

Five Methodological and Hermeneutical Bases For the Distinction Between Israel and the Church

Christopher Cone, Th.D, Ph.D, Ph.D

Chief Academic Officer / Research Professor of Bible and Theology

Southern California Seminary www.socalsem.edu

ccone@socalsem.edu

www.drcone.com

INTRODUCTION

Charles Ryrie identifies the distinction between Israel and the church as the first component of dispensationalism's tripartite *sine qua non*,¹ and observes that the distinction is "probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and...undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive."² In light of Ryrie's definitive claim, this paper evaluates five foundational methodological and hermeneutical components of that distinction: (1) authorial intention, (2) progress of revelation, (3) historical context, (4) contextual usage of the term *ekklesia*, and ultimately, (5) literal grammatical-historical hermeneutics. The purpose here is to answer five pressing and sometimes overlapping questions:

- (1) Did God intend to communicate a distinction?
- (2) Does development in the narrative of Scripture corroborate the distinction?
- (3) Does the Abrahamic Covenant anticipate the distinction?
- (4) Do occurrences of the term *ekklesia* allow for the distinction?
- (5) Does a normative reading of the text substantiate the distinction?

If these questions can be answered in the affirmative, then this would constitute strong exegetical evidence that the Bible indeed distinguishes between Israel and the church to the extent that dispensationalism suggests.

DID GOD INTEND TO COMMUNICATE A DISTINCTION?

If it is true that when we discover what the author intended to communicate we discover the meaning of the communication, then discovering the author's intention in writing must be the primary task of the exegete. When Peter explained the method of revelation (the Holy Spirit moved men who spoke from God, 2 Pet 1:21), he made it clear that while God utilized human writers, God Himself is the ultimate author. Paul asserts that Scripture is God-breathed,³ and consequently, Philip Payne observes well that because God is the ultimate author of Scripture, "it is His

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 33.

² *Ibid.*

³ 2 Tim 3:16.

intention alone that exhaustively determines its meaning.”⁴ That God revealed Himself in this way indicates that God considered the Biblical languages as adequate vehicles to convey His intended meaning in written form. Consequently, if we would understand His intended meaning, we must understand it *from what is written*. Because the Scriptures are useful, ultimately for the equipping of believers,⁵ it is evident that they are written in such a way as to be understood.

In assessing the accessibility to the interpreter of the author’s intent, E.D Hirsch at first distinguishes between meaning and significance,⁶ he later seems even to discount distinction between the two elements, suggesting that “the present of the listener will come after the present of the speaker,”⁷ and consequently, meaning is not entirely fixed at the moment of the speech act. In contradistinction to Hirsch’s later view of the non-fixity of authorial intent reflected in meaning, we work here from the premise that there is a fixed distinction between meaning (correct interpretation) and significance (application), and that there is a distinction between primary application (the significance of the text for the original audience) and secondary application (the significance of the text for later audiences).⁸ Thus the author’s intent *is accessible to us in a fixed and certain way, through – and only through – proper handling of the text itself*.

In the case of the theological outcome of distinguishing between Israel and the church we examine a sampling of passages, *in which God is not only the ultimate Author, but is also the One speaking in the first person*. In doing so we consider whether God intended in those passages to communicate a partial or complete distinction between Israel and the church, or whether He intended to communicate that there is no distinction between the two. It is notable that a non-fixed approach to meaning leads more comfortably to concluding in favor of a continuity between Israel and the church, whereas a fixed approach leads necessarily to a conclusion that the two entities are indeed distinct.

Genesis 12:2-3

God’s initial promise to Abram includes seven propositions:

- (1) And I will make you a great people or nation
- (2) And I will bless you
- (3) And I will make your name great
- (4) And you will become a blessing
- (5) And I will bless the one who blesses you
- (6) And the one cursing you I will curse
- (7) And they will be blessed in you all families of the earth.

⁴ Philip Payne, “The Fallacy of Equating Meaning With the Human Author’s Intention” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 1977: 243.

⁵ 2 Tim 3:17.

⁶ E.D. Hirsch Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (London, UK: Yale University Press, 1967), 1.

⁷ E.D. Hirsch, Jr., “Meaning and Significance Revisited,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984), 206.

⁸ Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2nd Edition (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 261-262.

The first six of these are all directly related to Abram, his descendants, or those who relate properly or improperly to him and his descendants. But the seventh proposition is set apart, as it promises a blessing also through Abram for families not connected to Abram. Notice the inclusion here of five distinct people(s) identified in these seven propositions: (1) Abram (2) his descendants (implicit by the process of becoming a great nation), (3) the one who blesses Abram, (4) the one who curses Abram, and (5) all families. Of these five, there are three immediately discernible and distinct groups. We recognize a clear connection between Abram and his descendants, as they will comprise a single great people, and thus an ethnicity.⁹ There is no ethnic prerequisite for membership in the ranks of those who bless or curse, as they are described here only by their actions toward Abram. All the families of the earth are yet a third group, but they are distinguished from Abram (and his descendants) by ethnicity: this group is blessed in Abram, but is not Abram. So of the five specific entities involved in the seven propositions, there are three distinct groups of people, and two of those are distinguished by their ethnicity: Abram and his great nation, and all the families of the earth. While it is reasonable that all families¹⁰ might include those descended from Abram, it is also evident that the great nation stemming from Abram would not include all families. While there may be some overlap, there is still ethnic distinction (in other words, all families include Abram's great nation, but Abram's great nation does not include all families). It seems clear enough that God intended to distinguish Abram's descendants as a great nation, from other families and peoples.

Exodus 8:23

God distinguishes between "My people,"¹¹ Israel and "your people,"¹² Egypt. In Exodus 3:6 God acknowledges that Israel is the nation descended from Abraham, thus more than four hundred years later, God is still maintaining the ethnic distinction introduced in His initial promise to Abram.

