

BRUCE WALTKE AND NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE FOR THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

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Writing this essay is a bitter-sweet experience. I studied under Bruce Waltke as a pre-eminent Biblical scholar. I have sweet memories of these classes. It is bitter to challenge later writings in which he denounced what he had formerly held. This subsequent position was stated in an essay “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual” included in a series of articles concerning *Continuity and Discontinuity* (ed. John Feinberg, 1988). In a subsequent article, he describes New Testament interpretation: “in the New Testament, in contrast to the expectation of Judaism, the Kingdom’s character is ‘heavenly’ and ‘spiritual’, not ‘earthly’ and ‘political’.”¹

Thus in his view of the New Testament author’s hermeneutic, the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:12-16) has been resignified to exclude earthly and political. In the LORD’s promise to David, the kingdom would be heavenly (originating from God), spiritual (of God’s doing), earthly (Jerusalem, the capital) and political. A *resignified* interpretation cannot claim fulfillment of an originally *signified* text without entailing contradiction. Thus Waltke’s argument is flawed. To demonstrate this, we will take three objections and show the New Testament evidence which expects a future, earthly kingdom.

The three criticisms and counter-arguments:

1. *Rev. 20:1-10 can’t be linked textually with Israel’s covenants and promises (353).*
Revelation 20:1-10 can be linked with Rev. 12 and 19.
2. *None of the epistles teach a future for national Israel in the land (358).*
Romans 11:32 does teach a future for national Israel based on Rom. 3:1-4 and 9:1-11:32.
3. *No New Testament passage clearly teaches a future Jewish Millennium (353).*
In Acts 3:11-4:12, Peter offers Jerusalem a future Kingdom.

While Waltke has chosen his terms carefully to preclude any answer, I believe a reasoned response can answer the issue. And the terms in which the text addresses the issue ought to be used as contextually expressed. And these terms are not precisely what Waltke chose; they are in general synonymous. Thus Waltke’s objections can be answered.

First, *Revelation 20:1-10 can’t be linked textually with Israel’s covenants and promises.*

While the term “Israel” does not appear in Rev. 20:1-10, the book does locate Israel in the concluding revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1) involving the judgment of the nations on earth (5:1-7). There will be 144,000 of the tribes of Israel (7:4), sealed as servants of God (7:1-8).

¹ Bruce K. Waltke “A Response,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (ed. by Blaising and Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 270.

These servants will be undefiled and will worship the Lamb (14:1-5). These 144,000 were redeemed from the earth (14:3). They were the firstfruits to God and to the Lamb (14:4).

The name “Israel” does not appear in Revelation 12. Nevertheless, this chapter features a woman who gives birth to a man child who was caught up to God and His throne (12:1, 2, 5). This woman symbolizes Israel, even though there are some who would contend with this interpretation. Further, there is a fiery, red dragon who stood before the woman to devour her Child as soon as it was born (12:3, 4). In the end time, the woman fled to the wilderness to a place prepared by God (12:6, 13-17).

There are three principal characters that link Rev. 12 with Rev. 19:11-20:10.

12:5 *male Child* who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. The Child was caught up to God’s throne.

19:11-16 and 20:4 *the Word of God* comes from heaven to judge and make war. He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron for a thousand years.

12:9 the *Dragon* who deceives the whole world stood before the woman at the birth of the Child (12:4), and then was cast out of heaven at the end time in a war in heaven with Michael and his angels (12:7-12).

20:1-3 the *Dragon* cast down into the bottomless pit and bound for a thousand years (so that he should deceive the nations no more). Afterward he must be released for a little while.

12:6, 13-17 the *woman* who gave birth to the male Child was persecuted in the wilderness for three and one-half years.

20:4, 6 the *souls beheaded* for their witness to Jesus, who had not worshipped the beast ... reigned with Christ for a thousand years (at least the *woman* is included in these souls).

