

**A CRITIQUE OF GENTRY AND WELLMUM’S,  
*KINGDOM THROUGH COVENANT:*  
A NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE**

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Let me begin by saying for the most part I like this book. Its treatment of covenants is thorough and for the most part on target. But this response is mostly about critique, so my response will be out of balance in terms of largely bypassing so much of what I like about the book.

My critique is like what I see in so many books of its type. They are not alone. The Hall of Fame includes John Stott, Tom Wright, Christopher Wright, and Gary Burge. You are in good company and will show myself to be an equal opportunity critic. I respond not so much as a dispensationalist, but as one who thinks covenants are a key to making sense of the Bible as a whole. I say this in the hope that my critique is not dismissed because I hold to Dispensationalism but because it is the logic of the covenant theme we are concerned with in the book *Kingdom through Covenant*. I accept that path as important in how we look at things, while taking a different fork in the road as we hit Jesus and the New Testament.

What their book ignored when it came to discussing Israel and the church was the contribution of Luke-Acts and a careful engagement with Romans 9–11. So I want to fill that gap by mentioning the Luke-Acts texts they ignore that are a central feature of this conversation when it comes to how Scripture handles Israel.<sup>1</sup>

**Luke 13:34–35**

When substantial rejection comes out of Israel, Jesus warns the nation about the risk. In Luke 13:6–9, Jesus says that the vine that does not produce fruit will be cut

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<sup>1</sup> I limit my focus to Luke-Acts, as it is all I have time for here. I will make some side remarks about Romans 9–11 that show how it contributes as well to the synthetic biblical theological issues that Wellum and Gentry claim are what they are doing with the material in their book.

down. Again the question surfaces, is this a permanent judgment against Israel?

This leads us into Luke 13:34–35, a crucial text. Luke 13 details the nature of the penalty Israel faces for “missing the time of her visitation” (see Luke 19:41–44). In Luke 13:34, Jesus speaks as a prophet of the Lord’s repeated longing to gather the nation as a hen gathers her brood. The image of God as a bird is common in the Old Testament and Second Temple Jewish texts (Deut. 32:11; Ruth 2:12; Ps 17:8; 36:7 [36:8 MT]; 57:1 [57:2 MT]; 61:4 [61:5 MT]; 63:7 [63:8 MT]; 91:4; Isa 31:5; 2 Bar 41.3–4; 2 Esd [= 4 Ezra] 1:30). The God of Israel’s desire is to care for, nurture, and protect His people. The reference to repeated attempts to gather the nation might allude to the many prophets He sent throughout Israel’s history. Only one thing stopped God from exercising His parental care: the people did not wish Him to do so. As a result, the gathering and its protection could not take place. The same risk applies now to Jesus’ offer.

In Luke 13:35, Jesus underscores the situation. Israel is in peril. The language of the empty, desolate house recalls Jer 12:7 and 22:5 (cf. Ps 69:25 [69:26 MT]; Ezek 8:6; 11:23). The parallel in Matt 23:39 mentions that the house is desolate (*ermos*), but Luke lacks this term. The Old Testament declared the possibility of exile for the nation if it did not respond to God’s call about exercising justice (Jer 22:5–6). As such, Jesus’ use of “house” (*oikos*) does not allude just to the Temple. Jesus is more emphatic than Jeremiah’s statement of the nation’s potential rejection; a time of abandoning exile has come. Rather than being gathered under God’s wings, their house is empty and exposed (Luke 13:6–9).

But for how long? Jesus adds a note about the judgment’s duration: Israel will not see God’s messenger *until* they recognize “the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (*heōs . . . eipēte eulogēmenos ho erchomenos en onomati kyriou*), from Ps 117:26 LXX [118:26 Eng.] (quoted from the NASB). Luke already made clear that the key term “one who comes” (*ho erchomenos*) means Messiah (Luke 3:15–16; 7:19). Israel is to accept Jesus as sent from God. Until the nation accepts Him, it stands alone, exposed to the world’s dangers. The quotation from Psalm 118 is positive, not negative. It suggests that Israel’s judgment is for a time.

### Luke 21:24

Luke 21:24 pictures a turnaround in Israel’s fate. Near the end of the eschatological discourse, Luke describes Jerusalem being trodden down for a time and refers to this period as the “times of the Gentiles.” What does this verse mean? It refers to a period of Gentile domination (Dan 8:13–14; 12:5–13), while alluding to a subsequent hope for Israel (Ezek 39:24–29; Zech 12:4–9). There are three reasons to maintain this reading.

