

A Balanced Relationship Between Dispensational And Covenant Theology

Within the Christian community much confusion exists regarding "Dispensational" verses "Covenant" Theology. Since both of these systems of theology have aspects to them that are true, each has won its share of adherents. On the other hand, each theology can accurately point to an aspect of the opposite system that is flawed. Although there is more to "Dispensationalism" and "Covenant Theology" than a mere discussion of how they integrate Israel and the Church, that issue is important to both and illustrates the distinctive approach each takes in dealing with the Old and New Testament eras. "Covenant Theology" tends to stress the unity between Israel and the Church (and in a similar manner unifies the Old and New Testament eras) while downplaying the distinctions. "Dispensationalism" wishes to separate Israel from the Church (and in a similar manner separate the Old and New Testament eras into different programs that God is involved in) while downplaying many of the similarities. The following pages will attempt to pick up the truths of each system while jettisoning the inaccuracies.

Lets begin with a number of questions that would generate different responses depending on whether a dispensationalist or covenant theologian were answering.

Questions

1. Did the Old Testament prophets envisage the Church and the salvation of Gentiles during the Church Age?
2. Is the message of the Old Testament and the prophets exclusively Jewish? In the Old Testament, is there a nationalistic exclusiveness fit for the Old Testament dispensation only and does God therefore focus only on the Jews? That is, Gentiles need not apply - at least until New Testament times.
3. Must we choose between a purely nationalistic Jewish interpretation of God's dealings with man in the Old Testament (dispensational) or a purely spiritual interpretation which links the people of God together as one with no Jewish/Gentile distinctions (covenant)?
4. How far did the Kingdom of God (defined here as the "rule and realm of God") extend in the Old testament? Did it extend so far as to include a spiritual body of believers composed of both Jews and Gentiles and was that "spiritual body" the focus of God's Kingdom? or did the Kingdom only focus on a geopolitical entity called national Israel?
5. Did the Kingdom of God (the rule and the realm of God) commence with the ascension of Jesus? With Pentecost? With a future "Parousia" (i.e. the Second Coming)? or with some other time?
6. Was the form of God's Kingdom in Old Testament times solely inward and therefore spiritual, beginning in the heart, or was it solely external and therefore only geopolitical in

form? Has the Kingdom of God changed from whatever it was in the Old Testament era to something different in our day?

7. Where do the Gentiles fit in the previous promises of God, those given during Old Testament days?
8. Is the New Testament gospel which is being preached to Gentiles qualitatively different than the Old Testament gospel?
9. Did God intend that the Gentiles even in Old Testament times should receive the gospel?
10. Have the promises to Israel been made over to a new Israel - the Church?

Several Provisional Answers

What is needed in an analysis of the two systems and in an arrival at answers to the previous questions posed is the exposition of relevant Bible passages. Amos 9:11-15 and Acts 15 will be the texts that we will use to help steer our way through these weighty matters. Before we look at those passages however, some provisional comments regarding the previous questions need to be given.

1.) Regarding the exclusive Jewishness of the Old Testament scriptures that question 2 raises and which dispensationalism often claims to exist, note that Genesis 1-11 cannot be seen as a nationalistic Jewish tract. Its scope concerns the 70 nations which Genesis 10 identifies. Significantly, at the very inception of the Jewish nation when God called Abraham in Genesis 12, He immediately tied the future of the Jews and Gentiles together. In verses 3-5, God referred back to these 70 nations just identified when He said to Abraham "in your seed shall all the FAMILIES of the earth (i.e. the ones named in Genesis 10) be blessed." This is more important than first meets the eye. God linked the "nations" of the earth with Israel for "blessing" at the very outset. So even in the Old Testament era, the Jewish/Gentile link begins to be seen for it was through Abraham's "seed" that Gentile blessing would come.

2.) It is often put down as fact that the-New Testament gospel differs from whatever gospel Israel knew in the Old Testament era (question number 8 above). But the gospel given in the New Testament is the same gospel as the gospel given in the Old Testament according to Paul. We cannot sort out different gospels. For example, in Galatians 3:8, Paul says that the gospel was already preached in Old Testament times to Abraham. Galatians 3:8 delivers an important theological truth when it says, "...the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.'" Paul sees the gospel (salvation comes by faith in God's seed, i.e. in Jesus) as being preached in Genesis 12:3. That Genesis 12:3 gospel is none other than our gospel, preached in Old Testament days to Abraham.

