

The Prophets and the New Covenant

This article, though it stands in its own right, is intended to be a lead-in to the one which follows; namely ‘The Law on the Believer’s Heart’.

I begin with the key text.¹

A look at 1 Peter 1:8-12

Peter, addressing believers, could say to them:

Believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls. Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven (1 Pet. 1:8-12).

Peter speaks of ‘the prophets’. In fact, what we read here can be properly extended to ‘*all* the prophets’, as Peter himself observed (Acts 3:24; 10:43), and as Christ himself warranted (Luke 24:27).

Note the ‘now’ in Peter’s words: ‘The prophets... prophesied of the grace that would come to you... They were ministering the things which *now* have been reported to you’ – reported by the apostles to believers, he meant, of course. There is no question about what Peter has in mind when he uses ‘now’. He is referring to nothing less than the eschatological change brought about by the coming of Christ and his establishment of the new covenant, as predicted by the prophets and ‘reported’ by the apostles. Peter is certainly not writing about some supposed millennial age *after* this present gospel age. Not at all. He is talking about ‘now’, the ‘but now’ of the new covenant (John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; Rom. 3:21;

¹ What follows in this article is taken from my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law* pp301-312,549-552, lightly edited.

5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 [second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB]; 16:26; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10). There is no doubt about Peter’s theme, I say. It is the sufferings of Christ, the salvation which those sufferings accomplished, and the glories that have *now* followed the finished work of Christ.

We know that the prophets – all of them – prophesied of these things (Matt. 1:22-23; 5:17; 13:17; 26:56; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 1:70; 10:24; 18:31; 24:25,27,44; John 1:45; 6:45; Acts 3:18-25; 10:43; 13:40; 24:14; 26:22; 28:23; Rom. 1:2; 3:21; 16:26; 2 Pet. 3:2). Interestingly, Peter informs us about the reaction of various parties to those prophecies. Angels, who had no personal interest in these matters, who could have no personal interest in them, nevertheless were curious. The prophets themselves, who would not live to see the fulfilment of their prophecies, even so were deeply interested, inquisitive and probed into it all. So, if angels were curious, and the prophets explored these things, how much more should we, as believers – those who inherit these benefits – how much more should we be taken up with them?

What is more, *we* have the enormous advantage of living in the time of the ‘but now’. ‘But now’ Christ has come, and because he has ‘now’ poured out his Spirit to teach us all truth, and to glorify the Son of God by declaring the truth to us through the apostles (John 14:26; 16:13-15; Heb. 2:3; 2 Pet. 1:16-21; 1 John 1:1-4), we ‘now’ have had all these things made clear to us by the Spirit through the apostles. So says Peter. We are living in the time of the ‘now’. If we could ask the prophets to explain their prophecies, they would not be able to help us much. Now... if only we could ask the apostles! They would be able to give us the definitive interpretation and explanation. If only!

Well... *we can* ask them. We can ask them how *they* read the prophets. They have told us, over and over again. All we have to do is open the New Testament and let them speak! This is the key. That is to say, to understand, interpret and apply the prophets, we must submit our minds to the apostles’ teaching drawn from those prophets, and their (the apostles’) exposition of the Old Testament prophecies. How did the Spirit teach the apostles to understand, explain and interpret the prophets? *That* must be definitive for us.

We have no lack of material to guide us. Take the prophecy of Amos 9:11-15. Its terms are old covenant, Jewish; that is, they concern David's tabernacle, Edom, the rebuilding of the cities of Israel in Canaan to form a settlement which will never come to an end, and so on. But the new-covenant fulfilment of Amos 9:11-15 is spiritual. It has nothing to do with tabernacle, temple or vineyards. It is gospel success among the Gentiles. This may surprise some, but James told us so (Acts 15:13-18). The issue which brought this to a head in the early church was conflict over the way Gentiles could be saved, enter the church and go on to sanctification, and, in particular, the part to be played in all this by the law (Acts 15:1-5,24; Gal. 1:7; 2:4; 3:1-5; 4:21; 5:1-12; 6:12-16). James cited Amos, indeed 'the prophets' (Acts 15:15), to show that God had predicted the very thing which was now taking place – namely, the calling of the Gentiles by grace, without the law. Thus James showed the way to read 'the prophets'.

Isaiah 2 speaks of 'the word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem' (Isa. 2:1). A literalist views this as for the Jews. 'In the latter days', Zion 'shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills' (Isa. 2:2). This must mean, to the literalist, that the physical hill of Zion will be higher than Everest! Some try to mitigate this by saying, without warrant, that it will be the highest mountain *in Israel*, which, in any case, is still considerable – Mount Hermon being over 9000 feet (3000m)! What is more, literally 'all nations shall flow to it', climbing this mountain (about 2 or 6 miles high! – depending on Hermon or Everest) to learn the ways of God (Isa. 2:2-3), 'for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem' (Isa. 2:3). And, to the literalist, this will apply to the Jews, 'the house of Jacob', who will say: 'Let us walk in the light of the LORD' (Isa. 2:5). So much for the literal interpretation of this Old Testament prophecy. How does the New Testament understand it?

