

"The OT Prophets and Premillennialism"

Intro:

I. The Old Testament Foundation for the Prophetic Message about God's Plan for His Covenant people

A. God's Intention to Establish His Kingdom over the Entire World Gen. 1:26

²⁶ Then God said, "Let Us make man *as* Our image, according to Our likeness. *They will rule* the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth."

B. Yahweh's Covenantal Plan—Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants—Promissory Covenants

C. The Basic Prophetic Message

Before we examine several prophetic passages that clearly describe Yahweh's plan for His chosen nation after judgment and exile from the land, it would be helpful to consider an overview of the basic prophetic message.¹ Here are three key elements of the message of the biblical prophets, although all three elements do not appear in every prophetic passage.

1. You Have Committed Covenant Treachery and Must Repent!

The prophets emphasize the seriousness and extent of Israel's rebellion against Yahweh. Evidence of this rebellion falls into *three categories—idolatry, social injustice, and religious ritualism*.

2. Without Repentance, You Will Experience the Curses of the Covenant!

In addition to pleading with God's people to repent of their covenant treachery, the prophets promise severe consequences for continued rebellion—Deuteronomic expression of blessings and curses. The most serious consequence involves expulsion from the land of promise.

3. God Is Not Finished with You—There Is Hope beyond That Judgment

The messianic promises and future predictions made by the prophets present this aspect of the prophetic message.

The prophetic picture of Israel's future existence would be both different from and better than what Israel had known before their experience of divine judgment. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel presented a glorious future after Yahweh would return them from Babylon exile.

¹ Summarized and revised and from J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 442-47.

The prophets make it clear that Yahweh expected them to pursue genuine, heartfelt obedience after their return. That glorious future did not occur after their return from Babylonian exile because the majority—except for the remnant—of the returnees continued pursuing their same hypocrisy.

The future fulfillment of these marvelous promises centers on the person and work of the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ, His establishing a new (and better) covenant with them (cf. Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 7:19, 22; 8:6), and installing His covenant people in the Promised Land.

However, this provision of abundance and prominence to God’s chosen people was *not an end in itself*.

As God had in mind from the beginning, Israel’s prominence in world affairs was always to direct the attention of their fellow Israelites and the Gentiles around them to the awe-inspiring and incomparable nature of Israel’s God (Exod. 19:4–6; Deut. 26:16–19).

Numerous OT prophetic passages envision the *restoration of a redeemed nation of Israel* to the land of promise in the predicted millennium.

II. The Prophetic Pattern for God’s Dealings with Israel and the Nations

When you read the biblical prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, they repeatedly present a series of eschatological expectations that are grounded on and will follow God’s promise of covenant judgment (“curse”) against His chosen people.

A. General Pattern of Events

Here is the general pattern of events that numerous OT passages predict (not always presented in this exact order or with each element present).

Early in Israel’s history, Deuteronomy 4:25–31 and Deuteronomy 29:22–30:10 present this anticipated eschatological progression. Jeremiah 29:4–14 delineates them with a clear focus on Israel’s Babylonian exile as the more immediate paradigm for the fuller consummation of Yahweh’s intentions for His covenant people:

- **Near Future Eviction from the Promised Land**—The prophets promise that Yahweh, Israel’s covenant Lord, will bring covenant judgment upon His rebellious people because of their penchant to commit treachery against their covenant Lord (Deut. 4:25–27; Deut. 29:22–28; Jer. 29:4).
- **Time gap implied**—While it is often implicit and only sometimes explicit, the prophets point to a passage of time during which Yahweh’s covenant people experienced the well-deserved consequences of covenant judgment (Deut. 4:28; 30:1; Jer. 29:10a).
- **Repentance and seeking after Yahweh**—God’s covenant people will become aware of their sin and rebellion and repent. They will enjoy a vibrant, genuine relationship with their Lord (Deut. 4:29–30; 30:1–2, 5b, 6, 8; Jer. 29:12–14a).
- **Judgment of Gentile oppressors**—God will judge those Gentile nations that resist God’s plan to restore His covenant nation to their homeland (Deut. 30:7).

- **Restoration of covenant nation to the Promised Land (the same land from which they were evicted)**—God will regather His covenant people from their scattered locations and reinstall them in the land of promise (Deut. 4:31; 30:3-5a; Jer. 29:10b-11, 14b).
- **The Promised Messiah**—God will raise up His Anointed One/Davidic Ruler who will rule over His covenant people as part of His rule over God’s kingdom throughout the entire world.
- **Peace and Security**—This kingdom will be characterized by peace, security, and spiritual vibrancy because of God’s direction and protection through His Anointed One (Deut. 30:5b, 9-10).