Further, in Romans 10:6-10, Paul declares that the word he is preaching, which he calls in verse 8 "the word of faith" is one that came from the Law of Moses. In effect, Paul asks, "Do you know from where I got the message 'with the mouth confession' and 'with the heart belief' (verse

9)? I got it from Moses, from Deuteronomy 30:10-14." He does not use the exact words that I have just put in his mouth but that is the essence of his point.

If that were not enough, look at Hebrews 3:17-4:2. It reads, "The gospel was preached to us, **as unto them** (the context refers to the Old Testament Jews who died in the wilderness due to disbelief and disobedience). Same gospel! Same preaching! Same word! Given to us "as unto them." But that word "was not united by faith in those who heard" (verse 4:2). Hence, they died for having rejected the gospel message which was being freely offered to them.

3.) We should note (in regard to questions 4 and 9 above) that the gospel was extended to Gentiles even in Old Testament times. Remember that Genesis 12:3 harks back to the nations of the earth just mentioned in Genesis 10. Also, large sections of the prophetic books are directly addressed to Gentiles. Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 45-51, and Ezekiel 25-32 represent twenty-five chapters of example. Further, there are a dozen references that delineate what purpose the plagues were to play in the lives of the Egyptians. Those references say that the plagues came, "So that the Egyptians shall KNOW that I am God." The primary purpose of the plagues were not to zap the Egyptians, but to provoke them to faith. They were to see that this is the God of Israel who can do these things and they were then called to believe in Him: Exodus 7:5, 8:10,19,20, 9:16,20,30, 14:4,18. The plagues accomplished their goal for in Exodus 12:38 we see a "mixed multitude" who "went up with" Israel. This mixed multitude was composed of Jews and Egyptians. So already in Exodus 12 there is seen to be a people of God which is composed of Jews and Gentiles.

More examples of believing Gentiles are Melchizedek, a local Canaanite priest/king who believes in the Lord. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Zipporah, Moses' wife. Balaam, who may not have been as bright as his donkey but who seems to be a believer. Rahab, the local Gentile barmaid who came to know the Lord and is listed in "Faith's Hall of Fame," Hebrews 11:31. Ruth, a Moabite, who figured in the lineage of Jesus. The Gibeonites, the Rechabites of Jeremiah 35, the Ninevites who repented at Jonah's preaching. And many others.

In fact, entire Old Testament books were written and delivered to Gentiles; Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum. Portions of other books could be included: e.g. Amos 1-2, Ruth; all of which shows that God was highly interested in Gentile salvation during the Old Testament era.

Hence, the answer to question #9 is "Yes, God intended that the Gentiles even in Old Testament times should receive the gospel and be part of the 'spiritual body' known as God's people." Yet at the same time His Kingdom continued to have an external aspect to it that zeroed in on the political entity known as national Israel. God said to Pharaoh, "Let My People Go." In so saying, He referred to National Israel. Thus, the answer to question #4 is that God's Kingdom had both a spiritual aspect that extended to Jew and Gentile and a geopolitical one known as Israel.

4.) Regarding question 10 above. No transfer goes on between promises being taken from Israel and given over to the Church. Yes, an enlargement of the promises which include their being given over to the Gentiles can be discerned in the New Testament. But this enlargement has already been anticipated all along in the Old Testament itself.

Amos 9:11-15; Acts 15

We come to Amos 9:11-15, a key passage which helps to sort out the many questions regarding the Jewish/Gentile relationship. A brief review of the book of Amos should prepare us for an understanding of Amos 9.

Amos 1-2 demonstrates that God holds all nations to the same moral standards, the Moral Law, which He has set for Israel.

Amos 3-5 brings us the great "Shema" (Hebrew word for "Hear") sections. These chapters call Israel to that standard as well, or else.

Amos 5:18-6:14 are the "Woe" passages that proclaim the trouble which will come to those who do not hold to the standard God has set.