In the first place, what is the reference to 'the latter days'? Isaiah declared these words in the Old Testament, of course, and he was referring to the age of the New Testament. 'The last days' started with the first coming of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). Peter knew he was in 'the last days' when he preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-

17). John could say ‘it is the last hour’ (1 John 2:18). ‘The last days’ or the ‘latter times’ or ‘the last time’ or ‘these last times’ all refer to the gospel age (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). Christ has come ‘at the end of the ages... to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb. 9:26); ‘the ends [fulfilment, NIV] of the ages have come’ upon us (1 Cor. 10:11). There is no biblical warrant whatsoever for saying ‘the last days’ refer to the millennium, allowing such an age to exist.

Next, take these two mountains, Sinai and Zion. Sinai is mentioned by name only four times in the New Testament; twice by Stephen when speaking of the physical location where God spoke to Moses (Acts 7:30,38), and twice by Paul when speaking of the old covenant (Gal. 4:24-25). Zion is mentioned seven times in the New Testament; twice in the phrase, ‘daughter of Zion’, in reference to the actual Jerusalem (Matt. 21:5; John 12:15), four times with reference to the gospel or the church (Rom. 9:33; 11:26; Heb. 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:6), and once where the prophetic view of the reader will colour his interpretation (Rev. 14:1). In Heb. 12:22, ‘Zion’ must be figurative; the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’ cannot be the literal city in the Middle East. Note the contrast between Israel and the church. Israel came historically to a physical mountain; believers do not – they come to Christ. Furthermore, nobody can believe that all those addressed in the letter to the Hebrews were actually living at Zion. And yet the writer speaks of them as having come to Mount Zion – not for a fleeting visit as tourists, but permanently living there. The verse cannot refer to believers going to heaven when they die, since that is future, and the verse speaks of a past experience (‘you have come’) which has led to their present salvation, and its consequences. The writer to the Hebrews goes on to explain this spiritual experience they are enjoying now. The context is the new covenant (Heb. 12:24).

So when the prophets promised that in the latter days God would elevate Zion and send his law out of Zion (Isa. 2:3; Mic. 4:2), they were not speaking literally of the Mosaic law being preached in a physically raised Jerusalem; they were predicting the worldwide advance of the gospel. The fact is, they were going further. They were making an implicit contrast between the old covenant from Sinai, and the new covenant from Zion. Sinai and

Zion are two very different places; the law of Sinai and the law of Zion are two very different laws. But laws they both are! Let us not run away with the idea that just because they are not under the law of Sinai, believers are lawless. They are under the law of Zion, the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:20-21; Gal. 6:2). And what a contrast there is between Sinai and Zion (Gal. 4:24-26). The same goes for the two laws. Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the law and so give it to Israel; Christ reigns on Mount Zion: 'I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion' (Ps. 2:6), from where he issues his law: 'For law will proceed from me' (Isa. 51:4), and will run throughout the world: 'The coastlands shall wait for his law' (Isa. 42:4). 'The LORD is well-pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will exalt the law and make it honourable' (Isa. 42:21). Who can think that this 'law' is just the ten commandments? Or even the entire books of Moses? Surely it must be the gospel. It is, beyond question, the entire word of God, particularly in its revelation of Christ. *This* is the way to read the prophets. Listen to Isaac Watts' hymn on the contrast between the law and the gospel:

*Curs'd be the man, for ever curs'd,
That does one wilful sin commit;
Death and damnation for the first,
Without relief, and infinite.*

*Thus Sinai roars, and round the earth
Thunder, and fire, and vengeance flings;
But Jesus, thy dear gasping breath
And Calvary, say gentler things:*

*'Pardon and grace, and boundless love,
Streaming along a Saviour's blood;
And life, and joy, and crowns above,
Obtained by a dear bleeding God'.*

*Hark! How he prays (the charming sound
Dwells on his dying lips): 'Forgive!'
And every groan and gaping wound
Cries: 'Father, let the rebels live!'*

*Go, ye that rest upon the law,
And toil and seek salvation there,
Look to the flame that Moses saw,
And shrink, and tremble, and despair.*

*But I'll retire beneath the cross;
Saviour, at thy dear feet I'll lie!
And the keen sword that justice draws,
Flaming and red, shall pass me by.*²

The same goes for 'Jerusalem'. In Galatians 4:25-27, Paul distinguished two Jerusalems; namely, the literal, the earthly 'Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children', and the spiritual Jerusalem, the church, 'the Jerusalem above [which is] free, which is the mother of us all'. Then he quoted Isaiah 54:1, applying it to the spiritual – not the literal – Jerusalem. *This* is how to read the prophets.

