

THE REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY OF
HANS K. LARONDELLE



A JUDEO-CENTRIC CRITIQUE

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Hans K. La Rondelle is professor emeritus of theology at the Theological Seminary of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. His most notable book in the area of eschatology is *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, a volume that is highly esteemed by many Reformed amillennialists, especially because of its explicit replacement theology. Throughout the whole book, while there is that common token expression of responsibility for Christians to witness to Jews as individuals, there is not the slightest expression of Pauline compassion for them, this being difficult since in reality, the claims of legitimacy for contemporary biblical Jewishness are denied. While as a Seventh Day Adventist scholar, LaRondelle's several quotations of Ellen White might be expected, it is important to recognize that this author is upholding the standard replacement theology of his denomination and its founder. Consider the recent summary statement taken from an article in a special issue of the *Adventist Review* devoted to Bible prophecy. The employment of "conditionality" here, coming from an Adventist source, should not surprise us. What should surprise us is the embrace of this principle, as with LaRondelle, by Reformed sympathizers.

Did Bible Prophecy Fail? As we read the Old Testament, we run up against certain prophetic predictions that, especially in recent times, have led to questions. They have the form of *eschatological* prophecies—prophecies relating to "the last things." Did they find fulfillment? Or were the prophets mistaken? The common element in these prophecies is that they begin with the prophet's circumstances (commonly the Babylonian exile), then look beyond immediate events into the future. In that future, the prophets were shown what ancient Israel could have become. They saw God's people returning to their glorified land. They saw Jerusalem as an exalted city—the *world capital*, in fact, into which people from all nations would stream, seeking a knowledge of the true God. The exaltation of this land and the entire world was to continue until it would become, in effect, a new earth. These prophecies about ancient Israel were never literally fulfilled, however. Why? The *humanistic* answer is that the prophets were not really recipients of divine foreknowledge and had simply guessed wrong. A completely opposite answer, characteristic of some evangelical interpreters (known as *dispensationalists* [more inclusively *premillennialists*]), is that, since these prophecies were inspired by God, they must take place—in the literal, present country of Israel. Seventh-day

Adventists take a third approach—one in the middle of the first two. Like the evangelicals, we believe these "failed" prophecies were given by God and are true. But we agree with the humanists that they will not be literally fulfilled in Israel. How do we reconcile these two points of view? By considering these prophecies *conditional*. As Ellen G. White put it: "The promises and threatenings of God are alike conditional." Following her lead, we have placed these prophecies in the category of *promises—promises of what could have been if God's chosen people had cooperated fully with His plan for them*. Unfortunately, they did not. We see the final frustration of God's plan in the New Testament. Here God's own people reject the Messiah:

“He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (John 1:11, RSV). While these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in reference to spiritual Israel, the Christian church (Gal. 3:15-29), they no longer apply to a literal Israel in the Middle East.¹

To begin with, at the core of LaRondelle’s eschatology is his Christological hermeneutic, which subject occupies over one third of his book. This is his hermeneutical motif. His stated overall critical response is to the literal interpretation of dispensationalism, though it should be understood that most of his objections are really with regard to essential premillennialism as represented by Bonar, Spurgeon and Ryle, etc. (FI 8-14, 339-348). LaRondelle explains his Christocentricity as follows:

Those modern interpretations of the prophetic Word which exclude Christ, His saving grace, and His new-covenant people from the center of Israel’s end-time prophecies basically miss the divine mark and exalt a torch of false prophecy. Christ is “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13) of the whole prophetic Word. Christ is the shining Morning Star, who illuminates each covenant promise and prophecy with His saving presence. Christ is “the Root and Offspring of David” (Rev. 22:16), which means that He is the Lord of David as well as the Son of David. He represents Yahweh, the God of Israel, in all that He says and does (John 12:44-50). Christ, the Holy Spirit, and God the Father are united so intimately that the christocentric focus is the inalienable hallmark of a biblical-theological exposition of Israel’s prophetic Word.²

