Eschatology Presentation – Part 1

Eschatology Series – BY: Dr. Michael Heiser

For those just starting on these, my point is not to take any positions (I don't); it is to show you that much of what you think is secure about end times beliefs is far from self-evident and depends on assumptions brought to the text.

Why an Obsession with Eschatology is a Waste of Time, Part 1

Focus: Are Israel and the Church distinct from each other, or does the Church replace Israel in God's program for the ages? How would we know? Why is it that Galatians 3 has the Church inheriting the promises given to Abraham? Why are believers called the temple of God in 1 Cor 3 and 6 if the temple is supposed to be rebuilt? If Israel and the Church are distinct, it would seem that Israel might still have a national future, apart from the church. Keeping Israel and the Church distinct is key to any view of a rapture (because the Church is taken, not Israel).

Naked Bible enthusiasts (and despisers) may recall that, long ago, I posted **a list of presuppositions** that are brought to the Bible that ultimately dictate one's position on eschatology ("end times"). I posted this because all too many Christians assume that their view is self-evident from the Bible (i.e., that it's so clearly taught as to make them wonder how anyone else could see end times any other way). I'd say the position most guilty of this is the pre-tribulational rapture view (the view presented in the Left Behind novel series).

My goal in the posts that follow is to elaborate on my original list and unpack the items a bit. My goal isn't to deny or endorse any position. I don't like or hate any of

them. There are things I like about all of them. I can already hear those married to one view: "how can he say that?! That's not possible! Yeah, it is. And it's the best perspective. (I'm sure that'll tick someone off). I'll explain my own thinking at the end of the series. For now . . . drum roll, please . . . let's dive in.

Presuppositional Issue #1 – Are Israel and the Church distinct from each other, or does the Church replace Israel in God's program for the ages? If they are distinct, it would seem that Israel might still have a national future, apart from the church. Keeping Israel and the Church distinct is key to any view of a rapture (because the Church is taken, not Israel).

Let's unpack this.

"God's people" in the first installment of the Bible (the Old Testament) was Israel (and a few Gentile converts here and there, who had to join the nation as Israelites – followers of Yahweh). God made a series of covenants with Israel to create and certify that bond. These covenants all had certain promises. As Israel came out of Egypt and entered the Promised Land, the nation inherited certain of these promises – or was it ALL of them? (that's item #2 for next time). Here's a list of the promises:

Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15:6-7)

1. They would become a nation whose population would be like the sand of the sea and the stars of heaven.
2. They would prosper and be a blessing to all who blessed them (or a curse to those who cursed them).
3. They would inherit a land promised to them ("from the Euphrates to the river of Egypt" – more on that in other installments).

Sinai ("Mosaic") Covenant (Exodus 20-24)

God s covenant with the nation at Sinai was given in Exodus

20-24. Its focus is the Mosaic Law. God labeled Israel a peculiar treasure, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation, and gave them the stipulations (laws) that would guarantee the continuance of fellowship between them and their God (continuation of the Abrahamic covenant). The covenant was ratified by a covenant sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood (Exodus 24:4-8). Various Sinai covenant renewals are recorded in the Old Testament. The most important were those on the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 29), at Shechem in the days of Joshua (Joshua 24), when Jehoiada was able to restore the Davidic line of kings under Joshua (2 Kings 11), the days of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 29:10), and in the days under the rule of Josiah (2 Kings 23:3).

Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7)

God promised David that his descendants should have an everlasting dynastic rule over the Promised Land and be known as his sons (2 Samuel 7:12-17; Psalm 89; Isaiah 55).

The New Covenant

Several passages in the prophets, but most explicitly in Jeremiah, speak of a new covenant in the messianic age (Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 49:6–8; Isaiah 55:3; Isaiah 59:21; Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 31:31, 33; Jeremiah 32:40; Jeremiah 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60, 62; Ezekiel 34:25; Ezekiel 37:26).