Take the prophecy of Zion in Isaiah 28:16, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not act hastily'. The New Testament use of this (Rom. 9:33; 10:11; 1 Pet. 2:6) clearly indicates that the prophet was predicting gospel times, especially Christ himself. The literal, old Zion was destroyed in AD70 (completed in AD135). The Zion in question is the heavenly Jerusalem, the church.

Such things are repeated times without number. Prophecies in the days of the old covenant were given in Jewish terms – how else could they be given? – and often given figuratively. They must be interpreted with this in mind. To read them literally when they are written figuratively, would be to make a foolish, not to say grievous, mistake. Likewise, to read them as literal for the Jews, when the New Testament applies them spiritually to the church, is another bad mistake.

For instance, a literal interpretation of Joel 2:28-32 demands remarkable astronomical signs; Acts 2:14-21 gives the right way to interpret the passage. Does anyone expect a literal fulfilment of Joel 3:1-2,12-16? If so, how deep will men be standing on one another's shoulders in the Valley of Jehoshaphat? Will the mountains of Judah literally run with wine and milk, and a fountain overflow from a newly-built temple (Joel 3:18)?

² *Gospel Hymns*, The Strict and Particular Baptist Society, Robert Stockwell, London, 1915, number 394.

Take the prophet Hosea. A literalist must expect the establishment of a reunited and massively enlarged Israel, living in material abundance under king David (Hos. 1:10-11; 2:16-23; 3:5). The New Testament shows the proper interpretation of these passages, however; namely, the calling of Jews and Gentiles under Christ in the gospel (Rom. 9 – 11, especially Rom. 9:25-26). And the same goes for the other prophecies which the apostle quoted in writing those chapters. Paul applied Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 to the calling of the Gentiles (Rom. 9:24-26), yet Hosea 1:8-11 itself speaks only of the children of Israel. The context of Hosea 1 is the defection and judgment of Israel, and God's surprising mercy to them despite their departure from him. The same applies to Hosea 2:23. The word 'Gentiles' does not appear in Hosea, except in Hosea 8:8, and this has no connection whatsoever with their salvation. A literalist, an interpreter wedded to the old-covenant, Jewish explanation, would never see – could never see – the calling of the Gentiles in Hosea. *But Paul did.*³

Take Ezekiel: surely no one expects the setting up again of David as king, his reign to last for ever – which means he as Israel's king will never die (Ezek. 34:23-31; 37:24-25) – and the rebuilding of the temple with all its apparatus of priesthood and sacrifice, including altar, offerings, feasts and holy-days (Ezek. 37:26-28; 40:1 – 46:24). And, reader, please note, with regard to these sacrifices and offerings, if literally restored, they must be for atonement for sin (Ezek. 43:13-27; 45:17-25), not merely for commemoration, as some try to say. Are we to expect Israel to have a prince again, a prince who will have sons, who will have an allotment of land, the inheritance of which is to be maintained according to property laws which distinguish between royal sons and servants (Ezek. 44:3; 45:7-8; 46:2,16-18)? Is the land yet to be reallocated according to the tribes (Ezek. 45:1-8; 47:13 – 48:29)? Who will the aliens be (Ezek. 47:21-23)? Will the tribal settlement be in rectangles (Ezek. 45:1-8; 48:1-29)? Will the observance of the new moon and the sabbath be re-established, literally (Ezek. 44:24; 45:17; 46:1-4,6,12)? Of course not! Ezekiel's prophecy is fulfilled in the new covenant. See how it is applied to the believer

³ See my *Romans 11: A Suggested Exegesis*.

in 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1. The same goes for Isaiah 52:7-12; 61:4-7 and 66:20-21, and so on.

Again, take Zechariah: surely no one expects a restoration of Jewish fasts and feasts (Zech. 8:19; 14:16), the setting up of the tribes again (Zech. 12:12-14),⁴ and annual visits by all the peoples of the earth to Jerusalem for worship at the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16-19), including sacrifices on the temple altar (Zech. 14:20-21), do they? If so, what do they make of: ‘The Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands’ (Acts 7:48)? What do they make of Hebrews 7 – 10; in particular, Heb. 9:10; 10:9,18?

God swore to his ‘servant David’: ‘Your seed I will establish for ever, and build up your throne to all generations... His seed also I will make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven... His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me; it shall be established for ever like the moon’ (Ps. 89:3-4,29,36-37). How are we to understand this? Was God saying the kingdom of Israel would last for ever, with one of David’s descendants reigning as king? This cannot be. The kingdom, ruined, its royal line broken by the captivity (which was spoken of in the immediate context, Ps. 89:38-51), was not restored after the Jews’ return. Even if it had been, still it would have fallen far short of the categorical terms of the prophecy. Nor, allowing the possibility for sake of argument, will a temporary restoration of the kingdom in the millennium – albeit lasting for a thousand years – and which will end in ruin, meet the case.

