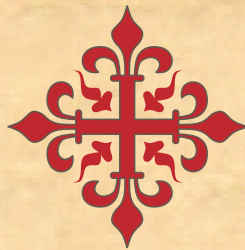


THE REFORMED ESCHATOLOGY OF
ANTHONY HOEKEMA



A JUDEO-CENTRIC CRITIQUE

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Anthony A. Hoekema was born in the Netherlands and immigrated to the United States in 1923. He attended Calvin College, the University of Michigan, Calvin Theological seminary and Princeton Theological seminary. After serving as minister of several Christian Reformed Churches (1944-56) he became Associate Professor of Bible at Calvin College (1956-58). From 1958 to 1979, when he retired, he was Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Professor Hoekema spent two sabbatical years in Cambridge, England (1965-66, 1973-74). Of the books he has written, one is of major significance, *The Bible and the Future* (1979); he was also a contributor to *The Meaning of the Millennium* (1977) in which he was the selected spokesman for amillennial eschatology. From the latter two publications we see quite obviously the perpetuation of the eschatology of Bavinck and Vos in particular, as well as that of the *Christian Reformed Church*. Hoekema also sympathetically references other amillennialist authors who oppose a premillennial and dispensational understanding of Israel and the Jews, including Oswalt T. Allis, Louis Berkhof, W. E. Cox, Louis DeCaro, W. Grier, Floyd E. Hamilton, W. Hendriksen, Philip Mauto, George Murray, Albertus Pieters, and Martin Wyngaarden.¹

A. The Christian Church is the true Israel.

Here Augustinian, supercessionist theology with regard to national Israel is quite explicit. For instance, “because the nation of Israel as a whole rejected the kingdom, Jesus said that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a nation producing the fruits of it (Matt. 21:43).”² Hence, “the New Testament church is now the true Israel, in whom and through whom the promises made to Old Testament Israel are being fulfilled.”³

B. Romans 11.

The author readily confesses that his understanding of this most important passage of Scripture is based upon the exegesis of William Hendriksen.⁴ This is but a further indication of Reformed scholastic interdependence and camaraderie that would also include Palmer Robertson, Venema, Riddlebarger, etc. (FI 84-86). For our purposes

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, pp. 194-195n.

² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴ *Ibid.* He specifically references Romans 9-11 according to Hendriksen’s *Israel in Prophecy*, p. 142n.

here we simply note certain conclusions which can be compared in more detail with the consideration of this matter in *Future Israel* (FI 251-290).

1. The salvation of the fullness of Israel, v. 12, 15.

The saved “remnant” of Israel, v. 5, assumes Israel’s widespread unbelief that at the same time will enable “riches for the Gentiles,” v. 12a, and the culmination of their “fullness,” v. 15. Yet there is to be an inevitable future salvation or “fulfillment” of Israel, v. 12b, likened to “life from the dead,” v. 15, that will bring about undreamed of riches for the Jewish people, v. 12, as well as further benefit for the Gentiles. But when will this resurrection of Israel take place? According to v. 15, it would appear to be when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” The analogy of the olive tree, vs. 17-24, indicates that “God is able to graft them [the natural branches of Israel] in again,” v. 23. But when? Hoekema, along with Dutch commentators of a Reformed background in particular, believes that the fulfillment” and “resurrection” and “regrafting” will be *coterminous* with the gradual gathering of the elect and the gradual completion of the “fullness of the Gentiles,” v. 25. Thus:

Israel will continue to turn to the Lord [as an accumulating remnant] until the Parousia, while at the same time the fullness of the Gentiles is being gathered in. And in this way all Israel will be saved: not just the last generation of Israelites, but all true Israelites, . . . the sum total of all the remnants throughout history.⁵

Of course a *prima facie* reading of Romans 11 does not easily lead to Hoekema’s conclusion here, and it is difficult not to conclude that Paul’s Jewish oriented meaning here is at all costs to be avoided. In other words, Hoekema’s exegesis here is really driven according to Augustinian and historic Reformed presuppositions. Rather Romans 11 most naturally presents a sequential/temporal order, which vs. 25-26 as a whole quite obviously construe. Hence a sequential/temporal understanding here, with the mass saving of Israel subsequent to the times of the Gentiles, also presents a most exciting conclusion to this age, as is Paul’s tone here, which at the same time is climaxed by the return of Jesus Christ. But Hoekema’s understanding, with a trickle of Jews being saved up to the end, is hardly climactic, even if a cumulative remnant over the centuries is considered. Rather Paul’s concluding excitement in Romans 11, as a Jew, surely anticipates a time of riches for the world through Israel’s national, spiritual regeneration and resurrection (Ezek. 36-37) that challenges the limitations of our present imaginations.

