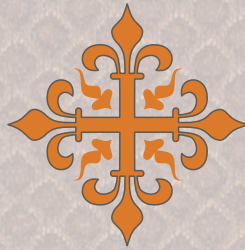


THE REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY OF
WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN



A JUDEO-CENTRIC CRITIQUE

BARRY HORNER

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William Hendriksen is a recognized evangelical scholar of Reformed convictions who quite evidently has Dutch roots and sympathies, as well as pastoral experience with the Christian Reformed Church. His commentaries on a number of New Testament books of the Bible have gained wide acceptance amongst contemporary Calvinistic Christians, especially since he has considerable exegetical abilities, he being a doctoral graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary. Several representatives of Reformed eschatology, especially Anthony Hoekema, also Cornelius P. Venema,¹ place considerable reliance upon Hendriksen's exegetical conclusions. We will consider two of his writings.

A. *The Premillennialist Conception concerning Israel and the Church* (1934).

This was a Master of Theology thesis submitted to Calvin Seminary in 1934. While the title leads one to expect that classic premillennialism will be exactly distinguished from the more recent subset of dispensationalism, this does not turn out to be the case. Rather there is considerable confusion at this point, especially with regard to the sources quoted that are more often dispensational.² The strong Dutch eschatological influence that Hendriksen upholds, including the same theological aura that Calvin Seminary represents, leads him to reference the premillennial views of Harry Bultema in particular that conflicted with the generally amillennial eschatology of the Christian Reformed Church (FI 173). Two points of criticism of premillennialism by Hendriksen that relate to our particular concern are as follows.

1. It is incorrect for premillennialism to maintain that Israel's future restoration will be unconditional. Thus:

We are continually assured that Israel's future restoration will be unconditional. It is not conditional on faith. Now this position which accords God's very special favor to those who continue in willful obedience and arrogant unbelief makes light of the character of God as revealed in Scripture. Scripture throughout reveals a God whose holiness is for transgressors a principle of and an object of fear. . . . It is impossible to

¹ Cornelius P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, 538 pp.

² William Hendriksen, *The Premillennialist Conception concerning Israel and the Church*. On p. 34 it is noted by Hendriksen that, concerning "one way of salvation for Israel; another for the Church," admittedly, "[m]any Pre's [Premillennarians] would not subscribe to this statement." Nevertheless, the overall presentation makes not the slightest attempt to distinguish between historic and dispensational premillennialism. However both premillennial schools of eschatology make a general, if not identical, distinction between Israel and the Church that is quite unacceptable to Hendriksen and the Reformed eschatology he represents.

harmonize the Premillennialistic view in regard to God's very special favor shown to those who refuse to accept the Gospel with this Scriptural teaching in regard to the character of God and his burning wrath against all willful disobedience and unbelief. I regard this to be a very fundamental objection against the Premillennialistic system.³

For a Calvinist of Hendriksen's Reformed stature to make such a claim, although over seventy years ago, and more recently uphold it,⁴ is nothing short of astounding. Suppose we were so say that the church's future completion would be unconditional, then how would Hendriksen respond? Doubtless his Reformed convictions would answer with a resounding affirmation. Of course faith here would not have been denied as superfluous; nevertheless, faith would be acknowledged as the sovereign gift of God whereby the future completion of the church and its elect constituents would be guaranteed. Furthermore, there never was a saved sinner who did not, prior to his conversion, yet rebel in the face of "the character of God and his burning wrath"! Hence the declaration here that God will bless Israel, while *continuing* in disobedience and arrogance, is a misrepresentation. It plainly ignores the truth of God promising to cleanse and renew the heart of national Israel with the result that obedience and humility will result. Thus Ezekiel 36:22-32; 37:1-14 precisely describes this divine regeneration and salvation procedure, in much the same way that the New Testament describes the regeneration and salvation of a disobedient and arrogant sinner. And as good Calvinist doctrine describes such conversion as being unconditional while incorporating faith, according to the election of grace, so it will be the case with the unconditional election and conversion of national Israel that will likewise incorporate faith. Yet without any exegesis of these classic passages from Ezekiel, Hendriksen nevertheless answers that they

had significance for the people who were living at the time these prophecies were uttered. In their literal sense they were intended for them and for their children, grandchildren, and so forth, not for the people living today, though it is true that their underlying moral and spiritual lessons remain valid for every generation.⁵

³ William Henriksen, *The Premillennialistic Conception Concerning Israel And The Church*, pp. 49-50.