This linkage in characters in Revelation combines to be part of a narrative focusing at the birth of Jesus Christ and Christ’s return from heaven to rule. At the time of satan being cast out to the earth, “now salvation and ... the kingdom of our God and the power of our Christ has come” (12:10). Thus, rather than being stages of one kingdom, the Kingdom begins in relation to satan being cast out and bound in the pit.

Waltke’s criticism concerning 20:1-10 is not consistent with the narrative. He states: “the historic dispensational trap of falsifying Paul’s teaching that God is restoring and will restore Israel into the Kingdom into the error that God will restore the Kingdom to Israel.”² Waltke’s criticism assumes the kingdom already exists into which Jews are being and will be restored. Revelation 12:10 announces the kingdom has come as the dragon is cast to earth. Revelation 20:4 also argues that the reign begins following judgment. That judgment includes the dragon being bound also for a thousand years (20:2, 3). But is the kingdom restored to Israel? This is not explicitly said, but when the thousand years are completed, Satan and his forces surrounded

² *ibid.* 352.

“the camp of the saints, the beloved city” (20:9). Mounce calls this “the millennial capital,”³ the city of Jerusalem⁴ Thus it appears that the millennial kingdom was ruled from Jerusalem, including Israel.

Second criticism, *None of the epistles teach a future for national Israel in the land.*

I propose that the epistle to the Romans does just what Waltke denies. The subject of Romans is the Gospel of God (1:1) which is firmly based in the Old Testament Scripture: “which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the Holy Scripture (1:2). Thus, to claim that the apostolic hermeneutic resignifies Old Testament Scriptures is not true – at least for the Gospel.

One important shared meaning is the Person of the Christ. He is the subject of the Gospel whose human status rests in his Davidic descent (1:3). Thus the Christ is of Israelite descent.

Now Paul had contended that the Jew had no special status in the Day of Judgment (2:17-29). This ran contrary to general Jewish thought. The Jew would ask: Is there any advantage to being among God’s chosen people, Israel? (3:1). In Paul’s answer (3:1-4 and 9:1-5), the advantage rests on Old Testament Scripture. Again, resignification of revelation concerning Israel’s value is not present.

Paul, first of all, contends that being Jewish is an advantage in every way (3:1). Primarily, that rests in that they were entrusted with oracles of God.⁵

But what God had been pleased to reveal was valuable quite irrespective of Jewish response (3:3, 4). From the New Testament vantage point, the problem of Jewish unbelief in the Lord Jesus was finally a problem of unbelief in their own Scripture.

In view of Israel’s unbelief, is God through with Israel? Will he abandon his many promises to them as a national entity? It is inconceivable that human unbelief could annul the faithfulness of God. This is true as stated in Psalm 51:4 where King David expressed his contrition for his sin with Bathsheba. Paul takes David as speaking prophetically⁶ for the whole nation at some point in the future. Whereas Jewish unbelief had led them away from God’s purpose and blessing, as had David’s unbelief, its effect on God is different. By being true to his commitments, God would be vindicated⁷ in his Word. This happens because the Scriptures are fulfilled in the sense in which they were revealed. Thus, despite the present situation of Israel, God’s ultimate triumph and vindication are assured.

³ Robert A. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 373.

⁴ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 297.

Wm. R. Newell, *Revelation*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935) 326.

⁵ The referent of oracles (*logia*) of God have been variously understood (1) BDAG 598 s.v. *logion* refers to “God’s promises to the Jews” (2) national promises of Messianic salvation given to Israel (see S L Johnson, Jr. “Studies in Romans: Part VII: The Jews and the Oracles of God,” *BSac* 130 [1973]: 245). (3) the entire Old Testament.

⁶ NET trans of Rom. 3:4, “this type of clause carries the same sense as the future indicative verb,” 413

⁷ *dikaiōthēs* (Rom. 3:4) has the sense of vindicated, demonstrated to be in his right.