First, the city’s fall is of limited duration. Why else mention a time limit? Second, there is a period in God’s plan when Gentiles dominate, which implies that the subsequent period will be characterized by Israel’s role.<sup>2</sup> Jesus’ initial coming and His future eschatological return represent turning points in God’s plan. Third, this view of Israel’s judgment now but vindication later suggests what Paul also contends

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<sup>2</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1974), 245.

in Rom 11:25–26: Israel has a future, grafted back in when the fullness of the Gentiles leads her to respond (see also Rom 11:11–12, 15, 30–32).<sup>3</sup> These chapters certainly have ethnic Israel in view, not any concept of a spiritual Israel. Romans 9–11 develops the temporary period of judgment noted in Luke 13:34–35.

### Acts 1:4–7

On a literary level, the remark in Acts 1:4–5 points back to Luke 24:49. Jesus commands the disciples not to depart from Jerusalem but to begin the mission from there, waiting for the “promise of the Father” (*tēn epangelian tou patros*). The disciples perceive this event as an indication of the end’s full arrival, which leads to their question in verse 6 about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Many Jewish texts expected that Israel would be restored to a place of great blessing (Jer 16:15; 23:8; 31:27–34 [where the New Covenant is mentioned]; Ezekiel 34–37; Isa 2:2–4; 49:6; Amos 9:11–15; Sir 48:10; *Pss Sol.* 17–18; *1 En* 24–25; Tob 13–14; Eighteen Benedictions 14).<sup>4</sup> The question is a natural one for Jews. Luke 1–2 expressed this hope vividly (Luke 1:69–74; 2:25, 38). What was debated in Judaism is whether the centrality of Israel would be positive or negative for Gentiles. Would it come with salvation or judgment for the nations? The disciples are not even thinking in mission terms here. Their question reflects a nationalistic concern for vindication. Nothing Jesus did or said in the forty days he was with them after the resurrection dissuaded them from this expectation. Neither does Jesus’ answer.

Nothing in Luke’s story also should dissuade us from holding onto this hope for Israel. Neither does Jesus’ reply in Acts 1:7–8 reject the question’s restoration premise. This reading following the Luke-Acts story line stands in contrast to interpretations such as that of Stott, who sees the question as full of errors.<sup>5</sup> In Stott’s view, they should not have asked about restoration, since that implied a political kingdom; nor about Israel, since that anticipated a national kingdom; nor about “at this time,” since that implied the kingdom’s immediate establishment. Jesus’ reply does not suggest that anything they asked was wrong except that they are excessively concerned about exactly when this will happen, something that is the Father’s business.<sup>6</sup> The other major argument Stott makes is that there is no mention of the land in the New Testament. However, the land is not mentioned, since (1) Israel is in its land when most of the New Testament is written,<sup>7</sup> and (2) the rule of Jesus is anticipated to extend over the entire earth, so why focus on the land? I will return to this issue later.

In fact, neither the definition of Israel nor the expectation for Israel changes.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Scott, “‘And Then All Israel Will Be Saved’ (Rom. 11:26),” in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (ed. James M. Scott; Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 489–527.

<sup>4</sup> On *apokathistēmi* (“restore”), see Mal 3:23 LXX (4:6 Eng.), where it is an eschatological technical term, and Dan 4:36 LXX. Acts 3:21 will return to this idea.

<sup>5</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Hilary LeCornu and Joseph Shulam, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Acts* (vol. 1; Jerusalem: Academon, 2003), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Michael E. Fuller, *The Restoration of Israel: Israel’s Re-gathering and the Fate of the Nations in Early Jewish Literature and Luke-Acts* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2006), 242.

Rather, God's eschatological work is now centered in Jesus. Throughout Acts, Jesus is the blessing's mediator. Throughout Acts, Israel's role remains central to the hope of salvation, including the expectation of national restoration. Acts 10–15 works out this story as it extends into all the world.

Jesus does not answer the question about the timing of Israel's restoration but neither does He reject the premise of the question that assumes this is where things are headed. Nor is His response a renunciation of an imminent end. It makes no commitment at all as to when the end comes. These verses show that the disciples are still thinking in terms of Israel's story. Nothing Jesus did or said in these key days when He taught them altered their ultimate hope for the nation. What was changing was the scope of their assignment and concern. They were to take Messiah's message to the entire world. A global perspective was becoming more important as a reflection of Israel's story.