Amos 7, 8, and 9 present the "Five Visions" portion of the book. In the fifth vision, God is seen smashing all the refuges where sinners amongst His people are trying to hide. In Amos 9:2, God smashes the spiritual refuge; in verse 3, the earthly refuge; in verse 4, the refuge of hope in the future where non-believers may try to take comfort. At length, in verse 10, God proclaims that "all the sinners among my people will die by the sword, that is, all those who say, 'disaster will not overtake or meet us!'"

This brings us to the main point. God cannot end the story with this word of ultimate destruction as its conclusion. He never ends the story that way. He always gives a word of hope. That word of hope begins in verse 11 as the prophet suddenly turns and gives us a glimpse of some future day of glory when God's ways will triumph.

Verse 11 - "In that day, I will raise up David's fallen hut." God uses a present participle to speak of this "falling hut." In other words, when God is speaking during Amos' day, David's hut is in the process of falling. What is this hut (Hebrew, "sukkah" that God says He will raise "in that day?") We have heard of David's "House" in previous scriptures (2 Samuel 7:5,11) but is the "House" related to this "hut" that is in a falling, collapsing, dilapidated form? We should not confuse the reference to David's hut (sukkah) with the tabernacle (Hebrew, mishkan). Nor should we think of David's "hut" as the coming Messiah, known as the branch (Hebrew, sokah) as some commentators have done. Rather, the "hut" actually does refer to the "House" of David as that "House" existed in Amos' day. David's stately "House" had been reduced to a "hut." The House of David, referred to in 2 Samuel 7, refers not to the temple, or David's home, but to a "rule" or a "dynasty" which would come to David. David was promised this "rule" eight different times in 2 Samuel 7. It was explained as a line of ruling descendants (2 Samuel 7:12,16,19,26,29) which the Lord would give him. Usually Kings worry about the durability of their kingdoms (e.g. Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2), but David was relieved of this anxiety. The Lord said that David's "dynasty" or "kingdom" would be secure forever since it was being established by the Lord.

In Amos 9:11 however, the "dynasty" or "house" is said to be in disrepair. It has been reduced to a "hut." This condition which David's house finds itself in makes the promise of God in 2 Samuel look like it is in disrepair. Will David's "hut" fall even further into oblivion thus nullifying God's promises? No! Look how God promises to raise that broken down house back up again "in that day" (Amos 9:11). David's "dynasty" will once again be strong and his "rule" will once more be firm. In the meantime, it can only be described as a "hut." In 722 B.C., a century or so after Amos' time, David's "House" fell into even worse shape when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom.

But then, in a fascinating passage, God describes exactly what it is that He will do "in that day." Using three Hebrew suffixes, translated as three "its" in verse 11, God clarifies what He is going to do in regards to the fallen hut of David's. He says:

"I will repair **its** broken places (a feminine plural suffix exists on the Hebrew word "broken places" which caused the translators to add "its" to this phrase - a better translation would have been "her broken places)

I will restore **its** ruins (a masculine singular suffix occurs on the word "ruins" causing the translators to add "its" - a better translation would have been "his ruins")

and build **it** (a feminine singular suffix occurs - a better translation would be "and build her") as in the days of old."

Important theology surfaces as a result of these three different suffixes on the words in Amos 9:11. The feminine plural suffix in that first phrase causes us to ask, "what can be the possible feminine plural antecedent which is to be repaired?" "Hut" (Hebrew, sukkah) is feminine singular but surprisingly, a feminine plural suffix was used. Why was a different suffix than we would have expected used and what is in focus here? The Hebrew word "kingdoms" is a feminine plural noun that serves as a possible candidate for reference. In Amos' time, David's House, or "hut" (i.e. the rule of David) had been broken into the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah. The feminine plural could refer to the repairing or bringing back together of the two kingdoms. This is the only feminine plural noun that the context can support. Put simply, at the time when God repairs David's "hut," the repair work will include the putting back together of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah into one Kingdom. Nearly a century and a half after Amos' writing, Ezekiel 37:15-22 refers more explicitly to this same event. This "its" therefore refers to the bringing back together of the two nations. To put this Hebrew word into a neuter indefinite "its" however, as our English translators did, and then to gloss over it is to miss a statement of great import. The true meaning of the passage just does not translate through in the English language.