The chart in Appendix #1 toward the end of these notes provides an overview of future events that the OT prophets predicted that Yahweh would bring to pass for His chosen nation, Israel.

This repeated progression of events delineates a divinely guided and facilitated progression from covenant judgment (exile) to repentance to restoration to the land from which Israel had been evicted. Some passages point to the promised Messiah’s role in that future restoration.

III. Important Underlying Principle—Yahweh Guarantees That He Will Restore His Covenant Nation to Their Land and Blessing

In two passages, the prophet Jeremiah presents a key principle that provides a powerful foundation for how interpreters should understand predictive prophecy concerning God’s chosen people, Israel—a divine guarantee that He will fulfill his unilateral covenant promises made to his covenant nation.

A. In Jeremiah 31:35-37, the prophet writes:

³⁵ This is what the LORD says:

The One who gives the sun for light by day, the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar—Yahweh of Hosts is His name:

³⁶ If this fixed order departs from My presence—this is the LORD’s declaration—then also *Israel’s descendants will cease to be a nation before Me forever.*

³⁷ This is what the LORD says: If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below explored, *I will reject all of Israel’s descendants because of all they have done*—this is the LORD’s declaration.

God links His covenant faithfulness to Israel with the fixed order of the sun, moon, and stars, as well as the heavens and the foundations of the earth, that He established at the creation of all that exists. This points to the perpetuity of Israel’s existence as a nation in God’s plan.² Despite most Israelites’ penchant for pursuing covenant treachery, God remains committed to bring to ultimate fulfillment His covenant promises to the covenant nation.

B. The second passage is Jeremiah 33:25-26:

“²⁵ This is what the Lord says:

If I do not keep My covenant with the day and with the night and fail to establish the fixed order of heaven and earth,

²⁶ then I might also reject the seed of Jacob and of My servant David—not taking from his

² Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 187.

descendants rulers over the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Instead, I will restore their fortunes and have compassion on them.”

Suppose Yahweh failed to maintain the order of the universe that He created—day and night, movement of celestial bodies, etc. In that case, it is just as possible that He might not keep His unilateral promises to Israel.

Remember that Jeremiah is writing this oracle to the rebellious nation of Israel that was soon to be devastated and taken into exile by Babylon. Since there is no possibility that Yahweh would fail in sustaining the absolutely essential patterns of the created universe, He promises to:

- provide a Davidic ruler over them in the future kingdom and
- “restore their fortunes and have compassion on them,” i.e., return them to the land of promise and establish his promised kingdom over the entire earth.³

God’s commitment to His chosen people as a nation of His choosing and the role He has in mind for them is anchored in His character as the unchanging God.

IV. Sample of the Prophetic Progression in Ezekiel 34 and 36

Notice the progression and repetition of key ideas in these two passages:

A. Ezekiel 34:10-31

After rebuking the false shepherds of Israel who had deceived and taken advantage of God’s people (34:1–10), notice four key parts of Ezekiel’s message (for emphasis, I have put certain phrases in italics):

1. ***34:11–14- Concerning His flock (Israel) that He had scattered among the nations, Yahweh promises to restore to the Promised Land:***

“¹¹ For this is what the Lord GOD says: See, I Myself will search for My flock and look for them. ¹² As a shepherd looks for his sheep on the day he is among his scattered flock, so I will look for My flock. *I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered* on a cloudy and dark day. ¹³ *I will bring them out from the peoples, gather them from the countries, and bring them into their own land.* I will shepherd them *on the mountains of Israel*, in the ravines, and in *all the inhabited places of the land*. ¹⁴ I will tend them with good pasture, and their grazing place will be on *Israel’s lofty mountains*. There they will lie down in a good grazing place; they will feed in rich pasture *on the mountains of Israel*. I will tend My flock and let them lie down.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD.”

2. ***34:23–24- Yahweh will have the promised Messiah rule over them in that land:***

“²³ I will appoint over them *a single shepherd, My servant David, and he will shepherd them*. He will tend them himself and will *be their shepherd*. ²⁴ I, Yahweh, will be their God, and *My servant David will be a prince among them*. I, Yahweh, have spoken.”

