination of the biblical support for every part of our perspective, because the church cannot be united in a corporate international witness that is unclear, or uncertain. The vision must therefore be “made plain upon tables” (Hab 2:2) that those that read “may run” (Dan 12:4), “not as uncertainly” (1Cor 9:26). The boldness of the Spirit in our witness can only be proportionate to the assurance that comes to those who have spared nothing to “prove (test, examine carefully) all things” (1Thes 5:22), to those whose ear the Lord has wakened (Isa 50:4-5). When did the understanding of the vision come to Daniel? “From the first day that thou didst set thine heart to understand, and to chasten thyself before thy God, thy words were heard” (Dan 10:12).

This care to prove all things, and show full cause for our assurance (1Pet 3:15) in the “sure word of prophecy,” (2Pet 2:19), justifies the pains we feel must be taken to establish the history and context of the covenant, and its prophetic significance for interpreting not only current events, but the whole sweep and goal of history.

The primary purpose of prophecy is to give witness to both the promise and the chastisement of the covenant.

Whether in faith or in unbelief, whether in the land or in exile, the Jew remains the one continuous evidence of the miracle of prophecy. This is why Israel is God’s self-chosen witness to His divine sovereignty in history. God’s tracks in history may be traced

¹³ German theologians have a name for this historical context: “sitz em leben,” or ‘life setting.’ A first principle in all prophetic interpretation is to understand the biblical author’s intention in his own context, against the backdrop of his times and experience, because it is through such contexts of history that God’s acts are revealed and interpreted by the prophetic Spirit through “the Word that comes.” It is through the prophet’s interpretation of such revelatory events in the context of Israel’s inspired tradition of covenant and prophecy that special events (select and divinely invested) acquire significance beyond themselves as a pattern pointing towards an eschatological fullness to be consummated in the “Day of the Lord.” This is not general history, but a divinely ordained succession of select events that comprise a holy history of divine revelation. Salvation history is therefore elect history.

according to the fortunes of the Jewish people as illumined by the light of prophecy. How can the church even use the word “witness” in its approach to evangelism while ignoring the Word of God that declares “you ... the ‘ancient people’ are my witnesses” (Isa 43:10,12; 44:7-8)?

The experience of the Jewish race throughout the course of history becomes, in the light of prophecy, God’s ultimate appeal, first to the erring nation, and also a sign to all nations. Even throughout the judgment of exile, the prophetic sign of Israel becomes a test-stone of divine examination by which the nations are judged and rebuked according to their attitude towards the wandering Jew in their midst. God will once more plead with all nations on the basis of the witness that He has given. There is no other that He has chosen. Even God’s witness of His Son, “the faithful witness” (Rev 1:5) par excellence, is in the “context” of the prophetic history of His witness nation.

It is Jesus who said, “Salvation is of the Jews” (Jn 4:22). And, it is Paul that says that the covenant established with the descendents of Abraham particularly through Isaac and Jacob is the root that supports all salvation (Ro 11:18). Therefore, “boast not!” The covenant is the “children’s bread” (Mt 15:26). Before it is to the nations, it is “to the Jew first” (Ro 1:16; Acts 13:46). “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not ...” (Matt 10:5).

The unique character and purpose of Hebrew prophecy lies in its distinct function to trace, interpret, and predict the history of the covenant. To ignore the centrality of Israel and the covenant is to preach Christ out of context. “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10). Paul shows that the gospel itself is “**according** to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began” (Ro 16:25). And this mystery is revealed in the context of God’s covenant dealings with Israel, “through their fall” (Ro 11:11). The tension created between the conditional and unconditional features within the covenant points to the gospel itself as an eschatological mystery “made known by the scriptures of the prophets” (16:26; 1Pet 1:10-12). Therefore, to preach Christ apart from the historical context of the covenant, and the revelation of the

mystery hidden in other ages, is to detach the jewel from its setting, and so diminish the effulgence of its glory.