God was speaking of the *endless* reign of *Christ* – *he* is the seed of David (Gal. 3:16) – the endless reign of Christ over his seed, his elect (Isa. 53:10). The angel, speaking to Mary, before the birth of her son, said of Jesus: ‘He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David. And he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’ (Luke 1:32-33). This is none other than that which was prophesied by Isaiah: ‘Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be

⁴ Those who think Rev. 7:4-8 refers to the literal tribes of Israel have to explain why none from the tribe of Dan will be included, why both Joseph and Manasseh are included, but not Ephraim, and whether or not they take the 12,000 to be literal, and, therefore, exact.

upon his shoulder... Of the increase of his government... there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice' (Isa. 9:6-7).

The point is that the new-covenant fulfilment and application of old-covenant language, terms, ordinances, promises, prophecies and commandments, strips out the external, Jewish element as we pass from the Old to the New Testament, since it has been abolished in the change of covenant. The writer to the Hebrews, writing nearly two thousand years ago, described these things as then being 'obsolete and growing old... ready to vanish away' (Heb. 8:13). This is how the New Testament reads the Old. It is the way *we* must do it. The application is to be spiritual and inward, not literal and external. No longer is there any concern over land, an earthly kingdom, a physical temple, physical circumcision, and so on. Such things pale into insignificance – indeed, into oblivion – in the light of the true interpretation, which is Christ and the gospel. The New Testament is its own interpreter.

Let me say just a little more on this. We must allow the New Testament to set the agenda. It is quite wrong, for instance, to read the New Testament in light of the Old. We understand and appreciate the Old through the lens of the New. And there is a further point. We all have our systems of theology, and our schemes of prophecy. Very well. But, where necessary, those systems and schemes must fall before Scripture. As we have seen repeatedly, we must resist the temptation to trim Scripture to make it fit our system or scheme. Sadly, for many, the system comes first. It is a temptation to us all. But if we force Scripture to fit our scheme, not only are we committing a wrong, we are bringing grievous trouble and misery, not only to ourselves, but to those who adopt our scheme and follow the track we have marked out. We must not do it! 'Let God be true...'

A vital point

Now for another point. And a big one, at that. In all this, the apostles did not, as is sometimes claimed, draw a *parallel* between Jews and Gentiles. I stress this. The New Testament way of using these prophecies is not by drawing a parallel; it talks about their *fulfilment*. 'Fulfilment'! This is *the* word, as we have seen time and

again. Nor does the New Testament ever say it is making just a local application of these prophecies, a mere interpretation of them, leaving the fulfilment to a later age. No! It always talks in terms of ‘just as it is written’, ‘this is what was spoken’, ‘this is’ (Acts 2:16,25,34; 3:22; 4:11,25; 8:32; 13:33-35,40,47; 15:15; 28:25-26, for instance); that is, events in apostolic days were the fulfilment of the prophecies. By no stretch of the imagination can a temporary (albeit 1000 years long) Jewish kingdom, which will end in ruin, be greater than the everlasting kingdom of believers under the gospel. For that to happen, we should have to regard a temporary (albeit 1000 years long) Jewish kingdom, which will end in ruin, as being the *fulfilment* of the prophecies, while the gospel (which has already lasted for nearly 2000 years) is a mere local *application* of them. Fantastic nonsense!

Take Hosea, whose prophecy I referred to earlier. The prophet spoke of the northern tribes of Israel. He did not include the Gentiles in his prophecy; Paul applied this to the church. Paul was speaking of Gentiles and not Jews. Paul was *not* merely drawing an analogy.⁵

So, I say again, the New Testament writers did not, as is claimed, draw a *parallel* between Jews and Gentiles, or draw an *analogy*. Rather, rightly *interpreting* the verses, they showed us the way to read the prophets and their prophecies. Let me restate this. The New Testament way of using these prophecies is not by drawing a parallel. It talks about their fulfilment. Fulfilment, I say again. Let ‘fulfilment’ ring in our ears. It is vital (Matt. 5:17-18 – all of Matthew!; Acts 3:18; Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:14; 6:2, for instance). Nor does the New Testament ever say it is making a local application of these prophecies, a mere *interpretation* of them, leaving the *fulfilment* to a later age. No! It always talks in terms of

⁵ But what about his use (Rom. 10:20-21) of Isa. 65:1-2? If Isaiah was speaking of Israel, once again we have an Old Testament promise of blessing for Israel (Isa. 65:1) fulfilled in the church. Yet if, in fact, in Isa. 65:1, the prophet was speaking about the Gentiles, but, in Isa. 65:2, was speaking about Israel – as I think – then no explanation of Paul’s use of the passage is required. In 1 Pet. 2:10, Peter applied Hos. 1:10; 2:23 in the same way as Paul in Rom. 9:25-26, which seems to suggest that Hos. 1:10; 2:23 were a kind of ‘proof-texts’ in New Testament times.

‘just as it is written’; that is, events in apostolic days were the *fulfilment* of the prophecies. Which is? When the Old Testament predicts a renewed Israel and the expansion of the kingdom, it is, in fact, predicting Christ, the gospel and the church. And in so doing, the apostles gave us the definitive way to understand the Old Testament in this matter. We know the apostles set out God’s final revelation, his last word, in Christ. As a consequence, the key with which the apostles unlocked and applied the Old Testament must be our key also. And, bear in mind, never once do we come across any evidence of apostolic practice to the contrary.