The second "its," the masculine singular, "its ruins," refers to David himself, or at least to the one of whom David pictures, the new-coming- David, the Messiah. Remember that "hut" (sukkah) is feminine singular. This reference therefore is to Jesus, who will be the future David. God is able to restore the Messiah's, masculine singular, ruins. This "I will restore His ruins" is a subtle reference to the resurrection.

The third "it" is indeed the feminine singular and does refer to the "hut" itself. God reports that He will rebuild David's dynasty "in that day" "as it was in the days of old."

Thus, the three suffixes refer to 1.) the bringing back together of the geographical political entity of the Jewish nation. Hooray for dispensational thought at this point. 2.) The bringing back of "His ruins," which we think speaks of the Messiah. Hooray for dispensational and covenant thought here for both are agreed on this point. And lastly, 3.) the third suffix references the rebuilding of the throne or rule of David into a powerful kingdom once again. The "dynasty" will be restored to its full "House" form, not a "lean to" or "dilapidated hut."

But we go on to Amos 9:12.

This rebuilding of David's hut is accomplished (verse 12) so "that they may possess the remnant of Edom." Who are the "they" and what does "Edom" have to do with it? "They" represents the people of Israel and simply means that David's Kingdom or rule, the New David, and the Nation of Israel are indissolubly linked together with the "remnant of Edom." They will "possess the remnant of Edom." This verse harkens back to Numbers 24:17-18 when Balaam prophesied that a "star" in Judah (the Messiah) would rise and possess (own) the remnant of Edom. In Amos' day, Edom was one of the chief enemies of Israel, like the Amalakites were in earlier times. Exodus 17 and 18 contrasts the Kingdom of God with the non-believing Kingdoms of men, represented by the non-believing Amalakites. Later centuries saw the Edomites taking on the position of representing the enemy people of this world. "Edom" then represents all the nations. But here a "remnant" of Edom is referred to. "Remnant" is a great Biblical word that is frequently used in regards to the believing minority of a nation. Here in Amos 9:12 it refers to a believing group of Gentiles, represented by the phrase "remnant of Edom," WHO ALONG WITH A BELIEVING GROUP IN ISRAEL make up the Kingdom of God. How do we know this refers to a believing group of Gentiles? The apposition "even" (better than "and") follows in the next phrase and reads, they will possess the remnant of Edom, "Even all the nations who are called by My name." To be called by God's name is to be part of the believing family of God. So it was God's intention all along to have a Gentile people coupled with the Jewish nation as part of His kingdom.

Acts 15

Acts 15 further clarifies the points we are trying to make in this discussion. As incredible as Amos 9 may be on its own, the New Testament use of it is equally amazing. During a crisis in the early church when serious questions came up regarding the Jewish/Gentile relationship, the apostles turned to Amos 9 for help.

Acts 15:2 says, "there was no small dissension among them." The church had come to one of those royal battles when a heated business meeting was taking place. The Jewish/Gentile cultures had hit the church. What were the leaders to do? Well, some got up and told about their experiences. Peter told about his time with Cornelius and how God saw fit to save him. Then Paul told about his missionary travels. Everyone was going back and forth in the discussion until James stood up and said, "Brethren, listen to me. Peter has told us how God took from among

the Gentiles a people for His Name. And with this the Words (note: not the general sentiment, but the "words") of the prophets agree..." And James now quotes Amos 9:11-12.

First of all, note that James reduplicates the intent of Amos' teaching when he says "After these things" (see Acts 15:16). If you recall, in Amos 5 through 9:10, Amos taught that days of judgment would precede the days of rebuilding the "hut." In Acts 15:15 and following, James says that "After these things" (i.e. the days of judgment which God would bring upon Israel) God would return to rebuild David's fallen tent. The return (Greek, "apostrepho," not the second coming, but a return to the people to rebuild them spiritually through Messiah) was for the purposes of rebuilding the nation... so that the rest of mankind (Acts 15:17 uses "the rest of mankind" as opposed to the "remnant of Edom" so that the real intent of the Amos passage may come across) may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by My Name."