Surely the inference here that dispensationalists and premillennialists “exclude Christ” is simply extreme and unfounded. Such a charge is quite ironic when one considers the weight of emphasis that the *Seven Day Adventist* denomination gives to evangelistic outreach that employs dramatic and graphic prophetic scenarios. These could easily be understood as obscuring christocentricity. Rather, in general, millennialists would claim to be second to none in agreeing with the thoughts that LaRondelle has expressed concerning the centrality of Christ in their prophetic understanding. Hence the explicit charge of a lack of christocentricity is quite invalid, especially when the millennialist gloriously anticipates that in the future, earthly Messianic economy, “the LORD [by means of His Son] will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one” (Zech. 14:9). Shall that glorified King yet have nail-prints in His hand? Will Jesus Christ also return as a Jew? We would believe that both of these questions should be answered positively, and this being the case, it would follow that this King will also remain King of the Jews and manifestly so as the crucified Jew. Furthermore, as a consequence, He will reign over the twelve tribes of Israel, even as He prophesied (Matt. 19:28). Even the Gentile

¹ William H. Shea, “Making Sense of Bible Prophecy,” *Adventist Review*, March 29, 2001, pp. 25-26. The quotation is from, Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 67. Also refer to *Questions on Doctrine*, published by “Seventh-day Adventist Leaders, Bible Teachers, and Editors, pp. 215-227, and Douglas Moran, *Adventism and the American Republic*, referencing a leading Adventist opinion in *Signs of the Times*, 1947, that the Jewish people would never be re-established in the land, and responses following the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, that culminated in La Rondelle’s substantial work, pp. 199-201, 252.

² Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel Of God In Prophecy*, pp. 9.

nations will be ruled over by a Jew. To maintain that while this Messianic economy retains a national and territorial distinction between Jew and Gentile, with resultant blessed harmony between Jew and Gentile, there must necessarily be a lack of christocentric focus, is patently illogical and unbiblical. LaRondelle further states:

Seventh-day Adventists have received special counsel to draw all eyes to Christ as the center of hope in their prophetic interpretations. . . .

We have learned that Christ and the New Testament are the Christian's final authority and highest norm for the theological understanding of Israel's history, prophecy, wisdom, and sacred poetry. . . . Our fundamental starting point in this work has been the axiom of faith that the Bible is its own expositor by means of immediate and wider contexts. Because we accept Jesus Christ as the true Interpreter of the Hebrew Bible, we take our stand with the Church of the ages in confessing that the New Testament is God's authorized interpretation and authoritative application of the Old Testament.³

It should also be acknowledged that this author declares his acceptance of "the validity of the grammatical, historical and theological principles of exegesis for all Scripture interpretation,"⁴ as the bottom layer, so to speak, of his hermeneutical complex, though he does this with a particular qualification. It is the inclusion in the preceding statement of a "theological principle" that is drawn from amillennialist Louis Berkhof, who in turn gleans from Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, all having similar eschatological leanings. Even Berkhof admits, what we also believe at this point, namely that "[m]any writers on Hermeneutics are of the opinion that the grammatical and historical interpretation meet all the requirements for the proper interpretation of the Bible. They have no eye for the special theological character of this discipline."⁵ And of course such people would not all be premillennialists. So LaRondelle concludes, referencing support from F. F. Bruce, though with questionable applicability, "grammatico-historical exegesis is not sufficient for the interpretation of Holy Scripture. Theological *exegesis* [emphasis added] is also necessary."⁶ However, it is not difficult to sense the necessity of this "theological" element for the formation of a certain understanding of the Old Testament by means of the imposition upon it of New Testament doctrine. And further we would enquire as to what doctrine is to be incorporated here, and how is that choice of doctrine to be arrived at? The more one considers answers here, the more one realizes that we move from objectivity to suitable subjectivity. Thus in so upholding the necessity of the New Testament being the

³ Ibid., pp. 9, 60, 207.

⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 133.

⁶ LaRondelle, *Israel Of God In Prophecy*, p. 25. The footnote references Bruce for support as follows: "But grammatico-historical exegesis is not sufficient for the interpretation of the biblical documents in relation to their place in the canon. Theological exegesis is also necessary, although it cannot override grammatico-historical findings." *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, p. 293. We would agree with Bruce here re canonicity in general, but our consideration is with reference to the exegesis of the biblical text, which establishes our theology.

hermeneutical crux for the interpretation of the Old Testament, the inevitable question must be raised that LaRondelle hardly addresses. It is this. “What is the hermeneutic by which we interpret the New Testament, especially its christology?” The answer must surely be the “grammatical-historical” methodology. But would LaRondelle add the “theological principle” as well? And what theology would he import here? In reviewing LaRondelle’s book, Willem VanGemeran makes some related criticisms at this point.