What I am saying is sometimes dismissed with the pejorative, ‘Replacement Theology’! Replacing what with what? Replacing Israel by the church. Well, if it is a ‘replacement’, who did the replacing? *I* didn’t! The writers of the New Testament did it – men who were led into all truth! I am simply repeating and enforcing their words. For my part, that is enough to silence all dismissive talk of ‘Replacement Theology’. The apostles who could write, for instance – and this is just a sample – the words of Romans 2:28-29; 9:6-8; Galatians 3:7,9,28-29; 5:6; 6:15; Ephesians 2:11-18; Philippians 3:3; Colossians 3:11 and 1 Peter 2:9-10, have, I am convinced, made their position perfectly clear. Abuse may make a smoke screen, but Scripture shines through the fog!

Notice, once again, that all this applies to ‘*all* the prophets’ (Luke 24:27; Acts 3:24; 10:43). In every prophet, therefore, we may find Christ and the gospel. More, in every prophet we *must* find Christ and the gospel. So much so, even before the full revelation of the new covenant, before the ‘but now’, Christ could speak severely to his disciples:

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken. Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory?... These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms concerning me (Luke 24:25-26,44).

No wonder Christ, ‘beginning at Moses and all the prophets... expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself’ (Luke 24:27). No wonder, also, that Paul, informing the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia of the atrocious sin of the Jews in

Jerusalem in crucifying Christ, could put it like this: ‘Those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know’ – that is, because they were ignorant, because they did not recognise (1 Cor. 2:8), because they would not recognise – ‘those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know him [Christ], nor even the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning him’ (Acts 13:27-28). Note that. The Jews should have known; they had ‘the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath’. The prophets told them what to expect – if they had had eyes to see it. And what goes for the Jews in Christ’s day, goes for us today – and more so. We have the Scriptures fully revealed and completed. The ‘but now’ has come. More light? More responsibility!

The evidence, I submit, is overwhelming. *This* is the way to read the old covenant today; namely, to look for its spiritual fulfilment in Christ. And, at the very least, therefore, it encourages us to search for Christ in all the Scriptures: ‘You search the Scriptures’, or ‘Search the Scriptures’; ‘these are they which testify of me’ (John 5:39).⁶

An objection

But what of Ephesians 3:1-6? Since Paul called the church ‘a mystery’, ‘which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men’, how, it is asked, could it have been revealed in the Old Testament? As a matter of fact, some go so far as to allege that the Old Testament contains no information about the church at all. Is this right? Certainly not! Scripture uses ‘mystery’ as a precise technical term, speaking of something which cannot be known by man unless God reveals it to him, something beyond discovery by human effort or ability (see Eph. 1:9; 6:19; Col. 1:27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:7; 1 Tim. 3:9,16). It is *not* something hard to grasp, or

⁶ I am reminded of the man who commented on a sermon he heard: ‘Not enough of Christ in it for me’. ‘But Christ was not mentioned in the text’, came the reply. ‘Wherever you are in England, you will find a road that will take you to London’, the man responded. ‘Every text has a way to Christ. It is the preacher’s job to find it’. Spurgeon commended Robert Hawker for the way he always saw Christ in the Psalms – even though, as Spurgeon said, he sometimes saw him where he was not!

vague, abstract or indefinite. To claim that ‘the mystery’ is the church, and that the church therefore was not revealed in the Old Testament, is wrong on more than one count. First, the mystery, said Paul, was not the church, but *something about the church*; namely, ‘that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, of the same body, and partakers of [God’s] promise in Christ through the gospel’ (Eph. 3:6), and that God had planned this from all eternity. The mystery was not simply that Gentiles would be saved, but that in the new covenant, God in Christ would form believing Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church, breaking down the separating wall between them. *That* was the mystery.⁷ In the second place, Paul did not say that the fact that Jews and Gentiles would form one body was *totally unknown* in the Old Testament. Far from it! He said this mystery ‘in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, *as it has now been revealed* by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets’ (Eph. 3:5). *As?* The word means ‘in the same manner as, just as, exactly like’, ‘in such a way as’. In other words, it had been made known before, but not to the same extent, not with the same clarity as it is under the apostles.

And this is entirely consistent with 1 Peter 1:8-12, to which I will return in a few moments. As Peter assures us, the prophets knew they were handling things they did not entirely comprehend, and it was only when the Holy Spirit made these things fully known to the apostles and the New Testament prophets – ‘but now’ – that men really began to understand many of the Old Testament prophecies. But it is wrong to say that the Old Testament made no mention at all of the church. The fact is, the Old Testament prophets were continually pointing men to Christ, the gospel and the church, even though the prophets themselves did not fully grasp what they were speaking about, and knew they had not grasped it.