1 Samuel 9:16

God distinguishes between "My people," Israel, and the Philistines. Four hundred years after the Exodus, and eight hundred years after God's initial promise to Abram, God specifically continues the ethnic distinction.

Isaiah 19:25

In this remarkable context, God refers to Egypt as "My people,"¹³ and yet maintains the ethnic distinctions between Egypt, Assyria, and Israel. God will judge Egypt, but will then heal the nation, allowing Egypt to worship God along with Assyria and Israel. The ethnic distinctiveness remains, yet other nations, besides Israel are blessed. The prophecy of Egypt's blessing reveals an important aspect of God's

⁹ Heb., *goy*.

¹⁰ Heb., *qal meshpachot*.

¹¹ Heb., *ami*.

¹² Heb., *amaka*.

¹³ Heb., *ami*.

intention: *He will have other people besides Israel, and yet He intends no dissolution of ethnic distinctions.*

Jeremiah 7:12, 31:31-33

Around 600 B.C., more than twelve hundred years after God's initial promise to Abram, and His initial distinguishing based on ethnicity, God reminds Israel of the continuing distinction. Israel remains God's people. In fact, thirty-eight times in Jeremiah, God calls Israel "My people," including 31:33, which describes God's future intended blessing for "the house of Israel." Two verses earlier God even acknowledges the geographical and political distinction between Israel and Judah, noting that He will make a covenant with both houses, and that covenant will result in a reuniting of two houses into one, as it was before the division of Israel as a judgment on Solomon for his sin.¹⁴

Ezekiel 13:9

God makes an important distinction here, announcing that the false prophets who have led Israel astray will not be counted as part of Israel. It becomes evident that God intends that not all who are descended of Israel will be counted as Israel, despite their ethnicity, yet He still maintains Israel's ethnic distinctness as "My people." Thirty times in Ezekiel, God refers to Israel as "My people," including in the contexts of prophecies to be fulfilled in the distant future (such as in chapters 36-46). In all instances, God maintains the ethnic distinctiveness for Israel.

Hosea 1:9-10, 2:23, 6:11

For a time God will say to Israel¹⁵ that they are not His people,¹⁶ but in that place later it will be said that they are sons of God,¹⁷ and they will in the future again be called "My people."¹⁸

Zephaniah 2:9

God describes future judgment of Moab at the hands of a remnant and remainder of His people. This is a reiteration of an earlier revealed idea that not all who are physically descended from Israel will participate in its prophetic future,¹⁹ yet those who are counted as the remnant and remainder of Israel are ethnic Israel.

Matthew 2:6

Referring to the birthplace of the Messiah, Matthew quotes God's prophecy,²⁰ in Micah 5:2. This prophecy is different from others considered in this context, as technically Micah is speaking in the first person and God is referenced in the third person, I mention this passage simply to show the Messianic expectation – the

¹⁴ 1 Kin 11:9-13.

¹⁵ 1:10a.

¹⁶ 1:10b.

¹⁷ 1:10c, as in Is 64:8.

¹⁸ 2:23, 6:11, etc.

¹⁹ E.g., Ezek 13:9.

²⁰ Mic 1:1.

understanding of what God intended – was that Israel’s distinct status as “My people” would be maintained even during the rule of the Messiah.

Romans 9:25-26

To this point, the distinction between Israel and other ethnicities has been perfectly clear in God’s communication. Paul’s employment here of Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 represents a potentially pivotal moment – both for the distinctiveness of Israel, and for our understanding of authorial intention.

It is evident from Hosea 1:10 that God is referring to Israel as not being His people (Israel is the “them” to whom it was said “You are not My people.”), yet Paul cites the verse in a context²¹ that could be understood as supporting that Gentiles are called as vessels of mercy²² based on Hosea 1:10 and 2:23. This understanding may seem to legitimize, for example, Hirsch’s idea that meaning is not entirely fixed at the moment of the speech act. God speaks to Hosea referring to Israel, but does Paul change the meaning of the Hosea passages? It would seem that Hirsch’s earlier view is better supported by Romans 9:25-26 than his later view. Paul *does not change the meaning* of the Hosea passages to say that they speak of Gentile salvation, rather he *applies the passage* in such a way as to show that God can indeed designate someone who was not formerly His people as someone who is now His people. This is consistent with what we observe of God’s revealed intentions in Isaiah 19:25 – that He will in fact designate those who were not His people as now being His people. As Hirsch initially maintained – and as we maintain here, there is a vital difference between meaning (interpretation) and significance (application). Further, regardless of whether or not God designates Gentiles as His people (and He does), there is no impact on the ethnical distinction God continues to maintain between Israel and non-Jews.

2 Corinthians 6:16-18

Paul’s allusion to several OT passages here help to confirm that his usage of the Hosea passages in Romans 9:25-26 does not represent a change in meaning. In verse 16, Paul says that we,²³ as believers in Christ, are collectively a²⁴ temple of God.

In each of the OT passages similar to Paul’s statement,²⁵ the antecedent of the pronoun *them* is Israel. Paul does not reshape the meaning of the passage, but rather uses the passage to illustrate that a temple of God²⁶ ought to be separate from idols.²⁷ By this reference Paul provides an answer to the rhetorical question of 6:16.²⁸ Just as Israel was a temple of God, and the people were expected to be holy, so the church is a temple of God, and should be holy.

²¹ Rom 9:23-26.

²² 9:23-24.

²³ He and the primarily Gentile Corinthians.

²⁴ There is no definite article before *temple*.

²⁵ Ex 25:8, 29:45-46, Lev 26:12, and Jer 31:1.

²⁶ 2 Cor 6:16.

²⁷ 6:17.

²⁸ What agreement has a [no definite article] temple of God with idols?

Importantly, there is nothing here to indicate that God intends for us to understand that Israel and the church are *the same temple*. The absence of the definite article preceding each instance of *temple*²⁹ helps to confirm what this context implies – that there is more than one temple of God.