³ Cf. Isa. 54:10- “Though the mountains move and the hills shake, My love will not be removed from you and My covenant of peace [Num 25:12; Ezek 34:25; Mal 2:5] will not be shaken,” says your compassionate Lord. See Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 123, for some helpful comments.

3. **34:25–31- Yahweh will provide them peaceful security, pour out abundant blessings on the land of promise, and be with them.**

God Installs Them in an Abundant and Peaceful Land of Promise- 34:25-29:

“²⁵ I will make a *covenant of peace* with them and eliminate dangerous animals in the land, so that they *may live securely* in the wilderness and sleep in the forest. ²⁶ I will make them and the area around My hill a blessing: I will send down showers in their season—*showers of blessing*. ²⁷ The *trees of the field will give their fruit, and the land will yield its produce*; My flock will be secure in their land. *They will know that I am Yahweh* when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslave them. ²⁸ They will no longer be prey for the nations, and the wild animals of the land will not consume them. *They will live securely, and no one will frighten them*. ²⁹ *I will establish for them a place renowned for its agriculture, and they will no longer be victims of famine in the land. They will no longer endure the insults of the nations.*”

Restored Relationship- 34:30–31:

“³⁰ ‘Then they will know that *I, Yahweh their God, am with them*, and that they, *the house of Israel, are My people*.’ This is the declaration of the Lord God. ³¹ ‘You are My flock, the human flock of My pasture, and I am your God.’ This is the declaration of the Lord God.”

B. Ezekiel 36:16–36

1. **36:16–21- Yahweh exiled His chosen nation from the land of Israel because of their sin**

“¹⁶ The word of the Lord came to me: ¹⁷ “Son of man, while the house of Israel lived *in their land*, they defiled it with their conduct and actions. Their behavior before Me was like menstrual impurity. ¹⁸ So I poured out My wrath on them because of the blood they had shed *on the land*, and because they had defiled it with their idols. ¹⁹ I dispersed them among the nations, and they were scattered among the countries. I judged them according to their conduct and actions. ²⁰ When they came to the nations where they went, they profaned My holy name, because it was said about them, ‘These are the people of Yahweh, yet they had to leave *His land* in exile.’ ²¹ Then I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they went.”

2. **36:22–24- Yahweh will act in accordance with His holiness by restoring His chosen people to the Promised Land:**

²² “Therefore, say to the house of Israel: This is what the Lord God says: It is not for your sake that I will act, house of Israel, but for My holy name, which you profaned among the nations where you went. ²³ I will honor the holiness of My great name, which has been profaned among the nations—the name you have profaned among them. The nations will know that I am Yahweh”—the declaration of the Lord God—“when I demonstrate My holiness through you in their sight. ²⁴ “For I will take you from the nations and *gather you from all the countries*, and will bring you into *your own land*.”

3. **36:25–27- Yahweh will spiritually transform His chosen people:**

“²⁵ I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and *you will be clean*. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will place My Spirit within you and cause you to follow My statutes and carefully observe My ordinances.”

4. 36:28–30- Yahweh will restore them to the land of their fathers and bless that land abundantly!!

“²⁸ Then you will live in the land that I gave your fathers; you will be My people, and I will be your God. ²⁹ I will save you from all your uncleanness. I will summon the grain and make it plentiful, and will not bring famine on you. ³⁰ I will also make the fruit of the trees and the produce of the field plentiful, so that you will no longer experience reproach among the nations on account of famine.”

The prophet Ezekiel forcefully and clearly promises that God has something in mind for Israel, the nation of God’s choosing, that aligns with His covenant promises of land and national status.

- After He judges His chosen nation, He will send His promised Messiah, who will rule over that redeemed nation after their repentance.
- He will restore them to the land of promise from which He had evicted them (according to Ezekiel’s progression).
- Individual salvation is part of God’s plan for His servant nation, *along with* restoring them as a nation to the Promised Land (matching the boundaries found in Genesis). He does not envision individual salvation instead of national restoration, but individual salvation (at a national level-Rom. 11:26) that is part of the national restoration to the land of promise.

V. Yahweh’s Promise to Restore Israel, His Chosen People

Some argue that the prophetic promise of Yahweh’s restoration of His covenant people found total fulfillment in Israel’s return from Babylonian exile. However, the language of the prophetic presentation of restoration does not at all match the limited reality of Israel’s post-exilic return from Babylon to the land of Israel.

