

Dispensationalism: Root Cause of Antinomianism

by J.K. McKee revised 02 May, 2005 www.tnnonline.net

The Messianic community today faces some strong theological challenges. While we are trying to develop a coherent orthodoxy relating to the correct beliefs and practices in relationship to the prophesied restoration of all Israel, we face external difficulties from popular Christian belief systems which directly relate to how a person reads and interprets Scripture. The two systems that are in direct opposition to the premise that born again Believers are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel and should live as Israel, are those of replacement theology and dispensationalism. Replacement theology, widely adhered to in Reformed circles, simply advocates that the nation of Israel has been abolished and Israel's promises have been transferred to a new entity known as the Church, which God is exclusively working through. Dispensationalism, in contrast, believes that Israel's promises are still valid, but that Israel has been temporarily put aside because of the Jews' rejection of Yeshua, and that right now God is working through the Church. When the Church has been raptured to Heaven it is said, then God will once again deal with the nation of Israel.

The majority of those coming into the Messianic movement from evangelical Christian backgrounds come from denominations or churches which have taught some form of dispensationalist theology. These churches certainly believe that God's promises to Israel are valid, and perhaps may be supportive of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. However, these churches likewise probably believe that although God's promises to Israel are valid, that they were not Israel as the Church. The Church is separate from Israel and God has separate promises and a separate plan for it.

Many evangelical Christian scholars herald dispensationalism as the key to modern Biblical truth. It provides an easy answer for reading the Bible. No longer do literal promises to Israel have to be spiritualized in some sense as applying to the Church, as is the common premise in replacement theology. On the contrary, dispensationalists assert that the literal promises given to Israel are still valid; they just do not apply to the Church. The serious drawback to this is that Scriptures that specifically apply to Israel do not apply to the Church—namely the Tanach or Old Testament—are often overlooked in Bible study. While these texts are important to understand as part of the Biblical narrative and they contain important principles, most dispensationalists assert that since they are not specifically directed to the Church, they do not have to be followed. Some dispensationalists even believe that parts of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament do not apply to Christians, specially those parts where Yeshua is to speaking to His Jewish followers. (But this does not include all dispensationalists.)

Dispensationalist theology is the primary basis from which much of modern evangelical Christian theology is formed. Since it advocates that Israel and the Church are separate entities, or groups of elect, and Scripture is divided along the lines of what "group of elect" a person is a part of, dispensationalism is known more by some of the cardinal teachings it has created than as a methodology for understanding Scripture itself. Perhaps the most popular teaching that is strongly connected to dispensationalism is the pre-tribulation rapture. The infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate is quite commonplace among those who discuss the end-times. However, there is another cardinal teaching, which is not as commonly known, that comes as a direct result of dispensationalism.

The majority of those in the conservative Messianic movement believe, in contrast to mainstream Christian theology, that the Torah or Law of Moses is still to be followed today and that it is relevant instruction for all Believers. We believe that Yeshua the Messiah upheld the Torah in His teachings and actions, and that all Believers must have a foundation in it in order to understand the remainder of Holy Scripture. Contrary to this position, many in mainstream Christianity relegate the Torah to only being valuable to know for the sake of Biblical history, and perhaps sometimes for the stories that it tells, but not as direct, relevant instruction for our times today. Holding the Law of God in very low esteem can lead to what is theologically termed *antinomianism*—the denial of the importance of the Law of God. Alexander M. Renwick, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, remarks that "It refers to the doctrine that the moral law is not

binding upon Christians as a rule of life. In a wider sense it is applied to the views of fanatics who refuse to recognize any law but their own subjective ideas which they usually claim are from the Holy Spirit.”¹

Dispensationalism, advocating that Scriptures clearly for Israel do not apply to the Church, is the root cause of what is called antinomianism. Antinomianism, in one of its forms, is the cause of the anti-Torah attitude which asserts that the Law of Moses has been completely abolished and done away by the work of Messiah Yeshua, contrary to His words on the matter (Matthew 5:17-19). As it relates to the present restoration of all Israel that is occurring in our day, it is arguably the greatest stumbling block on which most opposition to it will rest. Dispensationalists will argue that from their point of view what we believe is in error. They claim that it is in error because we deny the uniqueness of the Church as a separate group of elect, and advocate that the Torah is still to be followed today. **On these points, they are entirely correct.** It is our responsibility as students of the Word to understand why dispensational methods of examining Scripture are flawed and in error.