Please appreciate the other church leaders' response to James' quote of Amos in Acts 15. They heard the Amos passage cited and in essence, they said, "You are right. The plan of God in the Old Testament, the promises of God given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David; these promises INCLUDE the Gentiles. And into the House of David, the Kingdom of David, the Dynasty of David, belong and go the Gentiles. Why are we fighting, God has spoken." So they ended the meeting and sang that great hymn "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God." Acts 15-22 records that the Old Testament citation had its intended effect for after it was quoted and commented upon by James, the argument over Gentile admission into God's church was over and it "then seemed good to the apostles and other elders, along with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to" the Gentiles along with a letter of advice. After the letter the discussion was over. Those leaders, upon evaluating Amos' words in 9:11-15 knew that Jews and Gentiles belonged together. **They always had and they always will.**

Note too that in Acts 15:14, God was said to have taken a "people" for Himself from among the Gentiles. Interestingly and not coincidentally, the word for "people" is the Greek word "laos." "Laos" was the term for God's chosen people and when used, Israel thought of themselves. But here it was used of the Gentiles. Hence, though you may have different nationalities in the people of God, there is only one single "people" or "laos" of God. Yes, God included the Gentiles in His plan.

Here then are our conclusions.

James used a plain and simple hermeneutic when he appealed to Amos. James understood that what God had promised Abraham and then made over to David was part and parcel of what was going on in the New Testament world. That is, the promises of God to Abraham and David had definite Jewish political and national aspects, as the suffixes in Amos 9:11 indicate. Yes, there would be a reunited and flourishing Northern and Southern Kingdom brought together as one, there would be a Davidic person who would rule with power, there would be a people of Israel; but there would also be an inclusive but distinctive remnant of Gentile humanity at large.

To restate it once more; all, both Israel and Gentile, would be encompassed in the rebuilding of the "hut" of David. This would occur even though in the interim, the Jewish/Davidic dynasty would appear to sag during the immediate events of Amos' day (8th century B.C.) and the days

thereafter leading up to Messiah. Further, there would be a . Gentile and Israel inclusiveness even though a specific National destiny for Israel continued to be emphasized. There are therefore different aspects that can be discerned in the "people of God," a Jewish aspect and a Gentile aspect. Yet all have a common and basic future role in God's Kingdom.

Amos 9 and Acts 15 give us the Biblical balance that exists between

1. Dispensationalism - a theology which completely separates Jews and Gentiles.
2. Covenant Theology - a theology that completely joins, with insufficient distinctions, the Jews and Gentiles.

To return to the original ten questions which were posed in the beginning of this paper, the message of the Old Testament is not exclusively Jewish but has Gentile ramifications even from the beginning. Recall the linkage between the 70 families of the earth and Abraham's seed, the mixed multitude of Exodus, and the large amount of Old Testament scripture addressed to and concerning Gentiles.

We do not have to choose between a purely nationalistic Jewish interpretation of God's dealings with man in the Old Testament days or a purely spiritual interpretation which links the people of God together as one. The kingdom of God in Old Testament times included both a spiritual body of believers as well as the political body of National Israel.

The Kingdom of God commenced long before the New Testament era began. Jesus' first coming, His ascension, Pentecost, and the future Parousia (the second coming) are all just greater manifestations of that Kingdom. These events are an unfolding of His Kingdom, which Kingdom has always had both an inward spiritual and outward geopolitical manifestation. Admittedly, the geopolitical aspect of God's Kingdom has been greatly de-emphasized during the interval which exists between Christ's first and second comings. But it is waiting to be brought to the fore again at the Second Coming.

Though Gentiles were always intended to receive God's message of grace, it was not clear in Old Testament days that they were totally equal sharers in the promises and inheritance. The coheirship and co-membership waited to be revealed by Paul when he elaborated on the "mystery" wherein every dividing wall was to be destroyed between Gentile and Jew (see Ephesians 2 and 3). The Church age was definitely envisaged by the Old Testament. Amos 9:11-15 is but one example where Gentiles are prophesied to one day play a large part in the Kingdom of God.