In short, Eph. 3:1-6 does not in the slightest militate against the claim that we must read the prophets through new-covenant eyes, and see Christ, the gospel and the church in them. Not at all. It enforces it. In light of it, we should expect to find the glories of the gospel and the church spoken of in the Old Testament, but not so

⁷ Compare my *Romans 11*.

clearly as in the New. None of this, of course, supports the Reformed system of ordering the affairs of the church by the Old Testament. I have fully explained my position elsewhere.⁸

I go back to the key passage, 1 Peter 1:8-12. Speaking of ‘the salvation of your souls’, received through faith in Christ, Peter said:

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

If we could have asked the prophets: ‘Of what are you prophesying when you speak of the elevation of Zion, the going forth of the law from Zion, and the worldwide effect of it?’, and so on, there is no doubt as to their reply: ‘There are things we do not know. We do not know the precise timing and circumstances of the events we predict (1 Pet. 1:11), but we know the suffering Messiah is coming, and following hard upon his death and as a consequence of it, unspeakable glories will come, salvation is coming, grace is coming’ (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Isaiah, for instance, would have said that the coming Messiah must suffer for his people, suffer for their sins, even unto death. Nevertheless – and because of this – untold glories must follow. ‘God has revealed to me’, Isaiah would have said, ‘that the Messiah “shall see his seed... he shall see the labour of his soul... by his knowledge my righteous servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong” (Isa. 53)’. The prophets would have been unanimous: ‘We will not live to see it’, they would have said. ‘It is for others (1 Pet. 1:12). We are very curious about what we are speaking of, what it

⁸ See my *Infant Baptism Tested; The Pastor: Does He Exist?*; and *Christ* pp75-98,369-391, in particular. By claiming that Israel was the Old Testament church, covenant theologians inevitably open a Pandora’s box, less the ‘Elpis’.

means, the timing of it all and how, precisely, it will come about (1 Pet. 1:10-12). Despite our partial understanding, and despite its coming only after we are dead, come it will'.⁹

There is no hint of a suggestion in the New Testament that they would have said: 'We are predicting a physical restoration of Israel, and the re-instating – indeed, the exaltation of – the old-covenant law and worship'. The truth is, it is the very opposite; 1 Peter 1:10-12 tells us they were predicting the grace which would come to the church, not the law to the Jews.¹⁰

Consider such passages as Luke 24:27,44-47; John 1:45; Acts 3:18,25; 7:52; 8:30-35; 26:22-23; 28:23; Romans 1:2; 3:21; 16:26; 1 Peter 1:10-12. Unless we see Christ in the Old Testament – both law and prophets – we shall never read it and them aright. 'For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' (Rev. 19:10). Everything in the Old Testament points forward to Christ, and everything in the New Testament is centred in him. This is the way to read the Bible. There is both a continuity and a discontinuity. To deny one or the other, or to confuse the two, is to make a grievous mistake. As Peter told the Jews: 'Those things which God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets, that the Christ would suffer, he has... fulfilled'. Moses spoke of Christ, 'yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days' (Acts 3:18-24). How categorical – '*all* the prophets... have... foretold *these* days'. Yet so many claim to see a restoration of a national Israel near the end of this age – or after it – in almost 'all' if not 'all the prophets'!¹¹

⁹ This raises some interesting questions. How deeply did the disciples, for instance, probe the matter? They were surprisingly ignorant of Christ's impending suffering – even though he repeatedly warned them of it (Mark 9:31-32; 10:33-34; Luke 9:22,44-45; 12:50; 18:31-34; 22:15-23; 24:7,25-26). The same goes for the resurrection. It was only after the resurrection and Pentecost that things fell into place (John 2:19-22; 12:16; 14:26; John 20:9; Luke 24:1-8,44-49). See note immediately following.

¹⁰ Following on from the previous note, the prophets had got closer to the meaning than the disciples – let alone the Jews – in Christ's time (Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6-8).

¹¹ I do not think the present state of Israel, founded in May 1948, remotely fulfils the prophecies.

Note the words, ‘not to themselves, but *to us* they were ministering’ (1 Pet. 1:12); *to us*, that is, to believers, in this gospel age. *This* was revealed to the prophets. They knew *that* much. I concede that they could not have gone so far as to say something like: ‘The law has been added... till the Seed shall come... The law has been put in charge as our child-custodian until the coming of Christ’ (compare Gal. 3:19,24) – that had to wait for the ‘but now’ of Christ, followed by the outpouring of the Spirit on the apostles. Principally, of course, it had to wait until God revealed it to his people through Paul, writing to the Galatians. Even so, the prophets did know that they were ministering to us. And, the fact remains, *we have* entered into the promised glories, and done so *now*.