Many of us know that the restoration message which is being proclaimed in this hour contains the answers to many of our theological questions. When we properly understand that the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were promised many multitudes of physical descendants (Genesis 22:17; 32:12; 41:49); and later that Ancient Israel was split into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms following the death of King Solomon, with the Northern Kingdom being engulfed into the nations via the Assyrian Exile; and that in the Last Days all of recognizable Israel, dispersed Israel, and those of the nations, will be gathered together as one people of Israel,² then our position on the Scriptures begins to change. No longer can Scripture be viewed through the lens of Israel and “the Church,” as dispensationalists would have it, but rather *only Israel*. And, somehow all Believers in Messiah Yeshua will be participants in the prophesied restoration of Israel.

This understanding, however, is *only now* coming to the surface, being received in significant numbers, and it poses great challenges for us theologically as we must properly respond to the claims of dispensationalism, exposing its errors. Dispensationalism is a false teaching that has spread vociferously throughout Christianity since its inception almost two hundred years ago. Yet, it is a concept that few Christians question. Why is this the case? Because it brings “validity” to many traditions that the Reformation failed to purge from the Church. It gives a theological substantiation for keeping Christians out of the “Old Testament” and from examining its words closely. As the Messiah said to a group of Pharisees, “you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN’” (Matthew 15:6-9).³ Is the same true of modern Christianity? Just as these Pharisees nullified God’s written commandments to keep their own, have dispensationalists nullified God’s written commandments to derive their own system of dealing with the Almighty?

Belief in dispensationalism is the reason why many evangelical Christians today discard the importance of the Torah, and do not believe that things like the seventh-day Sabbath, the appointed times of Leviticus 23, or the kosher dietary laws are at all important. The understanding of holiness, sadly, is narrowed down to what one exclusively sees in the life example of Yeshua (Jesus). But any understanding of that life example of Yeshua is, of course—neutered—because in order to properly understand the Messiah’s mission one must have a strong foundation in the Tanach (Old Testament), and specifically the Torah. The all-important truths in the Torah serve to consecrate God’s people unto Him and to set them apart from the world. God told Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God

¹ Alexander M. Renwick, “Antinomianism,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 48.

² A list of critical prophecies relating to the restoration of all Israel, includes: Isaiah 11:12-16; Jeremiah 10:6-10; Ezekiel 37:15-28; Zechariah 10:6-10.

³ Cf. Mark 7:6-7; cf. Isaiah 29:13; Colossians 2:22.

has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” Ancient Israel was to be holy because they observed His statutes and ordinances, and hence were separated out.⁴

Dispensationalism, advocating that God has two groups of elect, validates many Christians’ claim to transgressing what are improperly viewed as “Jewish commandments,” only given to Israel. Since dispensationalists see themselves as part of a separate entity known as “the Church,” Scriptures that without any doubt are given to Israel—namely the Torah—do not apply as far as obedience is concerned. In actuality, however, the Torah contains commandments that were given to all Israel, and according to the Apostle Paul all Believers in Yeshua are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-22), or the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). As many Believers begin to recognize themselves as a part of Israel, come out of mainstream Christianity, and enter into the Messianic movement—it should be obvious that dispensationalism poses a major challenge to us.

Does the belief that God have two groups of elect have any Scriptural foundation? Should we interpret Scripture from the theological presupposition that God has two groups of elect? These are the two important questions that will dominate our examination of dispensationalism.

Wrongly Dividing the Word

The primary Scriptural basis for dispensationalism often comes from the antiquated King James Version translation of 2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The premise that dispensationalists propose from this verse is that to properly understand the Word of God, one must literally “divide the Bible.” One must split it up among God’s so-called “groups of elect.” Namely, anything that is clearly given to Israel, i.e., the Old Testament, remains for Israel. Anything that is clearly directed toward the Church, i.e., the New Testament, is for the Church. What applies to Israel does not apply to the Church.