Hebrews 8:10

Simply put, this context quotes the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, to illustrate that Christ’s ministry is simply better,³⁰ and thus to provide another evidence that *He is better*. There is no direct application of the new covenant to the church, and the original ethnicity-distinctive language is left intact, as 8:10 restates that Israel will be His people. This quotation of the new covenant is significant for a number of reasons, one of which is that even two thousand years after God’s initial promise to Abram, there was an expectation on the part of the writer of Hebrews that God intended to maintain the distinction between Israel and other nations in fulfilling the new covenant literally with Israel, and not with other nations.

Revelation 18:4

This passage includes a call, seemingly from God, for “My people”³¹ to come out of Babylon the great. It is not explicit in the immediate context who is the intended referent of “My people.” As it has been established previously in Scripture that God does call other peoples besides Israel “My people,”³² so Revelation 18:4 does not provide any information that would either persuade or dissuade regarding whether or not there is a continuing distinction between Israel and the Church. Working from the trajectory that earlier passages set, it appears that this is a call to believing Jews to come out of Babylon the great, but this is admittedly more a theological rather than exegetical conclusion in this case.

Conclusion

These passages, most of which record God speaking directly in the first person, demonstrate that He intended to communicate a longstanding and future-looking distinction between ethnic Israel and other nations – including peoples who are blessed,³³ and even called people of God.³⁴ He communicates that not all of ethnic Israel will be counted as Israel,³⁵ yet those who will be blessed *as Israel* will be ethnically Jewish.³⁶

²⁹ Gr., *naos*.

³⁰ 8:6.

³¹ Gr., *ho laos mou*.

³² Is. 19:25.

³³ Gen 12:3.

³⁴ Is 19:25.

³⁵ Ezek 13:9.

³⁶ Jer 31:31, Zeph 2:9.

DOES DEVELOPMENT IN THE NARRATIVE CORROBORATE THE DISTINCTION?

In Reformed perspective, the “church has existed from the beginning of the world, and will last until the end...”³⁷ That Belgic statement indicates an understanding of Biblical chronology that necessitates the non-distinction of Israel and the church. Keith Mathison explains well the basic Covenantalist view that the church and true Israel are not really distinct at all. Mathison observes that,

The church is distinct from national Israel, just as the true Israel in the Old Testament was distinct from national Israel even while being part of national Israel. The remnant group was part of the whole but could also be distinguished from the whole by its faith.³⁸

He adds a key point that,

if we are talking about true Israel, there really is no distinction. The true Israel of the Old Testament became the nucleus of the true church on the day of Pentecost...It means that when true Israel was baptized by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, true Israel became the New Testament church.³⁹

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit and The Timing of the Church's Genesis

While it is fair to say that at Pentecost, at least some of the people in Jerusalem who were “true Israel” in the Romans 9:6 sense became the New Testament church – as the church was initially entirely Jewish, it is not accurate or logically valid to therefore conclude that the New Testament church *is* true Israel. One problem with that view is that there were many believers who were “true Israel” who were not in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and who did not become part of the church until later,⁴⁰ consequently, *true Israel*, as a single entity, was not baptized by the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, though some individual members of true Israel were.

In the progress of revelation, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the crucial point in the formation of the church. 1 Corinthians 12:13 describes how “we” all were baptized by one Spirit into the body of Christ. When the baptism of the Holy Spirit is first introduced in Scripture, John the Baptist distinguishes between the present and future to announce that while he was baptizing,⁴¹ Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.⁴² John introduces a clear anticipation that there would be a future baptism accomplished by Jesus in which the Holy Spirit would be the baptizing agent. While John's Gospel records that Jesus baptized disciples early in His earthly ministry, it is also careful to note that Jesus Himself wasn't doing the

³⁷ The Belgic Confession, Article 27, (1561), viewed at <http://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>.

³⁸ Keith Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament,” Ligonier Ministries, viewed at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/the-church-and-israel-in-the-new-testament/>.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ E.g., Apollos in Acts 18:24-26, and the disciples of John in 19:1-7, compare with 1 Cor 12:13.

⁴¹ Gr., *baptizo*, present active indicative.

⁴² Gr., *baptisei*, future active indicative.

baptizing.⁴³ Neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke record that Jesus actually did any baptizing. All three agree in identifying the initial promise that He would baptize with the Spirit,⁴⁴ and none of the three include in their Gospels any discussion of the fulfillment of that prediction. Meanwhile, in the upper room, Jesus preannounced the coming of the Holy Spirit in a manner distinct from His previous ministries: in the future He would be given,⁴⁵ sent by Father and Son⁴⁶ to be with the disciples forever,⁴⁷ and He would testify about Christ.⁴⁸ In Acts 1:4 Jesus commands the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, whom would come “not many days from now.” Consistently, the Gospel writers anticipate the baptism to be in the future, and Luke’s Acts account records Christ as specifying that the prophecy would be fulfilled very quickly.

Obviously, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was a new development, and as of Acts 1 *it had not yet happened*. The fulfillment began in Acts 2 with the coming of the Spirit. In Acts 11:15-17, Peter directly connects the event at Pentecost and the Gentiles’ receiving of the Holy Spirit with Jesus’ prophecy. Paul later describes the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the means of entrance for believers⁴⁹ into the church as the body of Christ.⁵⁰ For those at Jerusalem who were not initially baptized by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-5, they were told to repent and they would be forgiven and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹ By the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, the baptism of the Holy Spirit was normative for all believers.

Abraham’s Descendants and the Identity of True Israel Revealed

A second problem is that to assert true Israel is the church and therefore the church is true Israel commits the logical fallacy of affirming the consequent.⁵² In this context Mathison does not quite go that far, but he does assert that the church, along with true Israel forms “the one people of God.”⁵³ However, Martin Luther does go as far as to say that “All Gentiles who are Christians are the true Israelites and new Jews, born of Christ, the noblest Jew.”⁵⁴ John Calvin, likewise, extends as far as to consider Gentiles as part of true Israel, saying, “The salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be drawn from both [Jews and Gentiles]...”⁵⁵

⁴³ Jn 3:22, 4:1-2.