⁴ William Hendriksen, *Israel and the Bible*, pp. 24-25. Concerning Jeremiah 18:5-10 he declares that "there is indeed a sense in which we can call the divine impartation of blessing a *conditional* matter. . . . [H]ere in Jeremiah 18-5-10, the Lord himself declares that whenever he predicts weal or woe, good or evil, for a nation, the condition always applies." There is minimal acknowledgment "that it is only by God's grace and power that men are able to fulfill the condition. But the condition is there nevertheless." However Calvinist Hendriksen makes no mention of the fact that the setting here is of God who declares, "Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" Would this author, in insisting on conditionality with regard to a list of Old Testament promises, pp. 16-31, be equally as insistent for conditionality with regard to the terms of the New Covenant?

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

This is astonishing avoidance of the plain meaning of the text which C. H. Spurgeon straightly rejects when preaching on this text.

[I]f words mean anything, first, . . . there shall be a political restoration of the Jews to their own land and to their own nationality; and then, secondly, there is in the text, and in the context, a most plain declaration, that there shall be a spiritual restoration, a conversion in fact, of the tribes of Israel praising one God, serving one king, the Son of David, the descended Messiah. They are to have a national prosperity that shall make them famous.

If there be meaning in words this must be the meaning of this chapter. I wish never to learn the art of tearing God's meaning out of his own words. If there be anything clear and plain, the literal sense and meaning of this passage—a meaning not to be spirited or spiritualized away—must be evident that both the two and the ten tribes of Israel are to be restored to their own land, and that a king is to rule over them.⁶

That such a conclusion is difficult to arrive at from the text is further evidenced by the fact that Reformed scholars, Robertson⁷ and Venema,⁸ obviously struggle with the same problem here as does Hendriksen. In obviously rejecting a literal interpretation, one suspects that, because of historic, more Augustinian presuppositions rather than objective exegetical conclusions, they prefer to simply extract regeneration and resurrection motifs from Ezekiel and declare their fulfillment in the New Covenant order.

2. This premillennialistic position, “is in conflict with the very definite statements of Scripture with reference to the unity of God's people of both dispensations.”⁹

It is necessary to understand Hendriksen's covenant theology at this juncture in which a derived, overarching Covenant of Grace incorporates all of God's redemptive dealings with man from the Fall until the return of Jesus Christ. This is a vital element in the distinctive Dutch Reformed theology which he espouses. Hence the “church/congregation in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38), finds its continuation in the church of the New Testament. Nevertheless, we may still enquire as to whether it is the will of God that He incorporate diversity within the unity of His one people. Hendriksen, in referencing Ephesians 2:11-22, then comments: “[F]aith in Christ unites N.T. believers to those whom the covenant-promise was made during the O.T. Dispensation. Together they constitute ONE PEOPLE.”¹⁰ As it stands, we can agree with this statement, except we believe this

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The C. H. Spurgeon Collection, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, I, no. 28, 1855 (Albany, Oregon: Ages Software, 1998), 382.

⁷ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God*, pp. 21-25.

⁸ Cornelius P. Venema, *The Promise of the Future*, pp. 19-20, 369.

⁹ Hendriksen, *Premillennialistic Conception Concerning Israel And The Church*, p. 56.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

“oneness” includes diversity, even that concerning which the prophets wrote about with regard to the consummated Messianic kingdom (Ezek. 36:22-23; 37:24-28; 39:7; Mic. 4:1-5; Hag. 2:6-9; Zech. 8:18-23; 14:16-19; Mal. 3:12). Hendriksen, in rejecting such diversity, of necessity must therefore deny the continuity of distinctive Jewish identity. To this we respond with comments, taken from *Future Israel*, that concern the people of God as described by Paul in Ephesians 2.

The main point that many amillennialists attempt to derive from this passage is that the “one new man” and the “one body to God” (Eph. 2:15-16), evidence a homogenous unity that does not allow diversity, namely divine recognition of Jewish and Gentile Christians. This we believe to be a fundamental error since the “one Spirit” and “one Lord” and “one God and Father” (Eph. 4:4-6) constitute a personal diversity in the essential unity of the Godhead. In Ephes. 2:13-16, and in I Cor. 12:12-30 where there is one body of Christ that is composed of distinctively gifted members, overall unity comprises a complementary diversity, as in the marriage union. Thus the “one new man” and the “one body to God,” indeed the “the whole building, . . . [is] a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21), represent a unity that incorporates Jewish and Gentile individuality ordained of God (Gal. 3:28-29; 6:15-16).¹¹

B. *Israel and the Bible* (1968).

This publication is a classic representation of replacement theology, certainly more friendly in tone than that of Boettner, that yet quite plainly upholds God’s permanent disenfranchisement of national Israel and corporate Judaism. This is the thrust of the substance of this publication while at the same time, in conclusion, it is recommended that the Christian should nevertheless be “understanding,” “appreciative,” “sympathetic and cooperative,” and above all “desirous to win Jewish souls for Christ.”¹² Of course this laudable goal yet means the loss of God-ordained Jewishness, and especially nationality and territory. Hence consider the substance of this writing which relentlessly, in classic amillennial style, considers the promises, so plainly offered to Israel in the Old Testament, as having been expropriated by the Christian church, the new Israel of God. In a significant chapter, “Is God Finished with the Jews?”, there is the following introductory statement.