Paul in the climax contends that “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). That is the conclusion Paul will reach after examining the Jewish status in his day and interpreting the prophetic Word concerning Jacob (Isa. 59:20, 21 and 27:9). This anticipation is valid because of privileges for Israel as a corporate people (9:4, 5):

- national adoption as heir (Ex. 4:22, 23),
- glory dwelling among the people (Ex. 24:16; 40:34,35; 1 Kings 8:11-15),
- the covenants of which Israel is partner,
- the legislation in the Mosaic covenant,
- sacred services at the tabernacle/temple,
- the promises including Abrahamic and Davidic. All of the benefits heighten the sense of Israel’s special privilege resting in election and deepen the sense of Paul’s grief (9:1-3).

The explanation that follows (Rom. 9:6 – 11:36) encompasses God’s purposes for both Israel and Gentiles. Israel’s present status does not rest on the failure of God’s Word (9:6a). Rather, the present situation rests in God’s election since “not all Israel consists of those who are part of natural Israel” (9:6b). Some would contend that Paul is redefining Israel. While the Old Testament defined Israel as the chosen natural descendants according to the Mosaic Covenant, now Paul is narrowing the term based on election – not of Esau but of Jacob. While Paul will focus on whether God was unfair in his sovereign choice, we will examine in Paul’s description of what God does and what mankind does (9:22, 23). God as sovereign Potter has the right to bear with great patience the vessels of wrath fitted for ruin. This is the present situation with many in Israel in which God allowed them to pursue the law of righteousness based on their own works (9:31,32). On the other hand, God had prepared vessels of mercy beforehand for glory. That includes people from among the Jews, but also of people from among the Gentiles (9:23), each of whom is elect and called. The misdirection of effort on Israel’s part resulted in a serious collision with the true Source of divine righteousness, the Lord Jesus Christ (9:33).

Israel is in need of God’s message which Paul preaches in the Gospel (10:1-15). But all Israel hasn’t believed the Gospel (10:16-21). However, Israel’s rejection is not total as he refers to the present remnant (11:1-10). Further, Israel’s rejection is not final. “Although Israel is temporarily set aside to the benefit of Gentile humanity, God’s purposes for His nation will ultimately be realized. Israel will one day cease to be the object of God’s wrath and will experience His deliverance through the coming of the Deliverer.”⁸

And this future will be on earth as Abraham was, since the promise was that Abraham would be the heir of the world (4:13). While Abraham’s natural/spiritual descendants will be heir of the land (Genesis 15:7-21 and Galatians 3:7), Gentile nations are blessed with Abraham (3:9) and share in the eternal life present in Israel’s future. The Davidic heir will ask of the LORD and he will give Messiah the nations as his inheritance (Psalm 2:8).

Although Romans does anticipate a future for national Israel on earth, it says nothing of that future being a Kingdom. That silence may reflect the commonly held expectation that that future would involve the Davidic Kingdom. Thus there is no need in view of the immediate unbelief to enumerate what is not questioned.

⁸ Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath* Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society: 2013) 317.

Third criticism, *No New Testament passage clearly teaches a future Jewish millennium.*

While Waltke qualifies this contention with *clearly teaches*, it may imply that some passages teach less than the clarity he expects. Our choice is Acts 3:17 – 4:27. This is the historic account in which the apostle Peter offers the Kingdom to Israel in the temple in Jerusalem. While the crowd of worshippers is the immediate audience, the priests, the official of the temple guard and the Sadducees quickly engage with Peter and John and reject the message (4:1, 2).

While the term “Kingdom” does not appear in the sermon (3:17-26), language links what Peter says with what Jesus had said to the disciples about the Kingdom (1:4-7). This provides persuasive evidence. Toussaint⁹ presents this evidence as a case supporting the offer of the Kingdom to Israel.

First, the word *restore* (3:21) is related to Jesus’ conversation and the disciples’ question, *restore* (1:6). In 3:21 it is the noun form (*apokatastas-eōs*) and in 1:6 it is a verb (*apokathistaneis*). Both occurrences anticipate the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (cf. Matt. 17:11; Mark 9:12).