⁴⁴ Mt 3:11, Mk 1:8, Lk 3:16.

⁴⁵ Gr., *dosei*, future active indicative.

⁴⁶ Jn 15:26.

⁴⁷ Jn 14:16.

⁴⁸ Jn 15:26.

⁴⁹ 1 Cor 12:12-13.

⁵⁰ Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 10:16, 12:12-27; Eph 1:23, 3:6, 4:4, 12-16, 5:23-30, Col 1:24, 2:19, 3:15.

⁵¹ Repent is the only condition here for forgiveness and receiving the Holy Spirit, as the Gr., *metanoesate* is aorist active imperative, second person plural, the two resulting conditions are also in the second person plural, while the baptism imperative, Gr., *baptistheto*, is in third person singular, a separate clause. Acts 10:47 confirms that water baptism was done for people who had already received the Holy Spirit.

⁵² Represented formally as: If P then Q. Q. Therefore P.

⁵³ Mathison, “The Church and Israel in the New Testament.”

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (Fortress Press, Concordia, Faithlife, 1900-1986), 35:288

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, ed. D.W. Torrance and T.F. Torrance, trans. R. Mackenzie (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 255.

A consequence of this logical challenge in considering the church as true Israel is the necessary assertion that believing Gentiles somehow gain a spiritual ethnicity, yet believing Jews maintain their ethnicity. Thomas Schreiner argues, for example, that because Paul refers in Philippians 3:3 to spiritual circumcision and then in 3:5 to physical circumcision, that it is not impossible that Paul could view there as being both a physical and spiritual Israel.⁵⁶ Schreiner cites in support of this possibility Galatians 3:29 and 6:16, focusing on the church's identification as the seed of Abraham (3:29), and states that "By NT times to be a son of Abraham or the seed of Abraham was equivalent to being a Jew."⁵⁷

But in this Schreiner moves from possibility to actuality without sufficient support. It is a critical omission that Schreiner does not in this context acknowledge the Romans 4 identifications of three distinct people groups as the seed or children of Abraham: (1) the fleshly father of Israel – Jews in general,⁵⁸ (2) the father of those who have faith but are not Israelite according to the flesh – believing Gentiles,⁵⁹ and (3) the father of those who are both of faith and also of Israel according to the flesh – believing Jews.⁶⁰ It is clear especially from Romans 4:11 that Paul does not view being a descendant of Abraham as equivalent to being Jewish, as he clearly distinguishes between the two groups in that context. While Schreiner argues for the church as new Israel on grounds that Paul taught that believing Gentiles were Jewish equivalents, the narrative development – especially in Romans 4 – regarding the seed of Abraham contradicts the idea that being a child of Abraham meant being Jewish.

In Schreiner's commentary on Romans, it seems Schreiner recognizes that being the seed of Abraham is not equivalent with being Jewish, as he says,

Abraham was always intended to be the father of all peoples (4:9-16). The promise cannot be restricted to the Jewish people, for the oath made was always intended to embrace the entire world.⁶¹

He adds,

...grace secures the promise to all Abraham's children (16c), that is, both Jew and Gentiles who have faith, since Abraham is the father of both (16d).⁶²

In this understanding, it would seem the only way possible for all the seed of Abraham to be Jews, and at the same time Abraham to be the father of Jews,

⁵⁶ Thomas Schreiner, "The Church as the New Israel and the Future of Ethnic Israel in Paul" in *Studia Biblica et Theologica*, 13 (1983): 19-20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁸ 4:1.

⁵⁹ 4:11.

⁶⁰ 4:12.

⁶¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1998), 177.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 223.

believing Jews, and believing Gentiles is *if every believing Gentile becomes a spiritual Jew, and if unbelieving Jews were not counted as Jews at all.*

Schreiner further complicates the passage, asserting Paul to be teaching that “Abraham is the father only of Jews who have faith. Circumcision is insufficient to belong to the people of God.”⁶³ Schreiner acknowledges an exegetical challenge with this view:

[S]ince a previous use of τοῖς is found after περιτομῆς, the τοῖς...τοῖς construction suggests that two sets of people are included in verse 12. If the repetition of τοῖς designates two distinct groups of people, then those who are circumcised would be one set of Abraham’s children, and those who walk in faith would be another set.⁶⁴

It is interesting that in order to achieve a reading that supports the spiritual Jew view, Schreiner concludes,

The double τοῖς construction is difficult, but the syntax is a bit awkward here in any case, and Paul did not always abide by the grammatical rules of his day.⁶⁵

Remarkably, Schreiner dismisses the simplest grammatical understanding, apparently because the resulting progress of Paul’s narrative would counter the Reformed theological position. Ultimately, Schreiner is forced to deny that unbelieving Jews are descended at all from Abraham, in order to support that believing Gentiles are spiritual Jews. Schreiner’s approach to the ethnicity of believing Gentiles and unbelieving Jews supports a continuity between Israel and the church, and is consistent with the broader Reformed idea that the church ultimately began with Adam and is comprised of all believers throughout history.

Conclusion

In contrast to Reformed view that the church began with the first believer, the chronological progress of revelation identifies two major narrative themes that support a standing chronological distinction between Israel and the church. First, the baptism by the Holy Spirit as prophesied by Christ is not fulfilled until the early development of the book of Acts, and is reckoned to be the exclusive marker of entrance into the church. Second, even after the baptism prophecy is fulfilled, Israel maintains its ethnic identity – as do the other groups identified as descendants of Abraham (including unbelieving Jews). These two – along with the simple fact that while Israel existed as a distinct ethnic entity before and after, the *ekklesia* was predicted as still yet future when Christ introduced it⁶⁶ – show a marked distinction between Israel and the church.