[LaRondelle] assumes a uniform interpretation of the NT. The fact is, however, the interpreters of the NT are not in agreement concerning the meaning of many of the words of Jesus and the apostles. There is even less agreement as to any “principles of interpretation which may be derived from the NT and applied to the OT prophets. It is naïve to approach the OT prophets from the perspective of the NT with the assumption that it lays down a system of interpretation of the OT prophets.⁷

Thus, if we say that we interpret the Old Testament by the New Testament we are in danger of employing a dual hermeneutic, namely the standard “grammatical-historical” principle for the New Testament, and then the imposition of the resultant derived theology upon the “grammatical-historical” interpretation of the Old Testament. Rather, we would suggest that there is one, and only one “grammatical-historical” hermeneutic for the whole Bible. It is what William Tyndale described as the “literal sense,” that pertains to “the scripture,” as quoted by J. I. Packer:

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scripture hath but one sense, which is but the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way. Nevertheless, the scripture uses proverbs, similitudes, riddles, or allegories, as all other speeches do; but that which the proverb, similitude, riddle or allegory signifieth, is ever the literal sense, which thou must seek out diligently.⁸

Hence, this leads us to a further justifiable criticism by VanGemeran, who has warned that: “[T]he ‘new’ Reformed hermeneutic is no longer ‘the Old is in the New revealed and the New is in the Old concealed,’ but rather ‘the Old is by the New restricted and the New is on the Old inflicted.’⁹ We believe this to be profoundly true. Consequently, VanGemeran continues:

LaRondelle needs to look not only at the interpretation of the OT in the NT, but also at the interpretation of the OT within itself. I greatly appreciate his emphasis on unity, harmony, and progressive understanding of God’s word. However, within the OT itself, the words of promise

⁷ Willem A. VanGemeran, “Book Review,” Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, *Westminster Theological Journal*, 45 (1983), p. 113.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God*, p. 104

⁹ Willem A. VanGemeran, “Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 46 (1984), p. 268.

are being interpreted and reinterpreted; for that reason, it is necessary to pay attention to the developments within the OT which also reflect unity, harmony, and progression.¹⁰

But furthermore, LaRondelle also defends the inclusion of a proper allegorical element in his hermeneutic. His argument, being quite standard, is as follows. There are, in certain instances, allegorical and illustrative usage of the Old Testament in the New Testament, as with Sarah and Hagar of Genesis 21 in Galatians 4:24-31, so that this justifies a legitimate allegorical interpretation of other parts of the Old Testament. However, what the Bible determines as being allegorical or illustrative, according to the inspiration of God, is one thing. But for the interpreter to claim for himself the same prerogative of the Spirit of God is quite another, even though LaRondelle distances himself from a history of such abuse in the Church, using this principle. There are indicatives in the Bible that are in no way intended as imperatives for the Christian (Acts 5:1-6). Perhaps, more importantly, we also need to appreciate the Hebrew mindset whereby the New Testament Jewish author could reference the Old Testament in a nuanced, applicatory or illustrative manner that in no way replaced the essential literal meaning of the Old Testament passage (FI 179-292).

Hence for LaRondelle we have a regulative, Christological, theological top layer that rests upon the grammatical-historical bottom layer or foundation. However, the proposal of this layered hermeneutic, with which we strongly disagree, is one thing, while its outworking, as we shall see, is quite another. After all, what Christian would deny that Christ is redemptively central to the whole Word of God? Nevertheless this significance must be kept in Trinitarian perspective with regard to the headship of the Father. This is not an insignificant point since, as has been well pointed out by Thomas Smail in *The Forgotten Father*, it is common today for an almost blind prominence to be given to the preeminence of Jesus Christ, as though impossible to challenge, while in fact it is a biblical distortion.¹¹ Hence we believe LaRondelle takes this legitimate Christological principle and gives it a disproportionate, driving emphasis, notwithstanding his passing mention of the triunity of God in a preceding quotation. Thus Bernard Ramm provides a more balanced approach

¹⁰ VanGemeren, "Book Review," Ibid.

