A Review of O. Palmer Robertson's The Israel of God

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The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

By O. Palmer Robertson

O. Palmer Robertson. The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub. 2000)

For those who have come out of Dispensationalism or want to know what covenant theologians believe about Israel, this is the book. This is a book which deals with the place and identity of Israel in the plan of God. In six chapters Dr. Robertson discusses different topics regarding Israel from its identity to its future.

Overall, I found this to be a very helpful and edifying book. The Bible and the truths of the New Covenant were the interpreting lens for everything. We do not look to outside events and force those within the Bible.

The Occasion for the Book

In the Introduction Dr. Robertson begins with a quotation from Bill Clinton when he was the president of the USA, about Israel:

"'If you abandon Israel, God will never forgive you' ... it is God's will that Israel, the biblical home of the people of Israel, continue for ever and ever." So spoke the President of the United States in a speech delivered before the Israeli Knesset assembled in Jerusalem. He was recalling with apparent approval the words of his desperately ill pastor. He concluded the speech by saying, "Your journey is our journey, and America will stand with you now and always." (p. 1)

It seems that this and such mindset was the driving force behind writing this book. The book is not polemic, but rather, it simply presents what the Bible as a whole teaches on some topics related to the Israel of God. It is obviously against

Dispensationalism by its adherence to Covenant Theology, but it does not attack Dispensationalism directly. Its purpose is to set a positive case on what the Bible says without really engaging with the other side.

Its Land

The first chapter is dedicated to the Land of Israel. This is a hot issue nowadays. I will be the first to tell you that I hate politics and I don't want to do anything with it and there is a lot of politics involved with Israel in the Middle East. I am not interested in political discussions. I am a theology nerd. I am interested in the *theological* claim of the land and God's plan with the Jews.

Dr. Robertson argues that the "concept of a land that belongs to God's people originated in Paradise" (p. 4). Adam was told to work the land and multiply. That was the original ideal plan if the Fall had not taken place. Then the whole earth would have been God's land and God's temple. The land being a sanctuary is another aspect. This is why the Lord God tells Israel that "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. 12 And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev 26:11-12). God places His sanctuary among His people like He did with the Tabernacle and Temple. This concept of the sanctuary of God among His people had its fulfillment in Jesus Christ of Whom it is written that He "tabernacled" among us (John 1:14). But it will also have its ultimate fulfillment on the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev 21:1-5).

An important aspect which Dr. Robertson highlights is the fact that the land actually belongs to the Lord. As Leviticus 25:23 puts it, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me." The land is the Lord's and the people of Israel are merely strangers and sojourners in the land with Yahweh. He gives the land to whomever He wills and does with it as He pleases.

An important aspect which Dr. Robertson highlights and the New Testament emphasizes is that the land is typological of the New Heavens and New Earth. Hebrews 11 says that although Abraham was the one who received the promise of the land of Canaan in which he sojourned, yet he was actually looking and desiring "a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb 11:16). The saints of old were "seeking a homeland" which is not of this world (Heb 11:14). Although Abraham lived in the "the land of promise", says Hebrews 11:9-10, yet in actuality he understood the typology of the land and therefore "he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (v. 11). This is clearly the New Heavens and New Earth, and not the land of Canaan.

In Romans 4:13 we have the promise of the land expanded. It is no longer the small land of Canaan, but now it is the whole cosmos—the New Heavens and New Earth. Therefore, the people of God are not promised the small portion of land in the Middle East, but the whole earth is promised to the meek (Matt 5:5). Robertson writes:

> Because God is the Lord of the whole universe, he will fulfill his covenant promise of redemption by reconstituting the cosmos. In this way, paradise will be restored in all its glory. The blessing of land that humanity first experienced will finally be graciously given back to him. (p. 10)

Another thing which is often missed by our Dispensational brethren is the fact that the land promises were completely fulfilled as recorded in Scripture by the time of Joshua, David and Solomon (Josh 23:43-45; 1Chron 18:14; 1Kgs 4:1, 20-21; c.f. Gen 15:18-21). Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant regulated the blessings and the possession of the land (see for example Deut 28; Lev 20:22-23). When the people disobeyed and broke the Lord's covenant, He brought judgment upon them and exiled them away from their homeland. This is a point which is, in my opinion, often missed by those who contend that the land of Canaan is for the Israelites forever from a theological perspective. Seeing that the Mosaic Covenant is abrogated, the regulations which existed for the possession and blessings of the land are also done away with. Not only that, we should not forget that the New Testament teaches us that the land was typological.

Much more could be said, but simply read the chapter. It is really mind-opening.

Its People

When we speak of Israel, whom do we actually mean? How does the Bible define Israel?

In chapter 2 Dr. Robertson deals with the question of who are the heirs of the land promise. Who is Israel actually? As a covenant theologian and not a Dispensationalist, one can already expect the answer. The Israel of God are all Jewish and Gentile believers in the Messiah.