The restoration of Israel that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel predict will take two stages or two phases. First, according to Merrill, Phase one “will come to pass in history under the beneficent policy of Cyrus the Persian, but that is *only a type, a foretaste*, of complete renewal and reconstitution that must await the eschaton.⁴ It represents an initial fulfillment—but not complete—and serves as a paradigm for phase two. In phase one, just Judeans return to the land of promise from one place, Babylon. The lofty circumstances presented by the prophets accompanying the promised return do not occur. The Judean returnees are plagued by many of the same spiritual failures as what characterized the nation before the exile to Babylon. Most important, the promised Davidic king is not present.

Phase two, the consummation of Yahweh’s intentions is yet future. It represents the fulfillment of all that the prophets envisioned. There are several very unique features of this return. First, He will gather His covenant people from the four corners of the world. Second, Yahweh will install not just Judeans but all of Israel as a unified people in the land from which He had evicted them. Third, they will be genuine

⁴ Eugene Merrill, “A Theology of Ezekiel,” *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 387.

worshippers of their covenant Lord (cf. Deut. 30:1-10). Fourth, they will enjoy that extent of land Yahweh had promised. Most importantly, the promised Messiah—the Davidic King Jesus—will rule over His people as well as the entire world.

The image in Appendix #2 at the end of these notes depicts these two phases of the restoration described in the prophetic books. Two matching geometric shapes depict these two phases—they share the same basic pattern. The first phase is a subset of the final phase of divinely intended restoration for God's chosen people. The dashed line rather than a solid line shows that the foretaste matches the pattern of what the prophets predicted but does not serve as the complete fulfillment of the consummation of those predictions. There is no meaning change between the foretaste and the consummation. Both phases are organically connected and part of the same predicted trajectory. The second phase brings to fulfillment the totality of God's intentions for His created world—consummation.

What should we learn from these prophetic passages concerning covenant judgment on the nation, followed by spiritual and national restoration? First, biblical interpreters must recognize that God's appropriate judgment on His covenant nation is *not the end of God's story for that chosen nation*. Second, *the land from which He exiles them* as a nation/people is *clearly the land to which He will return them as a nation/people*. The prophetic predictions that God's chosen people would experience the pinnacle of covenant curse—eviction from the land of promise—point to an *objective reality, the literal land of promise*, Israel's God-given home. When those same prophets write of God's intention to return His people to that land of promise, sometimes in the same chapter as their prediction of being removed from that land, they clearly mean that the land to which God's servant nation will return is just as literal and objective as the land from which they were exiled. Finally, the salvation that God's chosen people will enjoy in the eschaton does not preclude or replace the idea that God will restore them to the land He promised them.

VI. Conclusion

From the time of God's creation of all that exists, God declares His intention to establish His rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:26–27). What God plans to do in and through Israel is part of that plan to establish *His rule over all creation*. The biblical covenants repeatedly affirm that God will provide certain realities as part of His plan (for the nation of Israel as well as for the entire world). The ultimate fulfillment of those provisions rests on God's character—the God who manifests His glory by bringing to pass what He promised:

- *Abrahamic Covenant*: Yahweh promises land, nation/people, blessing to His chosen people, blessing for the entire world.
- *Davidic Covenant*: A Davidite will rule over God's future kingdom on earth.
- *New Covenant*: God will provide salvation for all those who participate in that covenant.

The Abrahamic Covenant is specifically presented as a unilateral covenant (Gen. 15)—a done deal in God's mind. The provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant are repeatedly presented in Genesis alongside statements of oath, covenant, and ratification.

The biblical prophets, who graphically describe the appropriate covenant judgment God will bring on His chosen nation, also depict the covenant restoration that God will bring to that same nation. The land from which God evicts His covenant nation is the same land to which He will restore them.

To dismiss or reinterpret the concrete realities (land, nation) that abound in the words of the biblical prophets does not just involve a passage here and there, but scores of prophetic passages. Even though

the prediction that God intends to restore His repentant people to the land of promise occurs in numerous passages, many scholars dismiss the future concrete realities described in those prophetic predictions to the nation of Israel, generally employing typology or Christocentricity (see below image as an attempt to depict that interpretive approach).

This writer has argued that we best handle God's Word when we read the biblical covenants and prophetic predictions that point to the consummation of God's kingdom plan with a certain expectation—that the God who fulfills His covenant promises in a way that matches the promise/prediction, will establish His kingdom on earth, ruled over by His Son, the Messiah. That concrete fulfillment of His repeated predictions and promises exalt God as the incomparable God—the only one that exists and the only one that keeps His promises in a way that matches His predictions/promises.