¹¹ Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father*. Initially captivated by the Charismatic Movement, this author became troubled by an unbiblical pneumatology that gave little emphasis to God the Father. He explains that in reading a paper before European charismatic leaders, "Professor Francis Sullivan SJ, of the Gregorian University in Rome, commented that I had said a great deal about the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the person and work of Christ, but practically nothing about his relationship to the Father, although the latter was as prominent as the former in the text I had been expounding (Acts 2:33) according to which Christ "has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear". I could only admit the omission and plead that I was not alone in being guilty of it—it was indeed characteristic of the kind of Reformed Christocentric emphasis in which I had been grounded. Indeed when one widens the scope and looks at vital modern Christian movements of any kind, one has to admit that emphasis upon and devotion to the Father has not been a main characteristic of many of them." Pp. 18-19.

when he recommends, for the interpretation of the prophetic segments of Scripture, five principles, the last of which is, “Keep in mind the centrality of Jesus Christ.”¹²

As an indication of how the imposition of a “theological principle” upon the “grammatical-historical” heremeneutic, can be arbitrary, while at the same time the imposition of the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old Testament does not necessarily lead to exegesis that results in discovery of the truth of God, consider LaRondelle’s section titled, “‘The Israel of God’ in the Context of Galatians.” We will focus on the exegesis of three passages here, though at the outset it should be noted that the author avoids making any reference to three of the most outstanding critical commentaries concerning Galatians, they being by F. F. Bruce, Ernest De Witt Burton and Hans Dieter Betz, and the reason why may not be unrelated to the fact that these authors do not offer sufficient support for LaRondelle’s categorical thesis concerning Israel’s divine ethnic disqualification.

A. Galatians 3:26-29.

There is such a constricted view here that one wonders if “in protesting too much,” the intention is to convince the reader to believe that the stated point of view is quite beyond question, while in fact the writer probably well knows that some of the most careful and esteemed commentators do not agree with him. LaRondelle states:

The historical background of this epistle indicates that Paul is vehemently rejecting [in 6:16] any different status or claim of the Jewish Christians beside or above that of gentile Christians before God. Baptized Jews and Gentiles are all one in Christ, are “all sons of God through faith on Christ Jesus.” Consequently, “there is neither Jew nor Greek” in Christ (Gal. 3:26-28). “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). How could language state it any more conclusively and unambiguously? . . . [T]o single out Jewish believers within the Church as “*the Israel of God*” is a concept that is in basic conflict with Paul’s message to the Galatians. He declares categorically that “there is neither Jew nor Greek” within the Church, and that the church as a whole—all who belong to Christ—is *the seed of Abraham, the heir of Israel’s covenant promise* (Gal. 3:26-69).¹³

The argument here is in absolute terms that disallow any diversity within unity. In other words, in spite of the fact that the promise originally given to Abraham distinguished between “a great nation” that would be a blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:1-3), that is the Hebrew nation being a blessing to the Gentile nations, LaRondelle declares the end result to be the homogenous people of God, which Galatians 3:29 does not declare. The obvious proof here is that upon conversion, the Christian male and the Christian female do not lose their gender distinction,

¹² Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 225-253.

¹³ LaRondelle, *Israel of God in Prophecy*, pp. 108, 110.

notwithstanding that both are “Sons of God” and “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26, 28). Thus Burton explains:

That he [Paul] is speaking of these distinctions from the point of view of religion is evident from the context in general, but especially from his inclusion of the ineradicable distinction of sex. The passage has nothing to do directly with the merging of nationalities or the abolition of slavery.¹⁴

The same point is applicable with regard to the parallel passage in Colossians 3:11, concerning which LaRondelle makes a similar categorical statement:

The apostle removes every theological distinction between Jew and Gentile before God, because “Christ is all and is in all” Col. 3:11; cf. Gal. 3:26-29).” However, this verse in full describes, “a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all in all.¹⁵

Surely the Sythian retains his ethnic identity within the unity that Paul has just described. And it is particularly noteworthy that within this same unity, the Apostle follows on by exhortation in his writing with regard to the hierarchical relationships that subsume within this unity between wives and their husbands, children and their parents, and slaves and their masters (Col. 3:18-22).

Hence, to further suggest that Paul, in distinguishing between a Jew and Gentile in the Church, would conflict with his essential thesis in Galatians is simply to fly in the face of the Apostle doing that very thing in Romans 11:5 where he acknowledges that “there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice,” comprised of Jewish Christians as distinct from Gentile Christians.

B. Galatians 4:21-31.

Again LaRondelle is highly selective here in his exposition that makes no reference to Burton, Bruce, Betz, and especially Lightfoot’s consideration of Hagar in 4:25, none of whom consider this allegorical representation to be a denial of Israel ethnicity.