The contention supported by dispensationalist C.R. Stam is that “all of the Bible is *for us*, but it is not addressed to us or written about us.”⁵ He advocates that only parts of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) clearly directed at non-Jews by the Apostle Paul are relevant to be followed today. This is because the Apostle Paul was the “apostle to the Gentiles,” and since most of the Christian Church today is not Jewish, the bulk of our attention should be focused on the Pauline Epistles. This presents a serious problem as Paul’s letters should not stand on their own merit, and they must be interpreted in light of the remaining Apostolic writings, the whole of Scripture, and of course the historical context in which they were written.

Stam and other dispensationalists often compare the Bible to a “post office” in which mail is “dispensed” to or siphoned out to post office box owners. The “us” referred to is the entity called the Church. The premise that most of the Bible is “not about us” is true only in the regard that most of the written Scriptures are very clearly about Israel. Therefore, while texts like the Torah or Prophets or Writings are part of the Biblical story, dispensationalists assume that they do not directly affect “us.” Is this interpretation truly justified and can it be supported when we examine the Biblical nature of “the Church”? Is “the Church” an entity separate from Israel?

In the Apostolic Scriptures, the Greek word that is commonly rendered as “church” is *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία). *BDAG* defines *ekklēsia* as “**people of shared belief, community,**

⁴ The Hebrew word commonly translated as “holy” in the Tanach is *qodesh* (קֹדֶשׁ), which *HALOT* has specified various definitions for, notably, “**God declares someone (something) as consecrated to him, holy to him**” (p 2:1074). The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* describes holy as “A Biblical term generally meaning ‘to be set apart.’ The term is also widely used in Scripture to refer to a variety of people and objects alike but ultimately points to God as the one who is qualitatively different or set apart from creation. Holy may also be used to describe someone or something that God has ‘set apart’ for special purposes” (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. [Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001], 60).

⁵ C.R. Stam, *Things That Differ* (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing, Co., 1951), 20.

congregation.” Another definition given is “of OT Israelites *assembly, congregation.*”⁶ While “church” is the common translation of *ekklēsia*, is it a justified one? *TDNT* says that “Since the NT uses a single term, translations should also try to do so, but this raises the question whether ‘church’ or ‘congregation’ is always suitable, especially in view of the OT use for Israel and the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic... ‘Assembly,’ then, is perhaps the best single term, particularly as it has both a congregate and an abstract sense, i.e., for the assembling as well as the assembly.”⁷ When understanding this, we have to ask ourselves the question of what the Apostolic writers intended by using the word *ekklēsia*. Did they see *ekklēsia* as being something separate from the community of Israel?

Ekklēsia can be representative of Israel. *Ekklēsia* was the Greek word chosen by the Rabbis who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek approximately three centuries before Yeshua, to render the Hebrew word *qahal* (קהל). *Qahal* is a Hebrew word that means “convocation, assembly” (*CHALOT*),⁸ and almost exclusively refers to Israel. *TWOT* tells us that “*qāhāl* may... designate the congregation as an organized body. There is *q^hal yisrā’el* (Deut 31:30), *q^hal YHWH* (Num 16:3, etc.), and *q^hal ʾēlōhīm* (Neh 13:1) and then at other times merely ‘the assembly’ (*haqqāhāl*). We encounter... ‘the assembly of the people of God’ (Jud 20:2). Of special interest is the phrase ‘congregation of the Lord’ (*q^hal YHWH*) of which there are thirteen instances (Num 16:3; 20:4; Deut 23:2-4; Mic 2:5; 1 Chr 28:8). **It is the nearest OT equivalent of ‘church of the Lord’**” (emphasis mine).⁹ When the Apostolic writers use the term *ekklēsia*, which is most often rendered in our English Bibles as “church,” they use *ekklēsia* in reference to the *qahal* or assembly of Israel—not a separate group of elect. They would have been familiar with its Septuagint usage, and the synagogues of the Diaspora which used the LXX would have likewise been familiar with how *ekklēsia* refers to the congregation of Israel.