⁶³ Ibid., 226.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Mt 16:18.

DOES THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT ANTICIPATE THE DISTINCTION?

Genesis 15 describes the covenant God made with Abraham,⁶⁷ specifically promising an heir and innumerable descendants,⁶⁸ a four hundred year slavery and return of his descendants,⁶⁹ and an expansive land in which to dwell.⁷⁰ The covenant reiterates and expands aspects of God's earlier promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, a promise which includes seven propositions:

- (1) And I will make you a great people or nation
- (2) And I will bless you
- (3) And I will make your name great
- (4) And you will become a blessing
- (5) And I will bless the one who blesses you
- (6) And the one cursing you I will curse
- (7) And they will be blessed in you all families of the earth.

The first four propositions pertain to Abraham's descendants becoming a great and blessed nation, the next two promise blessing or curse to those who treat Abraham's descendants well or poorly, and the seventh guarantees blessing through Abraham for all the families of the earth. As was discussed earlier, God's clear intention is to communicate an ethnic discontinuity between the descendants of Abraham and other families of the earth who will be blessed through Abraham. The task at hand in this section is to consider how, if at all, the Abrahamic covenant anticipates specifically a substantive distinction between Israel and the church.

In consideration of God's promise to make Abraham's descendants a great and blessed nation, God adds specificity through the establishing of further covenants to three components prerequisite for national elements: a land, a people, and a government. The land elements are first considered in Genesis 12:1, as God directs Abram "to the land which I will show you." That land is further delineated in Genesis 15, and notably so by ethnic divisions rather than simply geographical ones. There were discernible geographical markers, such as the peoples' placement in relation to two key rivers, but the ethnic associations were at least equally prominent. To the (singular) seed of Abraham the land is given.

Israel's future tenure in that land is outlined in the covenant God made with Israel at Moab.⁷¹ After a period of judgment, God would gather Israel out from the peoples where they would have been scattered. This promise means nothing if it does not mean that Israel would remain ethnically distinct. It is significant that God employs the phrase *from among the peoples*⁷² to describe Israel's return from

⁶⁷ 15:18.

⁶⁸ 15:4-5.

⁶⁹ 15:13-16.

⁷⁰ 15:18-21.

⁷¹ Deut 29:1ff. This covenant is often referred to as the Palestinian Covenant, though I prefer the term, the Land Covenant.

⁷² Heb., *mikal-haamim*.

scattering in a locative sense. The land in this context is again reckoned by ethnic associations rather than strictly geographic markers. Further, God adds that He would bring Israel back, referring to the nation not in the singular, but in the second person plural. It would not simply be the nation of Israel that would possess the land, it would be *individual Israelites*.

Finally, the land will be possessed by a spiritually regenerated and yet ethnically identifiable Israel,⁷³ but the peoples (nations) will stream to it, in pilgrimage.⁷⁴ There is no indication whatsoever in the promises of any non-Israelite *possession* of the land. The specific land aspects stemming from the Abrahamic Covenant anticipate that the promises will be fulfilled both nationally and individually by ethnic Israelites, as distinct from the nations who will enjoy blessings of God's presence there. Within the context of these land blessings, it is evident that there is anticipated a continuous distinction between Israel and non-Israelite peoples.

The second consideration in order for the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled is a government or kingdom element. Genesis 49:1 and 10 prophecy that Judah will be the royal tribe. God made a covenant⁷⁵ in 2 Samuel 7:8-17 with David that expanded on that prophecy, assuring David of (1) a great name, (2) a place for Israel, (3) rest from enemies, (4) a house for David, (5) a descendant after David who would build a house for God, and (6) the establishment of the throne of his kingdom forever. That descendant's (Solomon's) kingdom would not be forever, but the throne of his kingdom would be. God expands this Davidic Covenant further, explaining in Jeremiah 33:14-22 that His covenant with David is unbreakable, that a righteous Branch of David would spring forth, His rule would be characterized by justice and righteousness, and in it Judah and Jerusalem would dwell in safety. The first to Jesus in the NT identifies Him as the Son of David, and the last time He identifies Himself by name He refers to Himself as the root and descendant of David.⁷⁶

Revelation 20 describes the beginning of the Messianic rule, as described in Isaiah 9:6-7,

There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over His kingdom, to uphold it and establish it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.

The Messiah's rule will be on David's throne – in Jerusalem, and over David's kingdom – the ethnic house of Israel.

The final issue that must be resolved in order to have a blessed nation is the *people* aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant, in order to provide a way for an eternal people, by resolving the sin problem that would keep the covenant people from

⁷³ Ezek 37:11-14.

⁷⁴ Is 2:3.

⁷⁵ Ps 89:3.

⁷⁶ Mt 1:1 and Rev 22:16.

being able to receive the blessings of the covenants eternally. This *people* element of the Abrahamic Covenant is first discussed in the context of the conditional Mosaic Covenant, introduced in Exodus 19:5, “if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among the peoples...” This covenant with Israel through Moses was conditioned upon Israel’s obedience, and provided means where (at least) certain sins could be forgiven through the shedding of animal blood.⁷⁷ But as the Law unfolded, it became evident that even though Israel would be able to understand the requirements God had for the nation,⁷⁸ Israel would be incapable of obeying the covenant, and would reap the requisite judgment.⁷⁹ Further, it is evident that the Law was never intended to deal decisively with Israel’s sin issue.⁸⁰ Instead, the Law served to exacerbate the sin problem⁸¹ and expose it, in order to demonstrate the need for a Redeemer.⁸²

In contrast to the Mosaic Covenant, which was conditional, God would later establish the New Covenant, which would be premised on a physical restoration of the people of Israel,⁸³ and a heightened individual rather than national responsibility.⁸⁴ The covenant would be expressly with the house of Israel and the house of Judah – a clear and delineated ethnic group,⁸⁵ and it would differ from the former Mosaic Covenant.⁸⁶ The covenant involved an internal or spiritual restoration, accompanying the physical and national one, as He would write His law on their heart, and He would be their God and they would be His people.⁸⁷ Further, every individual of the Israel and Judah would know Him, and would be forgiven their sins.⁸⁸ God affirms the certainty of the covenant, and reiterates that it would be kept with the offspring of Israel.⁸⁹ This New Covenant resolves the sin problem for Israel once and for all, providing for forgiveness of sin and a right relationship to God.