Further, while many people will allow that the prophets spoke of Christ in terms of his suffering, note Peter’s assertion that the Spirit, through the prophets, ‘testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ *and the glories that would follow*’ (1 Pet. 1:11). I acknowledge that these glories will culminate in the second coming of Christ and the ushering in of the eternal state (1 Pet. 1:4-5,13), but they are by no means confined to that day. Peter could say that ‘God... raised [Christ] from the dead and gave him glory’ (1 Pet. 1:21). The glories of which Peter spoke – and of which the prophets testified – are nothing less than the glories of the new covenant. As I have pointed out, to say that the saints *will* ‘rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory’, and leave it there, is sadly to miss the point. The truth is, ‘though now you do not see him [Christ, that is], yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory’ (1 Pet. 1:8). In other words, while it is true that the saints *will* rejoice in the age of the new heavens and the new earth, the wonder of the gospel – the wonder of the new covenant – the wonder of the grace Christ has brought in, even now, by his sufferings – is that the saints rejoice *now*, at this very time, despite their grief through ‘various trials’ (1 Pet. 1:6). This is a vital part of ‘the glories that would follow’. It is not at all surprising, therefore, to hear Christ explaining that the prophets – who realised they were handling something very wonderful – ‘desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it’ (Matt. 13:17; Luke 10:24). ‘These all died in faith, not

having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them' (Heb. 11:13). This 'not having received the promises', however, does not apply to us! In the new covenant, it is to those of us who are believers – 'upon whom the ends of the ages have come' (1 Cor. 10:11) – that these things belong. They are ours. We *have* received the fulfilment of these promises.

Take Peter's sermon after the miraculous healing of the cripple (Acts 3:11-26). The apostle was explicit. This miracle, he said, is part of that which 'God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets... Yes, and all the prophets... as many as have spoken, have... foretold these days' (Acts 3:18,24). And what events were unfolded in 'these days', of which Peter was speaking? The sufferings and resurrection of Christ (Acts 3:13-18). But not only that! Why, the very context tells us what the apostle was referring to. He was making proper capital out of the miracle they had all just witnessed. The prophets foretold that, too! Oh yes, said Peter, the prophets foretold these days of suffering. But, in addition, notice how he opens his sermon: 'Men of Israel, why do you marvel at this?... The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied...' (Acts 3:12-13). The fact is, Peter was talking about the prophets who 'testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ *and the glories that would follow*'. Here was one of the glories!

Making a proper application of this, the apostle immediately commanded the people to repent, promising them salvation – under the striking expression, 'that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord' (Acts 3:19). He was, of course, addressing Jews, and making Jewish allusions. Listen to Isaiah, quoting God himself: 'I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake; and I will not remember your sins... I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud, your sins' (Isa. 43:25; 44:22; see also Ps. 51:1,9; Isa. 1:18; Jer. 50:20). And: 'I will pour water on him who is thirsty, and floods on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They will spring up among the grass like willows by the watercourses' (Isa. 44:3-4; see also Isa. 41:17-20; Ezek. 34:26-27;

Joel 3:18). Compare John 4:13-15; 6:35; 7:37. And Peter's hearers – Jews – certainly would have grasped what he was talking about. Furthermore, they would have realised that the apostle was declaring Christ to be God Almighty in human flesh.

Ah! But what about Acts 3:20-21? 'That he may send Jesus Christ... whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began'. Doesn't this mean that everything Peter was saying refers not to his own time – that is, our time – but to the millennium which will be ushered in at the return of Christ?

I do not think so. Let me quote Acts 3:19-21 fully:

Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

Working on the basis that Peter *was* talking about the millennium, would somebody give me the explanation of – and connection between – his command to repent and the 'that... so that... that'? Nobody disputes, surely, that Peter was commanding his hearers to repent there and then. Surely he was also promising them that, upon their repentance, God would blot out their sins – there and then. On this basis, the first 'that' falls naturally and easily into place. Very well. Where, then, in this unbroken sentence, does the apostle leap from present experience to the millennium? At what point does he make this leap? Does it come between 'blotted out' and 'so that'? In other words, Peter commands his hearers to repent, 'so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and... the times of restoration' will come – come in the sense of the millennium? If so, would somebody explain to me how the repentance of sinners two thousand years ago would produce the millennium, yet to come? There is no baulking the 'that' and the 'so that'. The first part of the statement and promise leads to the second, and is instrumental in producing it. The repentance is the instrument, the means by which the blotting out, and all the rest, are produced. There is no evading this, I repeat. I must say that I am utterly at a loss to make the connection between

repentance under Peter's preaching in Acts 3, and a millennium yet to come.

For my part, I believe the apostle was telling the Jews that if they repented, there and then they would receive the joys and sweets of sins forgiven. He enforced this, as I have shown, by reference to the prophets – a reference with which they would have been familiar. By the promise that God would 'send Jesus Christ', therefore, I am convinced that Peter was not speaking of the second coming of Christ, but of the first coming of Christ, and now, supremely, the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of the person and work of Christ – which he himself had just engaged in, and to which he referred in Acts 3:26: 'To you first, God, having raised up his servant Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities'. See also Isaiah 57:19; Acts 10:36; 13:32,38; Ephesians 2:17. It is at this point – when he has exhausted the implications of the 'that' and 'so that', that the apostle moves to make a declaration about Christ's return and – as the prophets foretold – the eternal glories which will then be ushered in. I have already recognised that 'the glories which follow', though they speak of this present time, will only be totally accomplished in the eternal glory.