Dispensationalism varies in its many forms. There are those who perceive just the “New Testament” for them, and those who believe that true insight can only be found in the writings of the Apostle Paul, “the apostle to the Gentiles.” But still, there do remain some constants. Dispensationalists assert that the whole of the Scriptures are not for them and that God has two groups of elect: “Israel” and “the Church.” Ultimately, however, most dispensationlists believe that in the eschaton, when Satan is defeated and humanity is restored to the New Heavens and New Earth, that all of God’s people will be unified. However, some dispensationlists do not believe this. Some believe that Israel has been promised an Earthly Kingdom under a sovereign Messiah, whereas promises to “the Church” are in Heaven with a risen Christ. Of course, Paul’s question of “Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:13, RSV/NIV) is a perfectly valid one here. Neither God the Father nor God the Son are divided. It is human men in trying to understand God and His Word who have divided Him.

The Lord told Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 25:13, “You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small” (cf. Leviticus 19:36). He prohibited Ancient Israel from having differing weights and measures, or different standards. In fact, He said that “There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you” (Exodus 12:49, NJPS). All of the people who lived within the borders of Ancient Israel were to be judged by the same set of instruction: God’s Torah. Proverbs 20:10 states quite candidly, “Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD.” Have these basic premises changed? Does God change His mind about holding all those who are within His boundaries to the *same standard* (Malachi 3:6)?

⁶ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

⁷ K.L. Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 397.

⁸ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), 314.

⁹ Jack P. Lewis, “קהל,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:790.

The Lord says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8). God does not change His mind because theologians decide that it is more appropriate to split up and compartmentalize the Bible, because they can more easily understand God this way. The Almighty is not divided. God does not have a double standard. *But human beings with a fallen sin nature often do.*

Think of dispensationalism this way: God’s children are all in one house, but His children are split up. Some children (the Christians) think they can go to the refrigerator and eat anything they want, while others (the Jews) feel prohibited from eating certain things. Some children (the Christians) can watch television on any channel they want, while others (the Jews) feel limited to only a few channels. When we take it to an extreme, some children (the Christians) are permitted to bring home boyfriends and girlfriends and engage in promiscuity, while others (the Jews) feel they cannot.

Is this a problem? Yes. It demonstrates that those in the house are not being held to the same set of standards, and causes a disparaging inequality as far as what people are supposed to. Would this cause disunity among those who follow the Almighty? Yes. Then why is this essentially what dispensationalists teach? Why do they teach that God tells some to do certain things and others do to other things, contradicting Himself? Is God divided?

The basic dispensationalist premise is that God has dealt and deals with different people in different ways, which goes against the Scriptural admonition “there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11), meaning that all will be judged by the same set of standards.

Paul writes in Romans 1:18-20, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” This is what is generally referred to as *natural revelation*, insomuch that Paul tells us that all humans will be accountable before their Creator even if they have not heard the gospel preached to them, for the Lord has revealed Himself through His Creation. All are going to be judged. But notably with this understanding is the fact that the Lord has not fully revealed His plan for mankind all at once. Hebrews 1:1 affirms, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets” (RSV).

God does not have a double standard nor is He divided with how He will judge humanity, but human beings certainly do. Is the premise of “dividing up the Bible” valid as 2 Timothy 2:15 implies for many people? No, it is not valid. The Greek verb that has been translated as “divide” in the KJV, *orthotomeō* (ὀρθοτομέω), has a more complete meaning. *Vine* says that *orthotomeō* means “to cut straight,” explaining that “What is intended here is not ‘dividing’ Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately.”¹⁰ *LS* simply says that it means “to teach it aright.”¹¹ *Orthotomeō* is rendered as “rightly handling” in the RSV and “correctly handles” in the NIV. The NASU has, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” Properly handling or dealing with Scripture is what “dividing” it correctly means. The *Life Application Bible* (KJV), commenting on 2 Timothy 2:15, remarks that “Because God will examine what kind of workers we have been for him, we should build our lives on his Word and build his Word into our lives—it alone tells us how to live for him and serve him.”¹²

Has the admonition to split up God’s Word among so-called groups of elect like Israel and “the Church” ever existed? No. The God of Israel has only one Instruction for His people. If God divides His Word then He divides Himself and will contradict Himself. This kind of false understanding gives our Heavenly Father *human* characteristics and causes people to doubt the reliability of the Holy Scriptures. Human men have a double standard; the LORD God does not.