There is nothing special in the ethnicity of the Jews, which makes them more holy or more special than Gentiles. Robertson notes that 'Abraham was originally nothing more than another pagan "Gentile" before being called by God' (p. 34). Abraham

is the root of Israel and he was a mere pagan idolater before his calling (Josh 24:2). Seeing that this is in fact so, there could be nothing special in ethnicity which sets them apart. Robertson quotes the Jewish commentator on Genesis, Benno Jacob, who says:

> Indeed, differences of race have never been an obstacle to joining Israel which did not know the concept of purity of blood. . . . Circumcision turned a man of foreign origin into an Israelite. (p. 35)

I found this very interesting coming from a Jew. Circumcision is what made one an Israelite and not ethnic origin. We know that in the New Covenant that fleshly circumcision is no longer required, but a new creation is what counts (Gal 6:15-16), i.e., circumcision of the heart (2Cor 3:3; Rom 2:25-28; etc.).

The glory of the New Covenant is in the fact that the people of God are not only gathered from Israel, but from "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). The distinction between Jew and Gentile no longer applies under the New Covenant (e.g. Gal 3:28). In fact, Paul explicitly says that Jew and Gentile believers have been made one in Christ in Ephesians 2.

There was a helpful discussion and exegesis of the text from which the book gets its name, Galatians 6:16. Dr. Robertson shows how the "Israel of God" in the entire context of Galatians cannot mean anything but all believing Jews and Gentiles. I found his exegesis and discussion on the text very helpful (pp. 38-46).

Dr. Robertson argues that a return to the old land is a return to the shadows of the Old Covenant which are done away with in Christ. Moreover, Dispensationalists believe that there is distinction between Israel and the Church and in the Millennium the Jews will be the head. This is nothing more than the old distinction between Jew and Gentile, which Christ has abolished, but now it is being brought again. This is a return to the Old Covenant which has been abrogated. It is a return to the shadows. It is impossible.

Another helpful aspect which Robertson touches on is the fact that the majority of Israel is still in rebellion against Christ, they are not part of the Covenant of Grace (New Covenant), therefore, they have no theological claim upon the land, not to mention the typology of the land of Canaan. Only those who have faith in the Christ of God can claim the promises of God.

Its Worship

The book of Hebrews is probably my second favorite epistle after Romans. It is masterful and deep. This chapter is dedicated to an exegesis of Hebrews 7 wherein the superiority of the New Covenant is shown. Although not stated explicitly at the beginning, the purpose of this chapter is to make impossible the idea of a rebuild temple and priesthood for whatever reason by showing the superiority of the work of Christ and how by His work He has abolished the old system. This was a very enjoyable chapter.

> Because of this great privilege of continual access to the very presence of God himself, we should look for no other city, temple, sacrifice, or priesthood. The perfections of Jesus provide all we need, both for this life and for that which is to come. As a consequence, our worship cannot conform to the old patterns associated with the previous priesthood and sacrifices. Instead, the new covenant community must worship in a way that indicates that the old rituals are gone and the eternal realities have come. (p. 83)

Its Lifestyle

Chapter four was perhaps the chapter from which I learned the most. In this chapter Dr. Robertson examines the wilderness motif throughout the Scriptures for the people of God. He shows the wilderness in relation to Israel. How from then the Scriptures form a basis that the wilderness is the time for God's people to be tested and nourished by God. The wilderness imagery or motif dominates Scripture and describe the journey of the people of God. Just like Israel of old had to wander in the wilderness 40 years before entering the land of Canaan, so likewise, the Israel of God must wander the wilderness of this world before entering their everlasting Sabbath—Heaven.

The wilderness motif is not only found in the Old Testament, but it is also found in the life of John the Baptist as well as the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the wilderness the people of God are disciplined by God as sons, as He disciplined His Old Covenant people. In the wilderness the people of God are nourished by God (Rev 12:6). It is a place where the God of the Covenant is present with His people, as He was by day and night with Israel of old. Dr. Robertson also mention that the wilderness is pictured both as a place of danger as well as great miraculous deliverance of God. He writes:

> The wilderness is depicted both as a region of great danger and at the same time as a place of wondrous deliverance. In the narrative of the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex. 13:17-14:31), the whole pattern of Israel's ensuing experience in the wilderness may be seen.4 Threat of disaster is answered by miraculous deliverance. (p. 88)

This theme is also found for the New Covenant people of God most exhaustively in the New Testament in Hebrews 3-4. Where the people of God have the greater Exodus of the Lord Christ behind them, yet they are still striving to enter the eternal Sabbath of God (Heb 4:11).

Dr. Robertson traces the wilderness motif throughout the Old Testament and New Testament.

The Coming of the Kingdom

Although God is King over all things and His kingdom rules over all (e.g. Ps 103:19), yet "a more specific manifestation of his authority is displayed in the kingdom of his Messiah" (p. 113). The Kingdom came with the coming of its King.

This was likewise a very helpful chapter wherein his Amillennialism and Two-Staged Kingdom theology showed, which is good! **See here** for more on Amillennialism and the Two-Staged Kingdom of God.

In this chapter Dr. Robertson shows the important and crucial place of Israel in the plan of God as related to the coming of the Kingdom and how Scripture connects the coming of the Kingdom with Israel. But as argued earlier and continually throughout the book, the Israel of God is not defined by ethnicity, but by faith in the Messiah.