The New Covenant is mentioned seven times in the NT. Luke 22:20 records Jesus’ statement that the cup was the New Covenant in His blood. In 1 Corinthians 11:25 Paul quotes Jesus’ statement, as recorded by Luke, and identifies in v. 26 the application for the church is to proclaim Jesus’ death until He comes. In these passages, neither Jesus nor Paul makes direct reference to the New Covenant being applied to the church. Paul later describes in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that “we are servants of a new covenant.” In the immediate context, the antecedent of the pronoun *we* is not believers, nor the Corinthians,⁹⁰ but is rather Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy.⁹¹ Thus

⁷⁷ E.g., Lev 4:14-20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13,16,18, etc.

⁷⁸ Deut 30:11-14.

⁷⁹ Deut 30:1 / c.f., Deut 15:4-5 and 15:11.

⁸⁰ Ps 40:6-8, Gal 3:17-18, Heb 10:4-6.

⁸¹ Rom 3:19, 4:15, 5:20, 7:8.

⁸² Gal 3:23-25.

⁸³ Jer 31:27-28, 31:38-40.

⁸⁴ Jer 31:29-30.

⁸⁵ Jer 31:31.

⁸⁶ Jer 31:32.

⁸⁷ Jer 31:33.

⁸⁸ Jer 31:34.

⁸⁹ Jer 35:37.

⁹⁰ Paul refers to the Corinthians as “you,” for example, in 3:2,3 and 4:12.

the passages is not a reference to the church in general as serving the New Covenant, but rather perhaps Paul magnifying His service to the Gentiles as helping to facilitate the future fulfillment of the New Covenant, by drawing the Jews to jealousy for their Messiah.⁹² The other four references to the New Covenant appear in Hebrews 8:8,13, 9:15, and 12:24, as the New Covenant is identified as a better mediatorship than that of Moses, thus demonstrating the superiority of the Jesus over Moses. The writer's purpose in this section of Hebrews is not to apply the covenant to the church, but to demonstrate that His blood that was poured out to ratify the New Covenant also was poured out to pay for the sins of all. It is through the better hope – the blood of Christ, in contrast to the blood of goats and bulls – that we draw near to God.⁹³ None of these passages draws any conclusion that the New Covenant is applied to the church, nor is such a conclusion either exegetically or theologically necessary.⁹⁴

The final component of the Abrahamic Covenant is ethnically universal blessing through the Seed of Abraham, as prophesied in Genesis 12:3b. In Galatians 3:8 Paul describes this passage as a prophetic presentation of the gospel, that God would save the Gentiles by faith. This promise is consistent with the people delineated in Romans 4:11, as those who believe without being circumcised – or believing Gentiles. This salvation is paid for by the Messiah, the seed of Eve, and the seed of Abraham as anticipated in the *protevangelium* of Genesis 3:15, and in God's Genesis 22:13 substitutionary provision of the ram as a sacrifice.

Conclusion

The Abrahamic Covenant provides the skeletal system for God's plan of the ages, as He structures His promises after the initial statement of that covenant in such a way as to be directly traceable to the Abrahamic Covenant – the Land Covenant to provide a place for the blessed nation, the Davidic Covenant to provide for its government and King, the New Covenant in order to provide for its people, the Mosaic Covenant to offer a conditional contrast to demonstrate the universality of sin and need for a Redeemer in anticipation of the New Covenant, and finally, the blessing of the Gentiles also through the Seed of Abraham. Nowhere in these covenants is there any blurring of ethnic distinctions, neither in their promising nor in their fulfilling. God's promises are rooted in ethnic distinctions, and there is nothing in the Abrahamic Covenant nor in the covenants following that would suggest a future undoing of ethnic distinctions in their future fulfillments.

Consequently, the Abrahamic Covenant and the covenants that follow support the distinction between those who are descended of Abraham and to whom pertain the great nation promises and those who are ethnically not descended from Abraham, yet are his children through faith, and to whom are promised blessing through Abraham's Seed.

⁹¹ 2 Cor 1:19.

⁹² Rom 11:12-14.

⁹³ Heb 7:19, 9:21-28.

⁹⁴ For more detail on this assertion, please see Christopher Cone, "The Hermeneutic Ramifications of Applying the New Covenant to the Church" in *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, gen. ed., Christopher Cone (Fort Worth, TX, Tyndale Seminary Press: 2013), 79-108.

DO OCCURRENCES OF THE TERM *EKKLESIA* ALLOW FOR THE DISTINCTION?

The purpose of this analysis is to determine whether the use of the term *ekklesia* allows for the distinction between Israel and the church, and whether there are *any* instances in which the *ekklesia* is synonymous with Israel. If there be any instances of the latter, then it might be reasonable to understand passages not identifying the *ekklesia* with Israel in light of those passages that do.

In examination of all instances in the Greek NT⁹⁵ of forms of the term *ekklesia*, we consider three possible categorizations of each. The category identified as *C* refers distinctly to the church universal or its local membership. In the category labeled *NE*, the referent is not specifically evident. And in the category *I*, the referent is primarily Israel – either geographical, ethnic, or spiritual.

References directly to the church universal or its local membership: (Total C = 67)

Mt 16:18 – This first reference is strongly indicative of a distinction between Israel and the church, as Jesus announces that He will build⁹⁶ His *ekklesia* on “this rock,” whereas He had previously acknowledged that Israel was already established.⁹⁷
Category: C.