This is what the apostle is talking of. To shunt *all* these blessings to the (supposed) millennium, is I think not only a mistake. It runs contrary to the context. And it robs believers of the glories which are now theirs – *now* theirs, I say.

'Those things which God foretold by the mouth of all his prophets, that the Christ would suffer, he has... fulfilled'. Moses spoke of Christ, 'yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days' (Acts 3:18,22-24). 'To [Christ] all the prophets witness' (Acts 10:43). Let us, therefore, do as Philip when he was asked by the eunuch concerning Isaiah 53: 'Of whom does the prophet say this?' 'Philip... beginning at this scripture, preached Jesus to him' – and preached him for the conversion and baptism of the eunuch. In short, he preached in new-covenant terms (Acts 8:26-38).

In this regard, I find Acts 24:14 intriguing; Paul believed 'everything that agrees with the law and that is written in the

prophets’ (NIV), ‘in accordance with the law’ (NASB).¹² So do we, as he did – as fulfilled by Christ in the gospel; that is, in the new covenant. The key word is *kata*, a word very rich in meaning. Here it means ‘according to’; perhaps, ‘agreeably to’, ‘in accordance with’, ‘in concord with’ (see also Matt. 7:12; Luke 1:70; 16:29,31; 24:27,44; John 1:45; 5:39-47; Acts 3:22-24; 10:43; 26:6,22-23; 28:23; Rom. 3:21; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). What Paul did *not* say was that he was a keeper of the *torah*, and that ‘the Way’ is nothing other than keeping the Mosaic law.

To sum up: the prophets spoke of the coming of Christ, his work and the glories that would follow. All the prophets did. They predicted that Christ would fulfil the old covenant, thus render it obsolete, and establish the new. The New Testament makes it plain beyond a vestige of doubt that this is precisely what happened (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19,23-25; Eph. 2:14-15; Heb. 7:12,18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:10; 10:15-18). And every believer, being in Christ, is a member of this glorious new covenant, a partaker of all its benefits (Rom. 6:14-18; 7:4-6; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19-20; 5:18).

Above all, as the prophets predicted, Christ himself is the new covenant. Listen to Isaiah:

‘Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One in whom my soul delights! I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise his voice, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and smoking flax he will not quench; he will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands shall wait for his law’. Thus says God the Lord...: ‘I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand; **I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people**, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners

¹² Notice what Paul did *not* say. He did not say: ‘I do all that the law requires’. Nor did he say: ‘I am bound by the law’. Nor did he say: ‘The law is the perfect rule by which I live’. Above all, he did not set out what would become Calvin’s three uses of the law, especially the third! Whyever not – if he believed it? In the context, it would have utterly flooded his critics. And, of course, it would have saved believers a great deal of trouble down the centuries.

from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house. I am the Lord, that is my name; and my glory I will not give to another, nor my praise to carved images. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them' (Isa. 42:1-9).

And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, so that Israel is gathered to him (for I shall be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and my God shall be my strength), indeed he says: 'It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be my salvation to the ends of the earth'... Thus says the Lord: 'In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you; **I will preserve you and give you as a covenant to the people**, to restore the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages; that you may say to the prisoners: "Go forth", to those who are in darkness: "Show yourselves". They shall feed along the roads, and their pastures shall be on all desolate heights. They shall neither hunger nor thirst, neither heat nor sun shall strike them; for he who has mercy on them will lead them, even by the springs of water he will guide them. I will make each of my mountains a road, and my highways shall be elevated. Surely these shall come from afar; Look! Those from the north and the west, and these from the land of Sinim (Isa. 49:5-12).

But there is, of course, one great prophecy of the new covenant – the leading prophecy of the new covenant – that I have not considered in all this; namely, Jeremiah 31:31-34. *This is deliberate*. All the above has been preparing the ground for the approach to this towering prophecy of the new covenant. Jeremiah predicts that God will write his law on the hearts of believers, in a new covenant, a covenant unlike the old. What does he mean?

After all the above, can there be any doubt? Although many try to maintain that it is the law of Moses that is written on the believer's heart in the new covenant, they are woefully mistaken. Woefully! Their view is an utter travesty, a grievous diminishing of the glory of the new covenant. The fact is, at conversion, God, by his Spirit, forms Christ in every believer (John 14:23; 17:23; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 3:17; Rev. 3:20; 21:3). Thus Christ himself is the law written on the believer's heart, for Christ himself is the new covenant; indeed: 'Christ is all and in all' (Col. 3:11).

And establishing that from Jeremiah will be my task in the following article: 'The Law on the Believer's Heart'.

David H.J.Gay
September 2014
davidhjay@googlemail.com