Appendix One: Progression of Predicted Events for the Nation of Israel

Physical, Spiritual, and National Blessings								
Divine covenantal judgment of God's Chosen People	<i>Implied</i> passage of time—Israel in Exile	Broad Promise—God will restore the fortunes of Israel	Yahweh will judge oppressive Gentile nations	Yahweh will return that nation of Israel to the Promised Land	The nation of Israel will enjoy a vibrant relationship with Yahweh	Yahweh will install His anointed One, the Davidic King, over His chosen people	Yahweh will provide His chosen nation an abundant and peaceful existence in the Promised Land.	Guarantee statement
Isa. 51:17-20			Isa. 51:21-23	Isa. 52:1-3	Isa. 52:6			
Jer. 30:4-7b, 12-15		Jer. 30:1-3a, 7b-8	Jer. 30:3b, 10-11a, 16	Jer. 30:8	Jer. 30:17-20	Jer. 30:9, 21	Jer. 30:22–31:1	
	Jer. 31:2a	Jer. 31:2b-6		Jer. 31:8-10, 16-17, 21-25, 28	31:11-14, 31-34			Jer. 31:35-37
Jer. 32:36	Jer. 32:37a	Jer. 32:42-44		Jer. 32:37b, 42-44	Jer. 32:38-41			
Jer. 33:4-5		Jer. 33:6-7, 10-11a		Jer. 33:11b-13	Jer. 33:8-9	Jer. 33:14-18	Jer. 33:25-26	Jer. 33:25-26
		Ezek. 20:4a		Ezek. 20:41-42	Ezek. 20:43-44			
Ezek. 11:16a ⁵	Ezek. 11:16b			Ezek. 11:17	Ezek. 11:18-20			
Ezek. 34:1-10				Ezek. 34:11-14	Ezek. 34:22, 30-31	Ezek. 34:23-24	Ezek. 34:25-31	
Ezek. 36:16-21			Ezek. 35:1–36:15	Ezek. 36:8-12, 22-24, 33	Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:1-14		Ezek. 36:28-30, 34-38	
		Ezek. 37:23		Ezek. 37:12, 21-22a, c, 25 ⁶	Ezek. 37:14, 23-24b	Ezek. 37:22b, 24a, 25c, 26b-28 ⁷	Ezek. 37:26a	

⁵ Ezek. 11:16-20 occurs as part of Yahweh's condemnation of His covenant people and just before He removes His visual presence from the Temple and Jerusalem. The language of covenant judgment in 11:16 looks to the near-term exile to Babylon initially. However, the universal language of v. 16 points to a much more broad exile—the more distant scattering of God's people in various parts of the world (see below discussion of near and far fulfillment). Consequently, the promised return and restoration is the eschatological setting where God gathers his covenant people to the Promised Land as one act of his establishing His kingdom over the entire world.

⁶ Ezek. 37 opens with the vision of the valley of dry bones, which describes Yahweh bringing His covenant nation to life (vv. 1-9). The prophet transitions from the vision to a prophecy that Yahweh will return His people to the land of promise (vv. 12-14). He emphasizes that the entire covenant people—Judah and Israel—will return (vv. 15-19- two sticks joined together), something that sets apart this predicted eschatological return from the historical return from Babylonian exile. See the below discussion of the near and far fulfillments of Israel's return to the Promised Land.

⁷ Here are just a few of other passages that refer to the promised Messiah ruling over the regathered nation: (Isa. 9:7; 11:1-9, 10; Jer. 23:4-6; 30:9; Hos. 3:5).

Appendix #2: National Restoration in Two Phases:

The eschatological return of all of God's covenant people (Judah and Israel) from the entire world to the Promised Land serves as the consummation of God's promise to place a believing nation in the land that brings to fulfillment the unilateral biblical covenant promises and the predicted land boundaries.

Phase 2:
"Consummation
or Ultimate
fulfillment,"
Distant Future

**Phase 1: "Initial
Fulfillment,"
Near Future**

**Biblical
Prophet**

The return from Babylonian exile serves as the initial fulfillment—near-term—of Yahweh returning the Judean exiles to the land of promise. Just the Judean exiles return from one place, Babylon. This return provides the paradigm or initial installment for Yahweh's ultimate (and yet future) intentions for His covenant people. There is more yet to come.