Mt 18:17 – Immediately following the context of the prophesied new assembly, and immediately followed by a repetition of the authority of Peter and the apostles in this assembly.⁹⁸ C

Ac 5:11 – set in Jerusalem, the *ekklesia* is distinguished from all who heard these things. C

Ac 8:1 – the church was persecuted in Jerusalem, and as a result scattered into Judea and Samaria. Judea and Samaria clearly distinct from the church. C

Ac 8:3 – By entering only some houses and not all, Saul distinguished between the church and Israel. C

Ac 9:31 – The church distinguished from geographical regions, though identified in geographical regions. C

Ac 11:22 – The specific assembly at Jerusalem is distinguished from the rest of Jerusalem. C

Ac 11:26 – The church in the Roman province of Antioch, comprised also of non-Jews, distinguishing it from geographical and ethnic Israel. C

⁹⁵ NA28.

⁹⁶ Gr., *oikodomeso*, future indicative.

⁹⁷ E.g., Mt 8:10.

⁹⁸ Cf., 16:19 and 18:18.

Ac 13:1 – Distinction between the church as a non-geographical entity and its geographical placement, and comprised of some non-Jews. C

Ac 14:23 – Each church (*kat ekklesian*) considered autonomous to some degree, having elders appointed for their leadership. Church is neither geographic nor ethnic, also comprised of some non-Jews. C

Ac 14:27 – The church at Antioch receives a report of God’s inclusion of non-Jews. C

Ac 15:3 – Paul and Barnabas sent by the church at Judea through Phoenicia and Samaria to Jerusalem. Church neither geographic nor ethnic. C

Ac 15:45 – Church at Jerusalem, distinct from inhabitants of Jerusalem, including Pharisees. C

Ac 15:41 – Churches, plural, in various geographical areas throughout Syria and Cilicia. C

Ac 16:5 – Churches, plural, in various geographical areas throughout Derbe and Lystra. C

Ac 18:22 – Church geographically distinguished as being local at Caesarea. C

Ac 20:17 – Church at Ephesus has elders, distinct from elders of Israel (as in Ac 6:12). C

Ac 20:28 – Overseers to shepherd the church, but are not seen as having any authoritative role in Israel. Church identified as being purchased with His blood, later identified as “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Rev 5:9), and not exclusively ethnic or geographic Israel. C

Rom 16:1 – A local church at Cenchrea. C

Rom 16:4 – Local churches comprised (primarily) of Gentiles. C

Rom 16:5 – A house church among the Gentiles.

Rom 16:16 – Churches (plural) of Christ indicates distinct parts that make up the whole, comprised of both Jew and Gentile. C

Rom 16:23 – Perhaps a house church meeting in Gaius’ home? If so, distinctly local, and not connected with Israel. C

1 Cor 1:2 – Church of God at Corinth, comprised largely of Gentiles. C

1 Cor 4:17 – Every church includes churches comprised of both Jew and Gentile. C

1 Cor 7:17 – All the churches include churches comprised of both Jew and Gentile. C

1 Cor 10:32 – Church of God directly distinguished from Jews and Gentiles.
Comprised of people from both groups, yet the church is not either of those groups.
C

1 Cor 11:16 – The churches of God denotes a plurality of local assemblies, making up the greater whole. C

1 Cor 11:18 – Corinthians coming together as a distinct assembly. C

1 Cor 14:23 – The whole church comes together in a local iteration. C

1 Cor 14:33 – The churches denotes a plurality of local assemblies, making up the greater whole. C

1 Cor 14:34 – The churches denotes a plurality of local assemblies, making up the greater whole. C

1 Cor 16:1 – The churches of Galatia, a large region of Asia Minor, distinct from Israel. C

1 Cor 16:19 – The churches of Asia, distinct from Israel. C

2 Cor 1:1 – The church of God, located at Corinth and all saints at Achaia.
Geographically distinct from Israel. C

2 Cor 8:1 – Churches, plural, of Macedonia. Geographically distinct from Israel. C

2 Cor 8:18 – All the churches, as distinct entities. C

2 Cor 8:19 – By the churches, as distinct entities. C

2 Cor 8:23 – Brethren as messengers of the churches, as distinct entities. C

2 Cor 8:24 – The churches, as distinct entities. C

2 Cor 11:8 – Other churches distinguished from the church at Corinth. C

2 Cor 11:28 – For all the churches, as distinct entities with distinct burdens. C

2 Cor 12:13 – Corinth distinguished from other churches. C

Gal 1:2 – Churches of Galatia as distinct entities. C

Gal 1:22 – Churches of Judea distinguished from churches of Galatia. C

Php 4:15 – Church at Philippi distinguished from other churches. C

Col 4:15 – Distinct church meeting in the house of Nympha. C

Col 4:16 – Distinction drawn between the churches at Colossae and Laeodicea. C

1 Thes 1:1 – Distinct church at Thessalonica. C

1 Thes 2:14 – Churches in Judea distinct from church at Thessalonica. C

2 Thes 1:1 – Church at Thessalonica as distinct entity. C

2 Thes 1:4 – Church at Thessalonica distinctly identifiable among churches of God. C

Philem 2 – Distinct church in Philemon’s house. C

1 Jn 3:6 – The church as a finite entity, before whom John testified of Gaius’ love. C

1 Jn 3:9 – The church as a finite entity, among whom was Diotrophes . C

Rev 1:4 – Seven distinguishable churches of Asia. C

Rev 1:11 – Seven distinguishable churches of Asia. C

Rev 1:20 – Seven distinguishable churches of Asia. C

Rev 2:1 – Church at Ephesus as distinct entity. C

Rev 2:8 – Church at Smyrna as distinct entity. C

Rev 2:12 – Church at Pergamum as distinct entity. C

Rev 2:18 – Church at Thyatira as distinct entity. C

Rev 2:23 – All the churches as distinct entities. C

Rev 3:1 – Church at Sardis as distinct entity. C

Rev 3:7 – Church at Philadelphia as distinct entity. C

Rev 3:14 – Church at Laeodicea as distinct entity. C

*Instances in which the referent is not specifically evident in the immediate context:
(Total NE = 40)*

