

Apostolic Understanding of the Prophets

The apostles, in their letters, never speak of any reinstatement of a Jewish kingdom. Rather, they tell us that the prophets spoke of the new covenant, which would be inaugurated by Christ. They tell us again and again that we must read the Old Testament (law and prophets) - in the present case, Ezekiel - through the eyes of Christ and the apostles, and see gospel days being spoken of in the prophets and the law, finding there the display of the glories of the new covenant established by Christ. We have scores and scores of examples of New Testament writers doing this very thing. And we have more than examples; we have the direct teaching of Luke 24:27; Acts 3:24; 1 Peter 1:8-10, and the like:

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Christ] interpreted to [the two disciples on the road to Emmaus] in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these [gospel] days (Acts 3:24)

To [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43).

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 enquired 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 in these extracts can be properly extended to '*all* the prophets', as Peter himself observed (Acts 3:24; 10:43), and as Christ

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himself did (Luke 24:27). In this plain teaching we have all the warrant we need to see the new covenant under Christ when we read Ezekiel's words of hope - not some supposed, temporary Jewish kingdom with the reinstatement of all the apparatus of the old covenant and its law.

But, as I have said, in addition to this clear teaching, we have scores of examples of New Testament writers doing this very thing; namely, using the prophets of the old covenant to speak of the new. Here are just a few examples of the very many that could be chosen.⁶

Take 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 progressive 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 Mosaic law. Thus James showed the way 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 *ekklēsia*.

⁶ For more, see my 'The Prophets and the New Covenant'.

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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)?

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.*⁷

And so on.

In short, when we read the Old Testament we should be looking for Christ and his covenant - the new, better or superior covenant (Heb. 7:22; 8:6) - which he established, having fulfilled the old covenant, thus rendering it obsolete. The watershed for all this may be found in Luke 1 - 2,⁸ leading to the last supper (Luke 22:20), the cross, the resurrection, the ascension and Pentecost.

⁷ See my *Romans 11: A Suggested Exegesis*. See

⁸ my 'Watershed of the Ages'.

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Consequently, the only viable interpretation of Ezekiel's message of glorious hope is to see that the prophet - in tandem especially with Jeremiah, but also with all the other prophets and the law - was prophesying of Christ and his inauguration of the new covenant. Ezekiel, of course, as all the prophets and the law, was speaking in old-covenant terms in the form of shadows. That was all he could do! But we know that Christ in the new covenant renders those shadows obsolete by bringing in their fulfilment, he himself being their reality (Col. 2:17; Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1). In his way, Daniel (Dan. 2) also addresses this very point - Christ setting up his kingdom, putting an end to all other kingdoms, realms or systems.⁹

And so, to the new covenant...

⁹ Although Dan. 2 is not concerned with the Mosaic system, Dan. 9:24-27 most definitely is.