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## *Rejecting the United States as the New Israel*

The first four articles in this series were to give an overview of certain aspects of dispensationalism, by summarizing what they predict is going to happen in the near future, demonstrating how they have capitalized on recent world events to promote their system, pointing out some of the folly to which dispensationalism ultimately leads, and showing how their central distinction between Israel and the church ends up effectively dividing the Scriptures into two different books to two different groups of people. We proceed now briefly to consider some of the ideas dispensationalists were rejecting, when dispensationalism arose in the nineteenth century.

We begin by considering the “America as Israel” thinking that by the nineteenth century had been present in the United States for quite some time, and in a certain sense is still with us today. Since the early days of this country, many have argued that promises to Israel were going to be fulfilled in the history of America. This thinking dispensationalists rightly rejected. But then they erred in the other direction, when they insisted that these prophecies were to be fulfilled not in Christ and His church, but in a future earthly nation of Israel.

### *A Postmillennial View of the United States as Israel*

During the so-called Great Awakening (1735-1760), postmillennialism became more popular, especially through the teachings of Jonathan Edwards, the well-known Congregational preacher in Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards saw Northampton to be “a city set on a hill that cannot be hid,” which would serve as a beacon to the world, showing to everyone the road to follow to become a true Christian commonwealth. In his judgment, the large number of emotional “conversions” he witnessed indicated “the dawning, or at least a prelude, of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind.”<sup>1</sup> He believed he was seeing the beginning of a great revival of religion that was going to spread to all nations.

Then came the victories on the battlefield—first during the French and Indian War (1754-1763), and then in the American Revolution. Many at this time equated victories for the colonies as victories for the kingdom of God. Timothy Dwight, the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, speaking at Yale three weeks after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, said that history would reach its climax in America, in the fulfillment of “that remarkable Jewish tradition” of a thousand years of “peace, purity, and felicity.”<sup>2</sup>

In later years Dwight went further, and compared America’s expansion westward with Israel’s conquest of Canaan—even going so far as to suggest that this would amount to the final historical fulfillment of God’s promise to give Israel the promised land. Thus Old Testament Israel was said to be a type—not of the church—but of America. And the death of native Americans was likened by some to the destruction of the Canaanites.

Americans were by no means the first to consider themselves to be the present-day counterparts to Old Testament Israel—many in England and other European countries have done the same. But America seemed by many to be better fit for such a comparison.

Undoubtedly the people of any nation would like to think that God has chosen them to exercise dominion over the other nations. Such carnal dreams have been used to unite the people of a nation, and give them confidence as they go out into battle. So obviously it is very appealing to people in our own country to hear that God Almighty is on the side of America, and that His prophets have said that the United States is destined one day to rule the world.

### *A Historical Premillennial View of the United States as Israel*

But the postmillennialists were not the only ones maintaining that promises to Israel were going to be fulfilled in America. In 1854, Samuel Davies Baldwin, a Methodist minister and president of a college for women in

1. Quoted in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 71.

2. *Ibid.*, 73.

Tennessee, wrote a 480-page book in which he attempted to prove that Old Testament prophecies were going to be fulfilled in the United States. The tide of immigrants flowing into the United States, said Baldwin, was a fulfillment of the prophecies that spoke of all nations being gathered together and blessed in “Israel.” And Ezekiel 38, which speaks of the forces of Gog coming against Israel, were said by Baldwin to be referring to a Russian-led alliance of European nations that was soon going to invade the United States, who then would annihilate them.

Baldwin was not a postmillennialist, but a premillennialist. He was what we would call today a historical premillennialist, who differed markedly from the dispensational premillennialists that would come later. So although he spoke of Armageddon happening soon, he saw the United States as the nation that was going to emerge victorious from this battle and reign with Christ during the coming millennial age.

In his work, Baldwin explained what principle of interpretation he was following to come to such conclusions:

To appreciate in any degree the arguments of our entire work, it must be kept constantly in view, that prophecy is of two kinds—the clear and the obscure. The former needs no explanation; to know the true import of the latter demands the greatest skill, and its exact meaning can be known only by fulfillment coinciding with some one of the plurality of legitimate expositions, of which the specific prediction is, *a priori*, susceptible. By far the greater portion of prophecy is *intentionally* obscure. The obscurity proceeds from the ambiguity of terms used, or from symbols; the language of symbols is always determinate and simple, but realization is essential to their application to their subjects; ambiguous terms, from the nature of the case, admit of a plurality of senses, *a priori*. To determine which of these meanings was the divine intention, and at the same time to show an unequivocal fulfillment in the end, necessitates the following rule: any *legitimate, a priori*, exposition of an obscure prophecy, with which future events clearly coincide, is thereby determined to be the intention of the prophecy, and such coincidence is fulfillment. The great point of importance, then, is to be certain that our *a priori* expositions are legitimate, and a rule to test such legitimacy is demanded. The rule is this: any exposition not opposed to the context, nor to the nature of things existing before fulfillment, must be considered legitimate.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, the author’s use of the term *a priori* makes this statement a bit hard to understand, but the general meaning I understand to be this: Many prophecies of Scripture are intentionally obscure, which means that before the prophecy is fulfilled there will be a number of legitimate expositions of the text. No one can tell for sure which of these legitimate expositions is the correct one until after the specific event takes place that fulfills the prophecy. But once this event does take place, then we can know for sure which one of these explanations was correct.