It has been established that the restoration predictions [in the Old Testament] have no reference to what is happening today on a national scale or will take place in the future. Explained in their own literary and historical contexts these prophecies do not refer to any twentieth century (or later) national return in unbelief, followed by national conversion, and so forth. Does this mean that God is finished with the Jews? Those who, contrary to all New Testament teaching (Matt. 8:11, 12; Rom. 10:12, 13; I Cor. 7:19; Gal. 3:9, 29; Eph. 2:14, 18; Col. 3:11; I Thess. 2:14-16; I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 2:9), maintain that the Jews are

¹¹ Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel*, p. 275.

¹² Hendriksen, *Israel and the Bible*, pp. 58-63.

still God's specially favored people, and that the program of their future glory is already beginning to unfold, sometimes speak as if with respect to this subject there are only two alternatives: (a) *their* view, and (b) the view that "God is finished with the Jews," as if all Jews were doomed forever. But is it not possible to reject both of these extremes, and to accept a third position? Instead of accepting a future *national* conversion of the Jews, is it not possible to believe in *remnant* conversion? And, instead of limiting this conversion to the *close* of the dispensation, is it not better to connect it with *every* period of history until the return of the Bridegroom, when at last the door will be shut against those who are not ready to enter (Matt. 25:10)?¹³

Now the supposed presentation of a mediating position here may have an appealing ring about it while in fact it is really literary obfuscation. What becomes abundantly clear in the ensuing argument and exegesis of this author is that the status of this remnant in covenantal Jewish terms is in fact a nonentity. In other words, as Hendriksen designates, those who comprise the remnant of Jewish Christians in fact have no participation in distinctive Abrahamic Judaism in the eyes of God. Their designation as "Jewish" Christians is in reality a cloak for mere tokenism and ambiguity. Consider Hendriksen's confession that the "blessings formerly promised to the Jewish people are now given to "the Israel of God," namely, to the church of Jew and Gentile. . . . [T]he privileges which once belonged to the ancient covenant people have been transferred to this new nation."¹⁴ Yes, but are any of these privileges distinctively Jewish? In the light of this "new nation," is there any sense in which the Jewish Christian could be legitimately distinguished from the Gentile Christian, that is in the sight of God? Most likely Hendriksen would reply in the negative, in which case his reference to the remnant as being "Jewish" would in fact be the employment of a meaningless expression. Herein we come to the point of difference that Edwards, Bonar, Ryle, and Spurgeon, etc., make as elaborated upon in *Future Israel*. It is that, within the composition of the one redeemed people of God, it is thoroughly biblical to uphold a racial and territorial distinction in the same way that a believing husband and wife, being one in Christ Jesus, yet maintain a gender distinction (Gal. 3:28).

Furthermore we would add that merely the hope of an accumulating remnant, as with Hoekema, totally misses the climactic vision of Romans 11. The remnant of Romans 11:5 is the guarantee that God is not finished with Israel, in confirmation of v. 1. However, He is not ultimately satisfied with merely a remnant, but rather "their [Israel's] fulfillment," their consummate acceptance as "life from the dead," when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:12, 15, 26).

Again, we commend Hendriksen for the spirit of his concluding chapter, "What Should Be Our Attitude Toward The Jew?" His evangelistic longing is well expressed:

¹³ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

O that all the gifts and talents with which these people have been so richly endowed might be applied also—yes, first and most of all—to the service of him who is indeed the true Messiah, King of kings and Lord of lords! O that the veil which prevents them from seeing in the Old Testament the glory of Christ might be taken away (II Cor. 3:15-16).¹⁵

Then he makes a further plea, with which we wholeheartedly agree. “More than anything else, we should tell these people the truth.”¹⁶ Yes, we as premillennialists believe that this truth should include the grave warning of Jesus Christ, “Unless you believe that I am He [the Son of God, Messiah], you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). But on the other hand, would Hendriksen really explain to a listening Jew the eschatological truth as he believes it concerning God’s disenfranchisement of covenant individuality, nationality and territory? Further, would Hendriksen explain just how many Christian churches and fellowships, that espouse his Reformed eschatology, have not only spawned distinctive Jewish missions, but also have been responsible for the planting of Christian churches and ministries in Israel?



¹⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 63.