### Acts 3:18–21

In his speech in Acts 3:18–21 Peter puts everything together and speaks of Jesus' return.<sup>8</sup> The "times of refreshing" (*kairoi anapsyxēōs*) refers to a future refreshment. *Anapsyxēōs* refers to a "cooling" to relieve trouble or to dry out a wound.<sup>9</sup> In the LXX the only use of refreshment is in Exodus 8:11 LXX (= 8:15 Eng.), where it refers to relief from the plague of frogs. The verb *anapsychō* ("to refresh") is used of the Sabbath rest of slaves and animals and the soothing of Saul by David's music (Exod 23:12; 1 Sam 16:23). Peter prophesies a messianic refreshment, the "definitive age of salvation."<sup>10</sup> The idea has parallels in Second Temple Judaism (2 Esd [4 Ezra] 7:75, 91, 95; 11:46; 13:26–29; 2 Bar 73–74; *1 En.* 45.5; 51.4; 96.3). Peter urges his audience to read what God has already said through the prophets. He refers specifically in v. 21 to the restoration of all things mentioned often in the prophets. The noun for restore (*apokatastasis*) is related to the verb used for Israel's restoration in Acts 1:6. As we noted above, texts such as Isaiah 65–66 are in view, where Israel is restored to fullness (also Isa 34:4; 51:6; Jer 15:18–19; 16:15; 23:8; 24:6; chaps. 30–33; Ezek 17:23; Amos 9:11–12). Nothing in any of this says that the story already revealed has been changed. Let's be clear, this involves Israel at the center of the Lord's return with texts such as Isa 2:2–4 and 19:18–25. Isaiah 19 is important because Gentiles also are in view. This is nation and land as the central place of rule.

In our narrative sequence, this is a crucial text. It tells us that what is to come was already disclosed. Whatever the expansion of the promise to Gentiles entails, it does not remove nor redefine Israel's story.

There is one more text. Paul in Acts 26:7 says he is on trial for the hope of the

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<sup>8</sup> Bauckham, "The Restoration of Israel in Luke-Acts," 477, in *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (ed. James M. Scott; Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 477, says this speech "is full of restoration terminology."

<sup>9</sup> W. Bauer et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BAGD) (2d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 63; F. W. Danker et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG) (3d ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>10</sup> Schweizer, *TDNT* 9:664.

twelve tribes (that INCLUDES restoration) when the 12 tribes is invoked. He discusses resurrection in detail by what follows in the speech, but it is the package of 12-tribe hope Paul is describing here. That hope would be expounded on in the Hebrew Scripture. The fact this appears at the end of Acts tells us we are not dealing with a theme that has changed as we move through the book to a “better” understanding.

### **What about the Land?**

It is true that much less of this national role for Israel is made in the New Testament than in the Old. There is no explicit mention of land as part of the future in the New Testament. Why? There are three reasons for this shift of emphasis.

First, Israel’s role is assumed as a given, having already been revealed and treated in detail in the Hebrew Scriptures, which the church embraced. Acts 3:19–21 points back to Moses and the prophets for “the rest of the story.” So the New Testament does affirm that the story about the future has details in it from the Old Testament.

Second, the more comprehensive New Testament concern is the eventual total victory that Jesus brings to the whole of humanity and the creation. This relativizes to a degree the importance of national Israel’s role in the plan. This point also helps to explain why the land is less emphasized in the New Testament. A salvation that in the end time encompasses an earth now existing in peace, means that borders mean less than they do when national sovereignty needs protection. It is the difference between Europe in the midst of World War II versus the Europe of a European Union where moving between nations no longer requires a passport check at the border. Where there is peace, there is reconciliation and brotherhood, not hostility.

Third, another reason the land is less of a concern is that Israel is in the land when the New Testament is written, so there is nothing to be reclaimed when the gospels and epistles are penned.

So it makes more hermeneutical sense for the theological unity of Scripture that the New Testament complements what God already has committed himself to in the Old. Maintaining a role for national Israel within the kingdom program seems to make the most coherent sense of Paul’s argument in Romans 11, where Israel is not a reference to the church, but is treated in distinction from the current structure through which blessing is preached. This approach, known as premillennialism, sees a hope for national Israel (as well as for the nations), with Christ functioning as Israel’s Messiah in the future kingdom program. Fulfillment is in Christ for all of this, so a christocentric perspective stands at the hermeneutical center of promise, but so do covenantal commitments made by God and carried out by the fulfillment that comes in Christ. Jesus declares such hope and so as fulfiller guarantees its taking place. This approach also affirms the fundamental unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ.