Having stated his rule for interpreting prophecy, he then proceeds to comment on Isaiah 60:9, which reads “Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far.” Baldwin argues that the term “isles” refers to the United States, and that “the ships of Tarshish first” was a reference to the discovery of America by the ships of Spain, which opened the way for many of God’s people to come to America and form a new nation in “the isles.” Furthermore, he adds:

Now we do not claim that our exposition is the only one of which the text is susceptible, but simply that it is legitimate; this claim must be admitted, because it is in accordance with the rule stated above, and therefore can not be denied.<sup>4</sup>

So first he invented a rule for interpreting prophecy, and then he interpreted passages in accordance with his own rule, and stated that his interpretation could not be denied, seeing as it was in harmony with his rule. This is the method that has been repeatedly used to get the Scriptures to say what people want them to say. Different people come up with different rules because they want the Scriptures to say different things. Often it is actually the case that a person’s goal is first, and then his rule for interpreting prophecy is second.

3. Samuel Davies Baldwin, *Armageddon: or, The overthrow of Romanism and monarchy; the existence of the United States foretold in the Bible, its future greatness; invasion by allied Europe; annihilation of monarchy; expansion into the millennial republic, and its dominion over the whole world.* (Cincinnati: Applegate & Co., 1964), revised edition, 79-80. I have eliminated a few commas in this quote, to make it easier to understand.

4. *Ibid.*

## *The Discourses of Fountain Pitts*

The popularity of this kind of thinking is illustrated by two discourses given by another Tennessee Methodist minister, with the unforgettable name of Fountain Pitts. These discourses were delivered in the United States Capital by invitation of several members of Congress, on February 22, 1857 (the anniversary of George Washington's birthday). The first discourse began in the morning, and the word concerning it traveled rapidly, so that when the afternoon session began, the Capital was reportedly filled to overflowing.<sup>5</sup>

His discourses entitled "The United States of America Foretold in the Holy Scriptures" and "The Battle of Armageddon" contained arguments similar to those used by Baldwin. For example, commenting on Daniel 12:11 which reads, "And from the time that the daily sacrifice shall be taken away, and the abomination that maketh desolate set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days," Pitts maintained that these days ended on July 4, 1776, at the very hour that the Declaration of Independence was signed. Pointing to prophecies in Ezekiel that referred to the promised land as being located between two seas, he argued that this clearly seemed to fit the United States, rather than Palestine.<sup>6</sup>

Although Fountain Pitts acknowledged that there was much wickedness in America, he still insisted that Americans were "the very best people on the face of the earth."<sup>7</sup> A statement that undoubtedly many would make about their own country.

## *Dispensationalism Arises with a Different View of Israel*

But then, especially after the Civil War, the rising tide of theological liberalism that dominated the churches and seminaries of this country, coupled with the increasing secularization of society, provided the opportunity for the rise of a different premillennial view. Many professing Christians found it hard to believe that a country characterized by such worldliness and theological liberalism could be God's special people, destined by Him to rule the world. People pointed not only to rising crime rates, but also to the growing rejection of the authority of Scripture. In times such as this, many professing Christians rejected the notion that promises to Israel were going to be fulfilled in prosperous days for America. And thus dispensational prophesying about the imminent return of Christ and judgment coming upon all nations, including the United States, became more believable.

Dispensationalism's insistence on a "literal" interpretation of prophecy was another factor that made it appealing. The incorrect methods used by not only postmillennialists, but also historical premillennialists, were rejected by dispensationalists. Instead they insisted that promises to Israel were going to be fulfilled not in America, but in a literal return of the earthly nation of Israel to the earthly land of Palestine. Thus while rightly rejecting one error, dispensationalists fell right into another.

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It is important to remember that as new ideas arise, the old ideas often do not completely go away. We must not think that this view that prophecies recorded in Scripture are going to be fulfilled in the United States is long gone. Many of us remember how President Ronald Reagan, for example, liked to refer to our country as "a city set upon a hill." Similarly, when citizens in our country rapturously sing "God Bless America," they are often thinking of our country as the one special nation blessed by God more than any other. And in a day of warfare on earth, it is easy to fall into the thinking that American troops in foreign lands are fighting for God's cause in the midst of this world. So when we sing "His wide dominion shall extend from sea to utmost sea, and unto earth's remotest bounds His peaceful rule shall be" (Psalter number 194), we must beware lest we also fall into this same carnal thinking.

Furthermore, we must remember that postmillennialists and premillennialists (whether dispensationalists or historical premillennialists) all err when they speak of a promised earthly kingdom of God. The church is God's holy nation, a kingdom of priests, and we who by God's grace are citizens of this kingdom seek the things that are above where Christ right now is sitting and reigning as King at the right hand of God.

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5. Boyer, 84-86

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.