

Dispensationalism and the Book of Joshua

Intro: For many years gospel preachers have responded to the teachings of dispensationalists who advocate a premillennial coming of Jesus. The doctrine was popularized in the seventies with the publication of Hal Lindsey's "Late Great Planet Earth" and more recently by the fiction works authored by Jenkins and LaHaye called the Left Behind Series.

Sometimes it is thought that premillennialism is nothing more than a curious interpretation of few Biblical prophecies. However, a more careful analysis reveals that premillennialism involves a wholly different interpretive approach to the Scriptures that results in a complex system of inter-related doctrines that undermines the integrity of some of the Bible's clearest statements. Let consider one example of that tonight.

Premillennialism and the Land Promise

The word "premillennialism" is a non-Biblical term used to describe the coming of Jesus. "Pre" meaning "before"; "millennial" meaning having to do with a 1000 year period of time. Dispensationalists affirm that Jesus will come and reign on earth on David's throne over the Jewish people for a thousand year period before the end of time. This scenario demands that a number of significant things happen:

It demands that the Jews be gathered back to Palestine.

It demands that the Jews be reconstituted as a nation.

It demands that the Jews recover as their possession the land of Palestine.

It demands that the Jews repent of their sin of crucifying Jesus and acknowledge Him as their king.

Thus, it is believed when all these things happen, Jesus will return to earth and rule over them on David's throne in Jerusalem.

If you ask a dispensationalist, "What is the foundation for this expectation? What message from God serves as the foundation for this whole system of thought, I believe he would take you to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:18.

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates: (Genesis 15:18)

Essentially the premillennial argument is this

God promised to give Israel the land of Canaan unconditionally.

Israel has never fully received the promise.

Therefore the promise remains to be fulfilled at some future time.

And thus it is argued that "land promise" made to Abraham has not yet been fulfilled necessitating a future fulfillment in the millennial age.

Of course, there are many other doctrines that joined together with this fundamental premise; but let's consider just this one aspect of dispensationalism in the light of the information found in the book of

Joshua. Clearly Joshua tells us about the Israelites conquering the land of Canaan; but...

Did Israel receive the promise God made to Abraham?

Were there conditions that governed the continued possession of the land?

God's Testimony through Joshua concerning the Land Promise

It is interesting that we have the opportunity to verify whether or not the promise to Abraham has been fulfilled. It comes from the testimony of those who lived in the land of Canaan. In the book of Joshua we can read a number of statements that will help us in our understanding of the land promise.

The writer of Joshua (Joshua himself?) acknowledged that God's promise concerning the land had been fulfilled in their occupation of Canaan through its conquest.

So the Lord gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the Lord gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the Lord gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass. (Joshua 21:43-45)

It appears that the prophet who had described the distribution of Canaan in this context was the fulfillment of the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants.

Moreover, Joshua himself in his final words to Israel acknowledged the fulfillment of all that God had said.

Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the Lord your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed. (Joshua 23:14)

What Joshua has just described is the apportionment of the nations from Jordan to the Great Sea as an inheritance:

See, I have apportioned to you these nations which remain as an inheritance for your tribes, with all the nations which I have cut off, from the Jordan even to the Great Sea toward the setting of the sun. And the Lord your God, He shall thrust them out from before you and drive them from before you; and you shall possess their land, just as the Lord your God promised you. (Joshua 23:4-5)

The establishment of six cities of refuge confirms the fulfillment of the land promise:

Notice this interesting statement in connection with the cities of refuge God had provided in the Law.

And if the Lord your God enlarges your territory, just as He has sworn to your fathers, and gives you all the land which He promised to give your fathers— if you carefully observe all this commandment, which I

command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to walk in His ways always—then you shall add three more cities for yourself, besides these three. (Deuteronomy 19:8-9)

According to this text, six cities of refuge among the Israelites would confirm that Israel's territory had been "enlarged" and that "all the land which He promised to give your fathers" would be in their possession.

So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they designated Bezer in the wilderness on the plain from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan from the tribe of Manasseh. (Joshua 20:7-8)

In this text we can see that Joshua set aside 6 cities as cities of refuge.

Thus, is there any doubt that the Joshua the leader of the Israelite people thought that God's land promise to Abraham had been fulfilled? Yet premillennial interpreters resist Joshua's conclusion contending that Israel never fully inherited the land God promised.

God's Testimony through Joshua concerning the retention of the Land

If on the one hand God confirmed through Joshua that the land had been received, it is also important to note that he made it clear that the retaining of the land was conditioned upon Israel's faithfulness to the covenant they had made with God to keep the Law.

When you transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, and go and serve other gods, and bow down to them, then the anger of the Lord will burn against you, and you shall perish quickly from off the good land which He has given you. (Joshua 23:16)

Brother Homer Hailey, one of our greatest scholars of OT texts, made an interesting observation about God's covenants with Israel from Deut. 29:1—“These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the sons of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.” (Deuteronomy 29:1)

Moses follows with solemn warnings of the consequences of idolatry and assures the nation that the blessings and the curses will fall upon them, depending upon how they respond to the commandments of the Lord.

Thus, he finally exhorts them, “So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

Such verses shows that though the reception of the land was unconditional, the retaining of the land was conditional upon Israel's faithfulness to God.

Conclusion: This is just one piece of a much large picture that dispensationalism develops; but the claim that Israel is unconditionally entitled to the land of Canaan for all time cannot be validly sustained from the Scripture. Joshua tells us so! And at least one foundation of the premillennial scheme is removed.

The King of the Jews has come and established His kingdom. We are privileged to be a part of it. When He returns that kingdom will be delivered up to God.