Second, the concept of restoration parallels regeneration when it is used of the kingdom (cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22; Matt. 19:28; Rom. 8:20-23).

Third, the purpose clauses are different in Acts 3:19 and 20. In verse 19a *so that* translates *eis to* with the infinitive. This points to a near purpose. The two occurrences of *so that* in verse 20 are translations of a different construction (*hopōs an* plus the subjunctive verb). They refer to more remote purposes. Thus the people’s repentance would result in forgiveness of sins, the near purpose (v19). Then if Israel as a whole would repent, a second more remote purpose would occur: the coming of the kingdom (the times (*kairoi*) of refreshing) and the second coming of Messiah appointed for Israel¹⁰, Jesus. *Kairoi* had been used by Jesus (1:7) to refer to the Father’s eternal decree, known only to the Father.

Fourth, the sending of *the Messiah* meant the coming of the kingdom. The fact that heaven must receive him (v. 21) meant that the kingdom could not have appeared until after his death. The resurrection and ascension must precede his return to inaugurate the kingdom, the time of restoration.

Fifth, the Old Testament “foretold (proclaimed) these days” (3:24). In the context of Peter’s sermon, “these days” would refer to the events that Peter had had reference to in the last month and a half: denial of Jesus (3:13), killed the Prince of life (3:15a). This One God raised from the dead (3:15b). Through faith in his name, this man was given perfect soundness (3:16). Thus, the events of these days refer to the trial, the crucifixion, the resurrection and now the healing by the Ascended One. These events were experienced by Peter and by the Jews in the temple.

⁹ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition* ed. Walvoord and Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983) 360-364.

¹⁰ NET, “designated in advance,” “the Messiah he has already chosen,” 328.

Peter's perception of the undistinguished unity of these events seems to contradict the distinction which Waltke makes: "the prophecies finding fulfillment up to the ascension of Christ ... will have earthly, visible fulfillment and those pertaining to the church formed with the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost from Christ's heavenly Davidic throne will have an invisible, spiritual fulfillment."¹¹

The very forcefulness of the healed man was his visible presence "leaping up, stood and walked ... praising God" (3:8). This questions the distinction Waltke made. It is a distinction ignoring the visible fulfillment that happened in Acts and results from *resignification* of what the prophet foretold following Jesus Christ's ascension. More broadly it puts into question that "the church's hermeneutic involved *resignification*."¹²

In conclusion, Waltke criticized Bock's case that "the restoration of the kingdom to national Israel (rested) on the verbal linkage of 'restore' in Acts 3:21 and Acts 1:6."¹³ Waltke never considered the validity of Bock's and our exegetical contention. Clearly in Acts 1:6, the apostles, including Peter, asked if the coming Spirit upon them meant that the kingdom would be restored to Israel. Jesus didn't deny what the Jewish apostles anticipated. Waltke did ignore what the apostles expected when he said: "Peter and the church were not looking for the restoration of national Israel."¹⁴ Jesus simply stated that only the Father knew the timing of this event (1:7). Further, he specified that the coming Holy Spirit would empower the apostles to witness to the historical resurrection (1:8 and 1:21; 2:32; 3:15; 13:31, etc.).

Waltke disregards this clear, contextual clarification of Peter's reference to "all things" (3:21). In an exegetical move which is less probable, he sets aside the near context in favor of a remote and unrelated context of 2 Peter 3:13. He then adds "in *keeping with* his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness."¹⁵ In interpreting the "restoration of all things," he favors what's in keeping *with* Peter's promise rather than favoring what Peter added in context, "all things which God had spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (3:21b).

The prophets spoke about this world, not a new world. They spoke about the beginning which featured the creation. The climax of the creation account focused on Adam, created to mediate God's rule on earth (Gen. 1:26-28). When Adam abandoned God's word in favor of the serpent's word, he was ruled by the serpent, and Adam no longer mediated God's rule. The "all things" includes revelation about the restoration of this issue of the mediated kingdom of God on earth.

¹¹ Waltke, 355.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*