¹⁰ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 178.

¹¹ H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 567.

¹² *Life Application Bible*, KJV (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989), 2139.

“The Mystery”

Consistent with most dispensational understandings is their view concerning what Paul calls “the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints” (Colossians 1:27). The word *mustērion* (μυστήριον) is defined by *Thayer* to be “the secret counsels which govern God in dealing with the righteous, which are hidden from ungodly and wicked men but plain to the godly.”¹³ Yeshua said in Mark 4:11, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,” meaning that only His true followers can understand what He is really communicating.

According to dispensationalists, the true mystery is the existence of a second group of elect outside the people of Israel, which is a separate “Church.” But can we justifiably conclude that the existence of “the Church” is the true mystery? Certainly, even though Paul talks about a mystery that has been hidden, there would be clues to its existence in other Scripture texts. I find no allusion whatsoever in the Tanach about God establishing a second group of elect. Isaiah 49:6 for example, tells us that the purpose of the Messiah is to “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I {God} will also make You a light of the nations so that [My] salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” This is a text speaking of the restoration of all Israel, which will be raised up and used by the Lord to extend His salvation to the entire world. Where is a specific Old Testament prophecy that speaks of the Messiah coming to establish the Church? You are not going to find one.

Colossians 1:26-28 in its entirety gives us a better understanding of the mystery that the Apostle Paul was writing about:

“Of *this [assembly]* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching* of the word of God, *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, **which is Messiah in you, the hope of glory.**”

Paul makes it clear what the mystery that has been “manifested” or “disclosed” (NIV) is. The verb *phaneroō* (φανερώω) means “to make manifest or visible or known what has been hidden or unknown” (*Thayer*).¹⁴ What had been unknown in previous generations prior to Paul’s writing this was not the existence of “the Church” as a separate group of elect. He specifies the mystery as “the Messiah in you, the hope of glory.”

The importance of this life-changing revelation cannot be overstated! As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves to whether or not you are living the life of trust. Test yourselves. Don’t you realize that Yeshua the Messiah is in you?” (2 Corinthians 13:5, CJB). Of the dispensationalists we are forced to ask: **If you have been truly born again do you not realize that the Redeemer lives inside of you? And is that not enough of a mystery?!**

The contention that exists with Paul concerning “the mystery” is that when he writes about the “revelation...made known to me” (Ephesians 3:3), he is speaking of “the Church” as a group of elect separate from Israel. However, those of us who understand the end-time restoration of all Israel: Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, and those of the nations, know that this is not the case. The major mystery that we have the responsibility to put to rest is what “the fullness of the Gentiles” actually is. Paul writes in Romans 11:25 that the ingathering of the “fulness of the nations” (YLT) is a prerequisite for the salvation of all Israel:

“For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25).

¹³ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 420.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 648.

What is commonly taught by dispensationalists is that “Israel” represents the Jewish people and that when the “fullness of the Gentiles” is brought in, meaning those of the nations who receive the good news come to faith, then the Church will eventually be raptured to Heaven so that the Jewish people can be saved. However, we must consider that the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim was prophesied to “become a multitude of nations” (Genesis 48:19), which is a “fullness of Gentiles.”¹⁵ These are the ones who were scattered into the nations with the Assyrian dispersion in 722-721 B.C.E. YLT renders Romans 11:25 with “hardness in part to Israel hath happened till the fulness of the nations may come in.” This text tells us that all of Israel has been hardened, and that the “fulness of the nations”—those scattered in the nations—must be gathered back into the fold in order for Israel to be restored.