These passages assume a nation in exile due to its sins – its violations of the Sinai covenant. This covenant argues that, though the Sinai covenant was broken, the promise of God would not fail. There would be a remnant through whom God would honor His promises. He would make a new covenant. His law would be written on hearts of flesh. In that day the throne of David would be occupied by one of David's line (this assume a situation when that was not the case – such as in exile) and the people would enjoy an everlasting covenant of peace in which the nations would also share (Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 49:6;

Isaiah 55:3-5; cf. Zechariah 2:11; Zechariah 8:20-23; 14:16; etc.). In those days worship would be purified (Ezekiel 40:48), true theocratic government would be established, and peace would be universal.

Got all that? Good. Now here's the question: Is the nation of Israel (the national ethnic entity) still the focus of these covenant promises (before and after the final New Covenant) or is the Church their focus now?

Arguments can be made for both sides – depending on presuppositions. We'll be getting into the details in items 2 and 3, so let's preview those items. The two sides of this #1 issue depend on whether one believes the promises of the Abrahamic, Sinai, and Davidic covenant were CONDITIONAL. That is, were there conditions behind receiving the promises ("Israel must do/be X") or were the promises made without any conditions ("no matter what Israel does in the way of sin, God would still give them the promises")? If there were conditions, it is obvious that Israel failed (they went into exile at God's hand). If there were no conditions is that what the New Covenant is about? Is the New Covenant the answer?

These questions are important for #1 because they create a construct by which to parse this first issue's question: Are Israel and the Church distinct from each other, or does the Church replace Israel in God's program for the ages?

Jesus very clearly came to establish the New Covenant ("this is the new covenant in my blood" – see Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 12:24). And the Spirit came upon the disciples and their converts after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2; see the book of Acts thereafter). The church was "circumcision neutral" – it was not only Jews, but also Gentiles, that also was a New Covenant element. But if the Church – and not Israel as a nation – was the focus of the New Covenant, then what purpose is there for national Israel (except to embrace Jesus and

become absorbed into the Church)? It also means that the Davidic ruler is Jesus, and the Promised Land is bigger than Israel – it's the whole world – hence the Great Commission. Let's ask it this way: Is there any part of the New Covenant *not* answerable by the Church? One might say the "all nations" part – but that is precisely the point of the Great Commission – given to the fledgling CHURCH, not Israel (Matthew 28:18-20).

At this point the common objection is the Land – that the Church isn't a theocratic kingdom. But it is – it's head is Christ and its land is the whole earth (back to the Great Commission). Why would we insist that the Land promises must be fulfilled in a tiny portion of the earth (Israel) rather than the whole earth? The answer given would be "well, the Abrahamic covenant guaranteed the Promised Land, and have specific dimensions, and Israel never got all that land … and so they either get *that* land as a national entity, or else God's promises failed. That, too, is a presupposition. It presupposes that God's plan doesn't *succeed* through the New Covenant and the global, Gentile-inclusive Church. It also presumes that Israel never got the land according to the dimensions of Genesis 15 (see later on that). But if the covenants were conditional, then Israel sinned the land promises away (they failed; God did not), and this objection about a literal kingdom within the parameters of Genesis 15 may be completley moot.

One more note on the difference and sameness of Israel and the Church, Galatians 3 (read the whole chapter) is crystal clear that Christians – the Church – "inherited" the promises given to Abraham. Should we exclude the land from land? If "the Promised land" has been replaced by "the whole earth," then the answer is yes – and that is the primary argument for saying that we have no reason to look for a literal kingdom in *Israel* (a millennium) in the future.

So, are Israel and the Church distinct? Yes, one is not the

equation of the other. But does the Church replace Israel as the people of God? In one sense, this is clearly the case since the Church inherits the promises given to Israel through Christ (Galatians 3). But what about the land? If the land promise is still out there, waiting to be fulfilled, then Israel as a national entity is still distinct in terms of kingdom prophecy. If the land promise was sinned away and is now replaced by the whole earth, then the nation of Israel itself has no special role in biblical prophecy – it's all about the Church.

And believe it or not, if it's all about the church, there is no seven-year tribulation or rapture, since the former is entirely built on the 70 weeks prophecy given to Jerusalem and Israel, and the latter is in turn built on the literal tribulation.

Stay tuned for part 2.