This comprehensive approach to promise and realization solves the difficult unity-diversity question that plagues debates about eschatology. There is soteriological unity (all are one in Christ and share in one unified plan), while there is structural distinction in the different dispensations of God’s administration (period of Israel ≠ period of the church ≠ period of the consummated kingdom moving to the new heaven and earth). Such an approach is a better synthesis than merging Israel and the

church, as much contemporary New Testament theology does. The result of such a merged reading means that the promises made to national and ethnic Israel do cease to operate for these original recipients of God's covenantal promise of grace. This raises questions about the commitments coming from God's Word and promises. Such a covenantal merger conflicts with God's faithfulness, which Paul wishes to defend in Rom. 9–11. Instead of reading the text with such a merger in mind, the apostle maintains hope that one day all Israel will be saved, in contrast to Israel's current rejection of Jesus. The current blessing of many more Gentiles one day will also contain the blessing of many from Israel also returning to the fold. To use Paul's imagery from Romans 11, those original branches having been cut out from the vine will be grafted back in so all Israel can be saved.<sup>11</sup> What God has started in bringing Jew and Gentile together, He will complete one day for both groups.

### A Reply to the Claim My Critique Involves Metanarrative Assumptions

When I published a much shorter critique of the book for the Gospel Coalition,<sup>12</sup> the authors replied with the following:

As expected, Bock centers on our understanding of the land. He laments the omission of detailed treatments of Romans 9–11 and Luke-Acts because to him these texts affirm a future for ethnic Israel in the land of Israel alongside the church during the millennium. However, these texts do not prove his point. For example, where is the mention of the future role of Israel in Jerusalem during the millennium in Romans 9–11? In order to appeal to these texts the way he does, Bock must first *assume* the truthfulness of the dispensational storyline. The same may be said about his appeal to Acts 1:6–8. No doubt our book could be strengthened by a full treatment of all of these texts, but Bock never engages our argument that DT's understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, the land, and the future for ethnic Israel is *not* how Scripture presents it.

Bock knows we cannot determine the meaning of Romans 9–11 and Luke-Acts from exegesis based on cultural setting, linguistic data, and literary structure alone. The metanarrative we bring to these texts determines our exegetical outcomes, and we are questioning DT's storyline. Furthermore, we argue that already *in the OT*, especially in the prophets, the land is viewed as a type that looks back to Eden and forward to the new creation. The people of Israel, as God's chosen peo-

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<sup>11</sup> This paragraph outlines my view on a major debate in eschatology that has been a part of the evangelical scene for a long time. See the discussion between Craig Blaising (premillennialism), Robert Strimple (amillennialism), and Ken Gentry (postmillennialism) in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). For more on this question, see Darrell L. Bock, "Why I Am a Dispensationalist with a Small 'd,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (1998): 383–96.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/kingdom-through-covenant-a-review-by-darrell-bock/>

ple, serve as the privileged means by which God brings about his redemptive purposes to the nations. Even now, God is not finished with them, as Romans 9–11 makes plain. At the same time, the meaning of Israel and Jerusalem is being transformed to speak of the people of God, which will include both ethnic Jews and Gentiles.<sup>13</sup>

My response to this retort is simply this, that there is a coherent way to put together the texts I am noting that does not *assume* a metanarrative at all, but contends that the only way to put together what Peter says in Acts 3 or Paul in Romans 9–11 is to see he is affirming the Old Testament metanarrative *while being aware what it is Jesus has now brought to the promise*. My critique is not about missing texts that could have strengthened the arguments of Wellum and Gentry, as they claim, but about missing texts that nullify or qualify some of their core contentions. I am simply flummoxed that the claim is that my engagement of these texts does not address how Scripture handles these promises because that is exactly what raising these texts does. I am questioning directly that the land is *merely* a type, even as they nuance it to claim it is realized by the expanded way they read the material. There is a *non sequitur* here. This involves a term-concept fallacy where only a specific mention of a specific term is said to evoke a topic. That is not the case, as associations can exist that evoke a theme. To expand does not entail to exclude what is included within the expansion. Expansion complements, it does not or need not cancel, which is what the Wellum and Gentry reading assumes. Nothing in the apostles' expectation or Jesus' teaching takes us in that more rhetorical direction or suggests that expansion takes removal along with it. I agree with their later point that Zion is both a people and a place, but the moment it becomes a place in a restored earth, we see Israel as a nation in a reconciled and realized promise, not at the expense of Gentiles (which is what many assume a restored national Israel means for those who hold it), nor as a replacement for national Israel (which is what their model argues for) but as part of the wondrous accomplished reconciliation that allows Jews and Gentiles to share in the same worship of the same king in the era to come because they each remain Jew and Gentile reconciled into one new entity, an idea we all share about where the promises went.

### Conclusion

So where does this leave us in terms of the book? It means that their proposal for another way has a major hole that needs filling before it can be a way forward. That hole involves how Israel is handled as a theme in Scripture. Provided a future can be found for national Israel, then a way forward is possible. Without it, it would seem that God's program is left with a hole about how He fulfills his commitments that is better filled than left as a bump in the road of eschatological fulfillment.

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/gentry-and-wellum-respond-to-kingdom-through-covenant-reviews>