

Eschatology Presentation – Part 3

[Why An Obsession with Eschatology is a Waste of Time, Part 3](#)

Focus: Did the covenants that God made with Abraham and David, and the New Covenant ([Jeremiah 31:31-34](#)), come with conditions for fulfillment? Are these covenants conditional or unconditional? The question is critical for knowing if the covenants (tied to the land promise) are still in effect or not (and so fulfilled by the Church).

To this point, we've talked about a single dispute that divides biblical scholars and students on eschatology: whether or Israel and the Church are to be kept distinct when interpreting prophecy. The question matters since any position that wants a literal millennial reign of Christ in the future must (to be coherent) argue that the land promises given to Abraham and his descendants are still in effect – and so literal fulfillment is expected. If the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God, and if the land promises are now fulfilled via the Great Commission to overspread the earth with God's people (i.e., the Church is the kingdom), then no literal millennium would be expected.

Or so it goes.

To be more precise, the ground we've covered thus far has effectively raised related questions, both on my part and the part of commenters. And there are some questions that stem from the "Israel and/or the Church: Yes or No?" problem that I haven't thrown out there yet. For example:

1. While Galatians 3 explicitly says that the Church (Christians) have inherited the promises given to Abraham, does Paul **restrict** those promises to those that promise a seed (descendants – literal and/or spiritual) but exclude the

land? In other words, since there is no mention of the land in Galatians 3, might *that* part of the promises still be out there for national Israel?

2. While it makes sense that the Great Commission would translate to fulfilling the land element – the oversweeping of the nations via evangelism to reclaim those lost nations – what we we to think of the fact that there is no *verse* that makes that explicit connection?

3. Since Paul is clear in Romans 9-11 that

(a) “Israel” refers to “natural Israelites (Jews); and

(b) “Israel” also refers to “spiritual Israelites” (believers); and

(c) “all Israel is not Israel” (that within national Israel there is a spiritual Israel, composed of Jew and Gentile); and

(d) there is this thing called the Church (Jew and Gentile)

... then can we really *neatly* separate OR merge these groups with respect to prophecy? Some would say yes; others, no. And THAT is the problem. You can make a coherent case in any regard. All we can really say is that, for sure, with respect to the New Testament, Paul (and other writers) do not restrict “Israel” to only ethnic Israelites – the term now means much more.

The question really comes down to this: Would Paul (or other NT authors) say that national Israel had no eschatological future apart from being members in the new, spiritual Israel, the Church? Are the destinies of the Church and national Israel tied together *en toto*, or can they be tied together “mostly” and yet there still be an eschatological future involving national Israel?

Again, there’s no way we can know for sure. So everyone gets to be humble (or ought to). This is just one reason (of a

whole list I'm working on here) I just cringe when I get an email from someone utterly captivated by their eschatological position to the exclusion of any other (and they probably don't even know there are others). I find myself praying and hoping that person's faith isn't really built on the latest lame prophecy novel or TV prophecy preacher.

All of the above takes us into today's topic: Did the covenants that God made with Abraham and David, and the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), come with conditions for fulfillment? Are these covenants conditional or unconditional?

Seasoned prophecy nerds know this question is important since, if these covenants came with conditions, there may have been a chance that they were dissolved or nullified due to Israel not meeting the conditions. The picture looks bleak, too. Since Israel (all 12 tribes) were exiled, it would be easy to argue that the promises were voided to national Israel and handed over to the Church as recipients of fulfillment. The kind of perfect obedience required by the covenants would be fulfilled in and by Jesus. He is the ultimate son of Abraham, the king in David's line, and it was he who sent the Spirit after his resurrection to inhabit the hearts of believers according to the New Covenant. Looks pretty tidy. But that would mean that the Church has displaced national Israel in its entirety. Israel (frankly) was no longer useful. The Servant of Isaiah – and chapter 53 is the **only** place in Isaiah where Servant is a singular person – is actually the representative of the corporate Servant in Isaiah – Israel (the rest of the occurrences of "Servant" in Isaiah refer to the nation of Israel – look it up). Hence Jesus is everything and all the covenants find fulfillment in Him. And His body is the Church. Again, a very tidy picture – one that would make Left Behinders pretty sullen, since there is no need then for a literal kingdom, and without that, the whole rapture idea doesn't even make it to the table.