The “quarrel of my covenant”(Lev 26:25 KJV) is the one continuous basis of the prophets’ warning and appeal to Israel. To come short of the blessing of the covenant is to fall prey to its curse (Deut 28:32; Lev 26). Yet, “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Ro 11:29), Therefore, regardless of the duration of Israel’s age enduring chastisement (Deut 28:59; Ezk 38:8; Hos 3:4-5; Mic 5:3), the nation is **never** “utterly cast away” (Lev 26:44; Amos 9:6; Jer 33:26; Ro 11:2 with Ezk 20:37).

The **benefit** of the covenant may be temporarily suspended through disobedience, but its ultimate fulfillment is assured on the basis of the divine promise that ungodliness will be finally “turned away” (Isa 59:20-21; Jer 31:34; Ro 11:26-27) through a consummate apocalyptic act of divine intervention in the Day of the Lord (Ezk 39:22). Israel remains under the curse of the broken covenant until the blinded eyes are opened to the gospel (Dn 9:24; Zech 12:10) and the New Covenant sprinkles its regenerating grace (Ezk 36:25) on the surviving remnant (Isa 4:2) that becomes the new nation born in a day (Isa 66:8; Zech 3:9; Ro 11:26).

The prophets despair of the nation’s ability to fulfill the covenant apart from the special divine intervention of the Day of the Lord. But at “the set time” (Ps 102:13; Dan 11:29, 35), through the divine gift of supernatural regeneration (spiritual resurrection) contemplated in the New Covenant, God will act decisively, and “at once” (Isa 66:8) to “take away their sins” (Ro 11:27). Thus, it is incumbent upon the church as God’s prophetic voice to give faithful witness to the present significance of the covenant for Israel. This is why we must be close students of the covenant, its foundations, and its history from antiquity to its ultimate fulfillment in the “salvation of all Israel” (Ro 11:26-27; Jer 31:34).

The second great mandate of the church is its distinctive stewardship of the mysteries of God. It belongs to the mystery of the gospel to show how the covenant is ratified in the

blood of Jesus, and that by His fulfillment of all righteousness, the New Covenant can be established, not only with the penitent remnant of Israel in the Day of the Lord, but now, in unexpected advance of the Day of the Lord, with “whosoever will” of all nations.¹⁴ However, before we can make progress sharing the glory of this mystery gospel with the Lord’s brethren, we must never forget the divine order. It is first “the law came by Moses” before it is, but “grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Before the messenger of the New Covenant makes His appearance to Israel, the forerunner is sent to prepare the way (Mal 3:1). Likewise, the law prepares the way for the gospel. The covenant, its promises, and the standard of righteousness contained in the law, is God’s continuing basis of appeal to Israel and the nations.”¹⁵

“You have deprived the gospel of its ablest auxiliary when you have set aside the law. You have taken away from it the schoolmaster that is to bring men to Christ. No, it must stand, and stand in all its terrors, to drive men away from self-righteousness and constrain them to fly to Christ. **They will never accept grace till they tremble before a just and holy law**; therefore the law serves a most necessary and blessed purpose, and it must not be removed from its place.” “The Perpetuity of the Law” sermon by Charles Spurgeon

We will show in what follows that all of the eschatological secrets of the New Testament are a revelation of God’s answer to the “crisis of the covenant.” By this is meant the tension, or dilemma that is created between the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants, and the conditional requirements of the covenant of Sinai. How can an unconditional covenant be unconditionally established and fulfilled so long as it remains in constant jeopardy through human weakness? (Ro 8:3; Heb 7:18) How can an eternal covenant be established if it depends on human faithfulness for its fulfillment?