Paul does not want to be misunderstood and therefore has more to say [following on from 3:29] to those who still claim special promises for ethnic Israel. In Galatians 4:21-31 the apostle radically denies any claim of ethnic Israel to any covenant promise. This passage has rightly been called “the sharpest polemic against Jerusalem and Judaism in the New Testament.” Paul goes so far as to equate “the present Jerusalem,” the nation of Israel, with the status before God of Ishmael, who was totally disinherited because he persecuted Isaac.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ernest De Witt Burton, *Galatians*, pp. 206-207.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109. The quotation here is from J. C. DeYoung, *Jerusalem in the New Testament*, p. 106.

Without doubt Paul is sharply denouncing “the present/now Jerusalem,” τῆ νῦν Ἱερουσαλήμ, tē nun Ierousalēm, that is the contemporary, political, carnal, Christ rejecting Jerusalem of Judea (I Thess. 2:14-16), but not the nation of Israel as a whole, especially from an eschatological perspective of irrevocable disqualification. Rather he anticipates “the [eschatological] Jerusalem above,” ἡ ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ, hē anō Ierousalēm, which expression has tended to be misunderstood by some expositors according to a Hellenistic rather than a Hebrew perspective. (FI 179-202). The distinction here between the Jerusalem “now” and “above” is not primarily one of location or geography, that is of earth below and heaven above, of matter below and spirit above, according to a Greco/Platonic mindset, but contrast between the present Jerusalem that now is and the future Messianic kingdom that is to be, coming from heaven to earth (Heb. 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14; Rev. 21:10-27). Rabinnic understanding of this terminology appears to be especially incorporated into the Hebrews references.¹⁷

C. Galatians 6:16.

Reference should first be made to *Future Israel* where a more detailed study of this verse is included (FI 263-269). However, La Rondelle declares:

Paul’s benediction in Galatians 6:16 becomes, then, the chief witness in the New Testament in declaring that the universal Church of Christ is the Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, the heir to Israel’s covenant promise (cf. Gal. 3:29; 6:16).¹⁸

This is an extraordinary confession since Galatians 6:16 is the only place in the New Testament where the expression “the Israel of God” is employed. We would simply add the following explanations which both acknowledge a distinct Jewish association. Hence following a detailed consideration, Hans Dieter Betz declares: “Thus, Paul extends the blessing beyond the Galatian Paulinists to those Jewish—Christians who approve of his κανών [kanōn] (“rule”) in v. 16.”¹⁹ F. F. Bruce similarly concludes:

F. Mussner (*Galaterbrief*, 417 n. 59) probably indicates the true sense when he identifies the Israel of God here with παῖς Ἰσραήλ [pas Israēl], of Romans 11:26. For all of his demoting of the law and the customs, Paul held good hope of the ultimate blessing of Israel. They were not all keeping in line with ‘this rule’ yet, but the fact that some

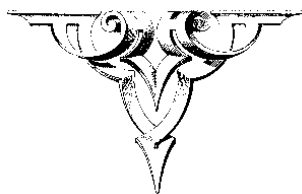
¹⁷ Alford, *Greek Testament*, III, p. 48; Lightfoot, *Galatians*, pp. 181-182. Also J. C. DeYoung, *Jerusalem in the New Testament*, just referenced by LaRondelle, provides a wealth of information that confirms the Jewish understanding of “the Jerusalem above” terminology as being anticipatory of the coming Messianic kingdom, pp. 109-116. However we would disagree with his arbitrary comment: “Paul’s thought of the heavenly Jerusalem must be distinguished from that of Judaism, not identified with it,” p. 118. Converted Rabbi Paul and the author of Hebrews remained Hebrew Christians, though it is not as easy for the Gentile Christian to comprehend this point.

¹⁸ LaRondelle, *Israel of God in Prophecy*, pp. 110-111.

¹⁹ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, p. 323. He also footnotes support from Peter Richardson and Franz Mussner.

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Israelites were doing so was in his eyes a pledge that this remnant would increase until, with the ingathering of the full tale (πλήρωμα [plērōma]) of Gentiles, 'all Israel will be saved'. The invocation of blessing on the Israel of God has probably an eschatological perspective.²⁰



²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle To The Galatians, A Commentary on the Greek Text*, p. 275.