Ac 12:1 – Nonspecific reference to members of the church. NE

Ac 12:5 – Nonspecific reference to members of the church. NE

Ac 15:22 – Nonspecific reference to members of the church. NE

1 Cor 6:4 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 11:22 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 12:28 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:4 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:5 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:12 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:19 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:28 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 14:35 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

1 Cor 15:9 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Gal 1:13 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 1:22 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 3:10 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 3:21 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:23 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:24 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:25 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:27 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:29 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Eph 5:32 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Php 3:6 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Col 1:18 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

Col 1:24 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

1 Tim 3:5 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

1 Tim 3:15 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

1 Tim 5:16 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

Heb 12:23 – Nonspecific reference to the church of the firstborn. NE

Jam 5:14 – Nonspecific reference to the church of God. NE

1 Jn 3:10 – Nonspecific reference to the church. NE

Rev 2:7 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 2:11 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 2:17 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 2:29 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 3:6 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 3:13 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 3:22 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Rev 22:16 – Might be directly referring to seven churches of Asia, but not exegetically necessary. NE

Instances in which the referent of ekklesia is primarily Israel, geographically, ethnically, or spiritually: (Total = 2)

Acts 7:38 – A clear reference to ethnic Israel, not geographic or spiritual.

Heb 2:12 – A quote of Psalm 22:22, referring to the assembly⁹⁹ of the Psalmist's brethren, apparently, Israel.

Implications and Conclusion

In examination of one hundred and ten appearances in the Greek New Testament¹⁰⁰ of forms of the term *ekklesia*, sixty eight instances (labeled *C*) refer distinctly to the church universal or its local membership, in forty instances (labeled *NE*) the referent is generally to the church, and not specific with regard to any connection to or disconnection from ethnic Israel, and in two instances (labeled *I*) the referent is ethnic Israel, in recounting ancient historical contexts. Considering that Acts 7:38 and Hebrews 2:12 provide the only specific references to Israel as *ekklesia*, it is notable that both instances simply recount historical events prior to Jesus' prophecy that He would, in the future tense, build His *ekklesia* on Himself, as the stone of stumbling and the rock of offense.¹⁰¹ Consequently, the NT use of the term *ekklesia* provides no support for Israel and the church as interchangeable, but instead provides sixty eight instances of support for the distinctiveness of the church from ethnic or geographical Israel. Further, the term provides no support whatsoever for any concept of the church as spiritual Israel.

CONCLUSION: DOES A NORMATIVE READING OF THE TEXT SUBSTANTIATE A COMPLETE AND LASTING DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH?

In this paper we have sought to resolve four major questions:

- (1) Did God intend to communicate a distinction?
- (2) Does development in the narrative of Scripture corroborate the distinction?
- (3) Does the Abrahamic Covenant anticipate the distinction?
- (4) Do occurrences of the term *ekklesia* allow for the distinction?

In the resolution of these four questions, we settle an ultimate fifth question:

- (5) Does a normative reading of the text substantiate the distinction?

The answers collectively provide a definitive answer on whether or not an ongoing distinction between Israel and the church is exegetically warranted and theologically appropriate.

⁹⁹ In the LXX, the Gr., *ekklesia* translates the Heb., *qahal*.

¹⁰⁰ NA28.

¹⁰¹ Is 8:14, 1 Pet 2:4-10.

First, we discover from a number of key passages which record God as speaking directly in the first person, that God indeed intended to communicate a longstanding and future-looking distinction between ethnic Israel and other nations – including peoples who are blessed, and even called people of God. He communicates that not all of ethnic Israel will be counted as Israel, yet those who will be blessed *as Israel* will be ethnically Jewish.

Second, we encounter in the progress of revelation two prominent themes that support a standing chronological distinction between Israel and the church: (1) the baptism by the Holy Spirit, first prophesied by John, then Christ, then later fulfilled progressively in the book of Acts, as the decisive marker of entrance into the church; and (2) even after the baptism prophecy is fulfilled in Acts, Israel and other groups identified as descendants of Abraham maintains their distinctive ethnic identities. These two themes strongly support the marked distinction between Israel and the church.

Third, the Abrahamic Covenant is the key to understanding the unfolding of God's plan. That covenant and all those that follow are careful not to allow for any blurring of ethnic distinctions, instead being firmly rooted in ethnic distinctions. Consequently, the Abrahamic Covenant and the covenants that follow support the distinction between those who are descended of Abraham and to whom pertain the great nation promises and those who are ethnically not descended from Abraham, yet are his children through faith, and to whom are promised blessing through Abraham's Seed.

Fourth, an examination of the one hundred and ten appearances in the Greek NT of forms of the term *ekklesia* provides strong evidence supporting the distinction between Israel and the church, as sixty eight instances refer directly to the church universal or its local membership, forty instances are general references to the church, and only in two instances is there any direct reference to ethnic Israel, and those are recounting historical events that occurred long before Jesus prophesied the *ekklesia* He would build upon Himself. The NT use of the term *ekklesia* provides no support for Israel and the church as interchangeable, but instead provides sixty-eight specific instances of support for the distinctiveness of the church from ethnic or geographical Israel. Further, the term does not accommodate any assertion that the church is spiritual Israel.

Collectively these four evidences answer the question of whether or not the Biblical data, understood through the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, support the complete and ongoing distinction of Israel and the church. When applied to the Biblical data, each of the four methodological and hermeneutical issues considered here – authorial intention, progressive revelation, historical context, and lexical context – are resounding in their support for the complete and ongoing distinction of Israel and the church.