¹⁴ Who could have conceived that subsequent to Messiah’s hidden advent, Israel would stumble, and thereupon enter its longest night of exile (cf Deut 28:29, “evermore” 28:59 “long continuance;” also 32:20-21, 26 with Ezk 39:21-29, face hidden while provoked through a ‘foolish nation’ (Gentiles/church); see also Hos 3:4-5; 5:14-6:3 with Mic 5:3), as a completely unexpected “door of faith is opened to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27) ‘through’ the revelation of the mystery of the gospel (Eph 3:5; 6:19; Ro 16:25-26). This is the “mystery hidden in other ages and generations” (1Cor 2:7; Eph 3:5; Col 1:26) that accomplishes at once the judgment of those who stumble, and the saving revelation of the gospel to those whose hearts and eyes the Lord is pleased to open (Mt 16:17; Acts 16:14; 1Cor 2:10).

¹⁵ It is well to remember, however, that it was neither apparent nor explicit from the Old Testament (though indeed foretold) that Messiah would be to the sinner the fulfillment of the law, that the incarnate Son would accomplish atonement and be the personal mediator of the promised Holy Spirit. These are discoveries that belong to the mystery intimated and intensified throughout Jesus’ ministry, and that began to be unveiled by the Spirit that came in revelation power at Pentecost (Mk 9:9; Jn 16:12-13, 25; 1Pet 1:12).

This is the dilemma of the covenant. It is this dilemma that points to the necessity of Jeremiah's 'new covenant.'

Let it be remembered, however, that before Jeremiah's prophecy of a 'new covenant,' there was no distinction between the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenant. Sinai was seen not as a different covenant, but an extension and confirmation of the preceding covenants of promise, adding only the conditional requirements that qualify and define the terms of inheritance. Only later revelation would clearly distinguish between covenants. However, such distinction does not revoke, but fulfill the requirements and conditions by a gracious and supernatural divine initiative promised in prophecy, but revealed in the gospel.

Again, we reiterate, neither Moses nor the prophets were optimistic of Israel's ability to fulfill the righteousness that the law required as necessary to inherit the land. Apart from an eschatological "day" of special divine intervention, such obedience is impossible, because, "with man this (salvation) is impossible." But "in the day of Yahweh's power, the people shall be made willing" (Ps 110:3). Therefore, until special intervention will "turn ungodliness from Jacob," there can be no abiding inheritance of the land, and hence, no final fulfillment of the covenant.

Even as God establishes the covenant of Sinai, and before the nation's entrance into the land, Moses expresses his despair of the nation,

"Yet the LORD hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day" (Deut 29:4)

Because of Israel's national spiritual lifelessness (from its inception), Moses looks beyond a foreboding future of covenant failure and severity of judgment towards an eschatological intervention of sovereign mercy when "the Lord your God will circumcise your hearts, and the hearts of your descendents, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut 30:6). Such eschatological divine intervention is essential to overcome the nation's natural inability to keep covenant in a living way, and so inherit the land forever. Thus, before Israel's initial entrance into the

land of promise, already there is clear prophetic anticipation of Jeremiah's new covenant as the only remedy for a nation who remain as spiritually incapacitated as Ezekiel's "dry bones." Whether in the case of a nation, or an individual, regeneration, the new birth, is a resurrection event. Nothing that may follow in a believer's life can be more miraculous than the moment of a salvation that is utterly 'impossible with man.'

In following units, we will take up in greater detail the specific content of the final witness that is destined to awaken Jews to their covenant identity. We will also develop in greater detail the transfiguring effect that the final sweep of events will have on the church. But before this, we want first to return (as briefly as possible) to the critical priority of context on which every other consideration depends.

Context is decisive! And yet, for all its practical value as a grid for interpretation, and safeguard against error, it is the 'tedium' of establishing the background and context of a subject that is most perilously neglected as the history of interpretation has shown. Background and context are essential foundations of understanding, and an indispensable test of any truth claim.

In this great interest, it is essential to identify and understand the interrelationship between two prominent and closely related ideas that together form the covenantal, and the apocalyptic framework of the New Testament. These are: 1) the covenant (as it pertains to both Israel and the church), and 2) "the mystery hid in other ages." How we understand these two central concepts will greatly determine our view and attitude towards Israel and the future role of the church. We begin first with a brief overview of the history and progress of the covenant.