There is a very helpful discussion on the Kingdom of God in Acts as it relates to the disciples' question in Acts 1:6. He shows how the New Testament vision of the Kingdom is that it is spiritual in the present age and non-consummate, but it will have its consummation at the Second Coming of its King. The Kingdom comes in two stages and no more. What some (e.g. **Dean Davis**) have called the Kingdom of the Son and the Kingdom of the Father. There was also a helpful discussion on Revelation and an Amillennial interpretation of chapter 20.

Romans 11

Chapter six deals with the question of Israel's future. Dr. Robertson maintains that ethnic Israelites are and will always be part of God's people and in God's plan, but he denies that there will be distinctive future for ethnic Israel, as envision by Dispensationalists for example. There will never be a distinction between believing Jews and Gentiles ever again. Both are on an equal footing and both are together heirs to the promises of God in Christ.

Dr. Robertson stresses throughout this chapter how Paul is actually concerned with what is to happen with Israel in the present and no so much in the future. He stresses how Paul is seeking to save some Israelites now and how he is seeking to save them through his ministry and not at some future date (Rom 11:5, 7, 14-15, 23, 30-31). All this emphasis is right and warranted by the context and it was helpful to have that pointed out because some act as if Romans 11 largely or wholly has to do with the future. Dr. Robertson shows that the emphasis of Romans 11 itself is upon the present time. He rightly notes that the "references in Romans 11 to God's present intention for Israel are pervasive and are highly significant for the total thrust of the chapter" (p. 171). This point must not be overlooked.

It is not the purpose of God to save every Jew. He has always had the freedom to pick and choose according to His sovereign pleasure and He has never bound Himself to save every ethnic Israelite. The mystery of God in this is that the rejection of Israel serves the purpose to bring Gentiles in. But even this is for the purpose of moving elect ethnic Israelites to jealously so that they would cling to their Messiah and in this way the world will be blessed (Rom 11:11-15).

Then there is a very interesting discussion on the most controversial verses in the chapter, namely, vv. 25-26. I will make this short. Dr. Robertson argues that the "partial hardening" (Rom 11:25) means that a part of Israel after the flesh has been hardened, i.e., not elected and given a hard heart (Rom 11:7-8). Then he argues that the word "until" in the Greek does not necessitate a change of course after its termination. In another words, the word "until" in itself cannot indicate that there will be a day when the decree of reprobation will not be in effect in Israel. This is something which he hammers on throughout this section. The word "until" in itself is not enough to indicate a change of course after "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." He argues that

> Romans 11:25 speaks of eschatological termination. Throughout the present age, until the final return of Christ, hardening will continue among part of Israel. Too often "until" has been understood as marking the beginning of a new state of things with regard to Israel. It has hardly been considered that "until" more naturally should be interpreted as reaching an eschatological termination point. The phrase implies not a new beginning after a termination, but the

> continuation of a circumstance until the end of time. (p. 180)

Then comes the question for the identity of “all Israel” in v. 26. He sees both the interpretation which sees “all Israel” as all elect Jews as well as the interpretation which sees “all Israel” as the Israel of God, exegetically supportable in the context. But his preference goes for the second option and his reason is enlightening. I’ve never thought of it in this way. The question concerns where the “fullness of the Gentiles” in v. 25 “has come in”? He argues from Ephesians 2 where it is said that the Gentile believers are brought near to the “commonwealth of Israel and…to the covenants of promise” (Eph 2:12-13), that this “coming in” of the Gentiles is a coming into Israel. He also sees the olive tree as Israel, therefore, since the only place in Romans 11 where the Gentiles “come in” or are engrafted in is the olive tree of Israel, therefore, it makes sense that the Gentile believers now being part of the Israel of God, along with elect Jews, constitute the “all Israel” which shall be saved.

This is very interesting and mind-opening to say the least. I held to the opinion that “all Israel” means “all elect Jews throughout history”, but seeing “all Israel” as the Israel of God, is likewise a valid and exegetically sound interpretation within the context. I find Romans 11 to be a difficult chapter, but it is a chapter I want to spend more time on so that I may have a position on it. I will not be too quick to say that I agree with everything Dr. Robertson said, but I think he presented a very well argued case for his interpretation on all points.

More importantly, Dr. Robertson notes what the chapter actually does *not* say:

> Nothing in this chapter says anything about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, or of a return to the land of the Bible, or of the restoration of a national state of Israel, or of a church of Jewish Christians separated from Gentile Christians. (p. 191)

While ethnic Israelites will always be part of God’s plan, there is nothing in Romans 11 about a distinct (future) plan for ethnic Israelites apart of the Israel of God—the Church of Christ.

Conclusion

The book then closes with a chapter which sets in propositions what Dr. Robertson has argued for.

I found this book a very enjoyable read and will recommend it to everyone wanting to know what covenant theologians teach about Israel in the plan of God. I have learned a lot from this book and I would no doubt return back to it to check some stuff again. Get this book and read it. You won’t regret it!