What is actually stated in Scripture is that when this “fullness of the nations” comes to faith in Yeshua the Messiah, then the “partial hardening” that has been placed upon all Israel will finally be lifted. For as the prophecies say concerning Yeshua, “Then He shall become a sanctuary; but to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over, and a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (Isaiah 8:14). Both Judah and scattered Israel, the latter presently in the nations and hence indistinguishable from the nations, have their own views of the Messiah: one as a First Century heretic, and the other as one whose job it was to abrogate the “Old Testament Law.” These things are beginning to change as many Jewish people are coming to faith in Yeshua, and many non-Jewish Believers (perhaps of scattered Israel) are beginning to see Yeshua for who He is as a First Century Jewish Rabbi that upheld the Torah and did not abolish it.

In Ephesians 1:9 Paul tells us, “He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him.” Further in his epistle, Paul tells these Believers that they are now a part of “the commonwealth of Israel” (Ephesians 2:11-17). Paul does not say, “And now you are part of the Church.” Rather, he says, that those of the nations “are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Messiah Yeshua through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). He says that they “are heirs together with Israel” (NIV).¹⁶

The real mystery is not that those of the nations can now partake of Israel, because the doors for citizenship in Israel were always open to foreigners. **The mystery that Paul talks about is that they can now partake of Israel through the good news of Messiah Yeshua!** Citizenship is an act of faith, not just an act of obedience.

What is a “Dispensation”?

Most of the confusion that exists when dealing with dispensationalists is their lack of understanding what a “dispensation” is. Consider the fact that in the New American Standard Bible, widely considered to be the most literal Christian version on the evangelical market today, the word “dispensation” does not appear once. It is, however, found four times in the King James Version:

“For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a **dispensation of the gospel** is committed unto me” (1 Corinthians 9:17, KJV).

“That in the **dispensation** of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him” (Ephesians 1:10, KJV).

“If ye have heard of the **dispensation** of the grace of God which is given to you-ward” (Ephesians 3:2, KJV).

“If ye have heard of the **dispensation** of the grace of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God” (Colossians 1:25, KJV).

What exists within Christianity today is a misunderstanding of what a “dispensation,” or more specifically, what an *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία) encompasses. This Greek word, according to

¹⁵ The Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew *melo ha'goyim* (מְלֵא הַגּוֹיִם) is *crescet in gentes*, or “grow into Gentiles.” Douay-Rheims American edition has “his seed shall grow into nations.”

¹⁶ The Greek *sumpolitēs* (συμπολίτης) means, “*fellow-citizen/compatriot*” (BDAG, 959).

Vine, means, “the management of a household or of household affairs.” An explanation given for *oikonomia* is that it is “a mode of dealing, an arrangement or administration of affairs.”¹⁷ It is composed of two nouns, *oikos* (οἶκος) and *nomos* (νόμος), which translated side-by-side mean “house” and “law.” However, the interpretation of *oikonomia* popularized by dispensationalists is that when a “dispensation” is being spoken of, it is representative of a particular age or time period in which God has dealt with a particular group of people in a particular way, as opposed to the administration or responsibility God gives to someone. I take issue with this viewpoint.

Throughout human history, we certainly find that God has not revealed His plan for humanity all at once. Changes have undoubtedly occurred as His plan of salvation has moved forward. But even so, is it justifiable to say that we currently live in an “Age of Grace” which was preceded by an “Age of Law,” with other “ages” having existed as well?

Have not concepts such as law and grace always existed? If grace had not existed in the Tanach or Old Testament, should not the Lord have destroyed the whole of Ancient Israel in the desert for transgressing His commands (cf. Exodus 32:7-14)? He did not do this. There is no example in Scripture of our Heavenly Father “flip-flopping” around between two plans and two groups of elect, like an adulterous husband would with his wife and his lover on the side. But if we believe in the dispensationalist premise of dividing up the Bible, these are conclusions that we can draw. Contrary to what the dispensationalists may derive from Scripture, our Heavenly Father only has one plan and one people.

As far as Christian Bible translations go, I accept the NASU’s more accurate rendering of *oikonomia*, translated as “stewardship” or as “administration” in the “key dispensational passages”:

“For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against by will, I have a **stewardship** entrusted to me” (1 Corinthians 9:17, NASU).

“He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an **administration** suitable to the fulness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Messiah, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:9-11, NASU).