I hope you see (again) how tenuous the whole framework is for

this undeniably common view of end times. It is *far* from being self evident. But the other views can't claim absolute certainty, either. We'll get to them. For now, let's talk about the conditional (C) vs. unconditional (UC) problem.

The short answer to my question is "yes" – the covenants are BOTH C and UC. Those who believe in a rapture have been taught they are unconditional. Wrong. So let's start there.¹

The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3; Gen 15)

For sure there are UC elements in this covenant. God initiates the covenant and its promises. The first six verses deal with the promise of descendants (Gen 15:1-7). Gen 15:7-16 deals with promises of the Land. Then God alone passes through the ritually slain and prepared animals sealing the covenant (Gen 15:17-21). The fulfillment of the covenant's promises therefore depend on Yahweh alone. Case closed, right? Wrong.

While the fulfillment of the promises depend on Yahweh's ability, it is an entirely different question as to WHO will be on the receiving end of the promises Yahweh fulfills. That's where the conditional elements come in to play. Put succinctly, receiving the promises depends on a spiritual relationship with Yahweh – obedience to his revelation.

In Gen 12:1-3, the first passage concerning the covenant with Abraham, we see Abraham obeying what he is told ("and he [Abraham] went"; Gen 12:4). After the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15, God reiterates the covenant in Genesis 17:2. But Gen 17:1 lays down a clear condition. Here are the two verses together:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly."

Notice that the language of v. 2 is clearly drawn from the covenant of Gen 12 and 15. But this time there is a clear condition. God goes on in Gen 17 to repeat all the elements of the original covenant. Then he demands that Abraham and all in his household be circumcised. Here's the point: Only Abraham's circumcised descendants – those who obey – are eligible to receive the promises Yahweh will give. Refusal to obey meant you weren't going to be part of the promises. God would make sure the promises got fulfilled, but the person who refused to obey wouldn't be on the receiving end. We see more of this conditionality in Genesis 18. The dual elements are crystal clear:

¹⁷ The Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, ¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For **I have chosen him**, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord **by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.**"

To summarize all this, Yahweh unilaterally committed himself to do certain things He promised to Abraham. But these promises only extend to Abraham's spiritual descendants – those who, like him, would follow Yahweh. At first this was basically operating only within Israel, Abraham's physical seed. Eventually, it expanded to Gentiles. But the premise was the same: the "obedience of faith" as the apostles liked to call it was necessary to receive the promises. The Abrahamic covenant was both conditional and unconditional.

And so now the questions: Did national Israel corporately forfeit the promises? Since it is those who *believe* that inherit the promises, what Paul says in Galatians 3 makes perfect sense – but is that the end of the story? Is the kingdom the Church? On what grounds would we look to a national kingdom in Israel in the future? If it is, it isn't

because the covenant was unconditionally given to THE NATION of Israel. Both testaments agree that those who were given the promises were those who BELIEVE.

It's about the obedience of faith, not nationality. At least that much is clear. So we can stop now with defending a literal millennium on the basis of covenant unconditionality. For that idea you need a different argument. That one is DOA.

Next up, the Davidic Covenant.

1. Readers who would want a more technical discussion of this issue are referred to Bruce K. Waltke, "The Phenomenon of Conditionality within Unconditional Covenants," in Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison, ed. Avraham Gileadi, Baker: 1988, pp. 123-140.
2. Added: This link is not originally from the author of this series. Link HERE [Q&A: Conditional and Unconditional Covenants](#) and [HERE](#).