

JOSHUA (5) – Joshua and Christian Zionism (3)

Covenant Fellowship Church

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The Land, The People, and The Promise

A Five-Week Exploration

Week 3: Two Ways of Reading the Story of the Bible: Covenantal v. Dispensational

Goal: To explain the “Operating Systems” of these two theologies.

Sidebar: Here’s perhaps the very best book resource that you could read dealing with the contrast between covenantal and dispensational views of Abraham, Israel, the Land, and Jesus Christ: *Heirs of the Promise: A Covenant Study* (2nd edition), by J. D. Hall (this is available at <https://insighttoincite.substack.com/p/download-heirs-of-the-promise-who>). This link brings you to the substack website of J.D. Hall, and this recommendation is *not* an endorsement of everything that J.D. Hall has written. Depending on your appetite, you might either download only Chapter 7 (free) of the book or obtain the entire book (for a modest premium cost).

Exposition of Key Passages

Joshua 21:43–45

This comparison is central to the differences between covenantal and dispensational ways of reading the Bible, and this passage is the “Achilles’ heel” of the Dispensationalist system. This comparison highlights the fundamental divide between seeing the Land Promise as an *outstanding debt* God owes to ethnic Israel versus seeing it as a *fulfilled type* that points to a global, spiritual reality. (Compare the bronze serpent: Num. 21:8–9.)

Feature	Covenantal Interpretation	Standard Dispensationalist Interpretation
Fulfillment Status	Complete. We take the text literally when it says “all came to pass.” God kept His word entirely.	Partial/Provisional. They argue Israel never occupied the <i>full</i> extent of the land promised in Genesis 15:18–21.
The Word “All”	Refers to the totality of the promise made to the Patriarchs. Not one word failed.	Refers only to the land required for their immediate rest at that time, not the final “eternal” grant.
Nature of the Land	The land was a Type . It served as a shadow of the “Rest” found in Christ and the eventual New Earth.	The land is a Literal, Specific Grant . It is an earthly inheritance belonging specifically to the physical descendants of Jacob.
The “Failure” of Israel	Israel lost the land because the Mosaic administration was conditional . Their exile was a just covenantal consequence.	The promise is unconditional . Though Israel failed, God is obligated to restore the land to them in a future Millennium.
Joshua vs. Jesus	Joshua gave them a temporary rest, which pointed to the “Greater Joshua” (Jesus) who gives eternal rest (Hebrews 4).	Joshua’s conquest was a down payment; the real fulfillment occurs at the Second Coming of Christ.

Theological Implications

Christian Zionism relies on the idea that the “Land Promise” is still “out there” waiting to be fulfilled. Joshua 21 establishes the following:

(over, please)

1. **God is not a debtor:** If the Land Promise were still unfulfilled, it would imply that God’s word “failed” or that the author of Joshua was mistaken. Rather, God’s faithfulness is vindicated by the total fulfillment recorded in Joshua.
2. **The Expansion of the Promise:** We must follow the New Testament’s lead (specifically Romans 4:13) in arguing that the promise to Abraham was that he would be “heir of the **world**,” not just a small strip of land in the Levant. The “land” of Canaan was a starter-map for the eventual Kingdom of God covering the whole earth.
3. **The “Type” v. “Antitype” (or “Fulfilled Type”):** Using Joshua as a foundation, the covenantal view argues that looking for a future Jewish kingdom in Palestine is like wanting the shadow of a tree instead of the tree itself. Once Christ (the Seed) arrived, the “geographical” phase of the covenant led into the “universal phase.

Hebrews 4:8–11: The “entering Rest” = the Land argument

Joshua’s conquest of “the Land” was never intended to be the final fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise.

- **The Logic of “entering Rest”:** The author of Hebrews argues from the lesser to the greater. If the “Rest” mentioned in the Psalms (which were written long after Joshua’s death) was simply the land of Canaan, then God would not have warned the people in David’s time about “entering His rest.”
- **The Refutation:** If the Land Promise were an “outstanding debt” as Christian Zionists claim, the author of Hebrews would have pointed back to the land. Instead, he points forward to a “Sabbath rest” that is found only in Christ.
- **Key Point:** We conclude that Joshua 21:43–45 proves that the *physical* promise was fulfilled, while Hebrews 4 proves that the *physical* fulfillment was merely a “type” of the spiritual rest we now have in the gospel.

Hebrews 11:13–16: The “Heavenly Country” Argument

Consider the desires of the Patriarchs themselves. We deny the idea that God “owes” a physical kingdom to ethnic descendants.