“...[I]f indeed you have heard of the **stewardship** of God’s grace which was given to me for you” (Ephesians 3:2, NASU).

“Of *this [assembly]* I was made a minister according to the **stewardship** from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*” (Colossians 1:25, NASU).¹⁸

It makes much more logical sense that Paul speaks of the stewardship or administration God entrusted to him, rather than a vague “dispensation.” If we believe that the Lord actually does work in different time periods (“dispensations”) in different ways, then why did Yeshua *only speak* of “this age or...the *age to come*” (Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30)—the age to come referring to His future Messianic Kingdom? Was He a dispensationalist? Should we not take our theological ques from the Lord Himself? Where does He speak of dispensationalism?

How do we respond?

What should be the proper response from Messianic Believers to some of the ills of dispensationalism? Those of us who believe that our Heavenly Father is in the process of restoring all Israel, are in fact the only ones who can properly answer and respond to the false teachings of dispensationalism, without resorting to replacement theology. Many in Messianic Judaism cannot

¹⁷ *Vine*, 174.

¹⁸ It should be noted that a substantial amount of dispensational theology is based on antiquated King James renderings of verses and it is not hard to find some dispensationalists who have extreme KJV-only positions. Although we respect the KJV as a valuable Scripture translation that God has used throughout the centuries, we must understand that since 1611 there has been a significant amount of *more* research done into the ancient Scriptural languages, notably Koiné Greek. Thus, we find some serious modern-day problems with some of the KJV translations, i.e., “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

expose dispensationalism for what it truly is, because they too largely believe God has two groups of elect, and that as “redeemed Jews” they can co-belong to both Israel and “the Church.” As a sad consequence of this, many of these people are anti-Torah, or believe that the Torah is to be only followed by Jews and non-Jewish Believers need not concern themselves with any of God’s Law at all.

Many of the problems of dispensationalism will have to be addressed on a purely case-by-case basis, because many Christians have a strong tendency to form entire theologies around one verse of Scripture, such as the KJV rendering of 2 Timothy 2:15, “rightly dividing the word of truth.” While we know that “splitting up the Bible” among so-called groups of elect is wrong, can those who consider themselves part of “the Church” who have problems with it respond to it properly? Can those of Messianic Judaism? Not entirely. Why? Because we know that in the Apostolic Scriptures “the mystery of the Gentiles” concerns all of Israel coming to faith in the Messiah, with those of scattered Israel returning to the fold and being acculturated back into the Commonwealth of Israel.

Some of the key issues that we must face as a direct result of dispensationalism are those which many of us have already addressed. Our ministry frequently must discuss the fallacies of pre-tribulation rapture, the attacks upon the validity of the Torah or Law of Moses, and the established fact that God does not recognize a separate group of elect known as “the Church” outside of Israel. But the primary job of us responding to these false teachings relates to more our attitude than anything else. We must not be like those who “know better,” *rabidly* exposing dispensational falsehoods like a junk yard dog ravaging through a piece of meat. Certainly, while we fully affirm that dispensationalism is extremely problematic, we recognize that many dispensationalists do not know any better. In the spirit of our Lord and Savior, we must keep those who are away from the truth in constant prayer and intercession, that our Father would bring them into His light. We must encourage those who have ears to hear.

This analysis I have offered is but a brief description of dispensationalism and the problems we as Messianic Believers commonly have with it. No doubt, of all the theological controversies that we will have to continually deal with, this one may be the largest. Coming against this stronghold should unite us against a common adversary. In the coming days, we should expect that coming against dispensationalism and its various derivations will be our primary distinction from all who claim to be in complete compliance with the Bible.

J.K. McKee (B.A., University of Oklahoma; M.A., Asbury Theological Seminary) is the editor of TNN Online (www.tnnonline.net) and is a Messianic apologist. He is author of several books, including: *The New Testament Validates Torah*, *Torah In the Balance, Volume I*, and *When Will the Messiah Return?* He has also written many articles on the Two Houses of Israel and Biblical theology, and is presently focusing on Messianic commentaries on various books of the Bible.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

revised 02 May, 2005

edited for spelling/grammar

31 July, 2007