- **The Logic:** Even while Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were standing on the soil of Canaan, the text says they died “not having received the promises.” *How could they be in the land and yet not have the promise?* **The Answer:** The land was a signpost. They were not looking for a return to a specific plot of dirt; they were looking for a “better, that is, a heavenly” country.
- **The Refutation of Zionism:** Modern Christian Zionism actually offers the Jewish people *less* than what the Patriarchs were looking for. By focusing on a secular state in the Middle East, Zionism focuses on the “shadow” (the earthly land) and ignores the “substance” (the City whose builder and maker is God).

The “Shadow v. Substance” Framework

These two Hebrews passages serve to reveal a “Covenantal Hermeneutic” (our approach to reading the Bible) as opposed to the Dispensationalist view of Joshua:

Argument	The “Shadow” (Joshua)	The “Substance” (Hebrews)	Conclusion
The Conqueror	Joshua (the Type)	Jesus (the Antitype)	Jesus accomplishes what Joshua could only foreshadow.
The Territory	Canaan (a small strip)	The World (Romans 4:13)	The promise has expanded from a local land to the entire cosmos.
The People	Ethnic Israel	The Church (Jew and Gentile)	The “Heirs of the Promise” are those with the faith of Abraham.
The Requirement	Law-keeping for land tenure	Faith for eternal inheritance	The Land of Canaan was a conditional “theocracy” that has passed away.

The Abrahamic Land Promise is not “on hold” or “waiting for a millennium.” Instead,

1. **Joshua 21** says God fulfilled it 100%.
2. **Hebrews 4 & 11** says the fulfillment was a pedagogical tool (a “schoolmaster”) to teach us about the Rest found in Christ.
3. **Therefore**, to say that the Land Promise is still unfulfilled is to essentially say that the work of Christ is insufficient or that the “shadow” is more important than the “substance.”

Now, let’s pivot from Bible interpretation to the practical and ethical implications for the contemporary Church. A correct understanding of the Book of Joshua and the Covenant of Grace requires a significant shift in how we must view the modern Middle East.

Conclusions: The Church and the Modern State of Israel

Christian Zionism is not merely a different view of the “end times,” but a fundamental misunderstanding of the gospel itself. These are four major points to consider:

1. The Secular v. The Theocratic

The modern State of Israel (established in 1948) is a **secular geopolitical entity** and not a continuation of the Old Testament theocracy.

- **The Move from “Shadow” to “Substance”:** Since the “shadows” of the Old Covenant were taken up in and fulfilled by Christ, this means that the ***biological*** descendants of Abraham no longer hold a divine “title deed” to the physical land, but Christ owns the entire world, and those united to Him by faith are to be co-rulers of the world with Him.
- **The Error of Identification:** To identify a secular government with the “Kingdom of God” is to commit a form of theological idolatry, ascribing divine sanction to the actions of a fallible, human state.

2. The End of the "Wall of Partition"

Ephesians 2:14 teaches that the “middle wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile has been permanently abolished.

- **Equality in Christ:** Christian Zionism inadvertently rebuilds this wall by suggesting that God has two distinct peoples with two distinct destinies (one earthly, one heavenly).
- **The Covenantal View:** There is only one “Israel of God”—the Church—composed of all who believe in the Messiah, regardless of ethnicity.

3. The Priority of the Gospel Mission

The most striking practical application involves the mission to the Jewish people.

- **Against “Dual Covenant” Theology:** We reject the idea that Jews can be saved through their own covenant apart from Christ.
- **The True Blessing:** The greatest “blessing” a Christian can offer a Jewish person (in accordance with Genesis 12:3) is the presentation of the gospel. To support their residence in a physical land while ignoring their need for the Savior is a failure of Christian charity.

4. Justice and the Ethics of the Kingdom

We need to hear the Bible’s call for “Covenantal Justice.”

- **Impartiality:** Since the Land Promise was fulfilled in Joshua and the earthly theocracy has ended, the Church’s ethical stance in the Middle East should be governed by the universal principles of justice and mercy for all people (both Jews and Palestinians).
- **The Church’s Voice:** The Church is called to speak prophetically to the world, pointing away from earthly “holy sites” and toward the “Heavenly Jerusalem” that is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26).

Summary

The Hope of Christian Zionism	Our Covenantal Hope
A restored physical kingdom in Jerusalem.	The consummated Kingdom of God on a New Earth.
Rebuilding a third physical Temple.	The Church is the living Temple of the Holy Spirit.
Political support for a secular state.	Gospel proclamation to all nations, starting with the Jew.
Looking back to the “shadows” of Joshua.	Looking forward to the “Rest” of the Greater Joshua.