⁵ Ibid., p. 145.

2. The salvation of all Israel, v. 26.

This will involve “the bringing to salvation throughout history of the total number of the elect from among the Jews. . . . [Thus] ‘all Israel’ . . . [is] not designating the nation of Israel as a totality to be saved in the end-time, but as referring to the number of the elect to be saved throughout history.”⁶ Of course such a view commonly believes that this elect remnant has no national or territorial identity in the sight of God, only temporary ethnic recognition. So the “Jewish” Christian, in being absorbed into the Church of Jesus Christ, allegedly loses all historic Jewish identity in the sight of God. Such an emasculated meaning for “Jewish” betrays the faulty exegesis that it is purported leads to this conclusion, especially when Paul has so rigorously upheld that he is presently an “Israelite” in v. 1.

C. Galatians 6:16.

The honesty that the following quotation expresses is quite revealing since one could rightly expect that the alleged identification of Israel with the church in Galatians 6:16 would have numerous supporting indications in Scripture. However we read:

There is at least one New Testament passage where the term Israel is used as inclusive of Gentiles, and therefore as standing for the entire New Testament church. I refer to Galatians 6:15-16. . . . The word *kai* [Greek], therefore, should be rendered *even*, as the New International Version has done. When the passage is so understood, “the Israel of God” is a further description of “all who follow this rule”—that is, of all true believers, including both Jews and Gentiles, who constitute the New Testament church. Here, in other words, Paul clearly identifies the church as the true Israel.⁷

Let the reader simply refer to *Future Israel* (FI 263-269) concerning Galatians 6:16 and he will appreciate just how much Hoekema leaves unsaid with regard to what is undoubtedly his minority opinion, the NIV notwithstanding. He might at least have made mention of the majority opinion.

D. The conversion of the Jews.

The following quotation describes the continual adding of Jewish Christians to the remnant (Rom. 11:5), so that when the remnant, that is “the sum total of all the

⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

remnants throughout history is complete,"⁸ then "all Israel will be saved," but not in any national and climactic sense.

Jews will continue to be converted to Christianity throughout the entire era between the first and second comings of Christ, as the full number of the Gentiles is being gathered in. In such Jewish conversions, therefore, we are to see a sign of the certainty of Christ's return. In the meantime, this sign should bind on our hearts the urgency of the church's mission to the Jews. In a world in which there is still a great deal of anti-Semitism, let us never forget that God has not rejected his ancient covenant people, and that he still has his purpose with Israel.⁹

However, as well-intentioned as the last two sentences may seem to be, there appears some ambiguity, even obfuscation, with the declaration that "God has not rejected his ancient covenant people." Does this mean that Hoekema believes, concerning this present church age, that national Israel and the land it inhabits has divine sanction according to the explicit covenantal promises that God made to Abraham? The following comment would suggest otherwise.

From the fourth chapter of the book of Hebrews we learn that Canaan was a type of Sabbath-rest of the people of God in the life to come. From Paul's letter to the Galatians we learn that all those who are in Christ are included in the seed of Abraham (Gal. 3:29). When we read Genesis 17:8 ("And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" [ASV]) with this understanding of the New Testament broadening these concepts, we see in it a promise of the new earth as the everlasting possession of all the people of God, not just of the physical descendants of Abraham. And when in the light of this New Testament teaching, we now read Amos 9:15 ("And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be plucked up out of their land which I have given them, saith Jehovah thy God" [ASV]), we do not feel compelled to restrict the meaning of these words to national Israel and the land of Palestine. We understand them to be a prediction of the eternal dwelling of all of God's people, Gentiles as well as Jews, on the new earth of which Canaan was a type.¹⁰

Here is a classic example of how plasticity in exegesis, especially with regard to Amos 9:15 (FI 198-200), results in the square peg of an Old Testament text being forced into the round hole of a theological system. The Jew to whom we are called upon to witness would rightly scoff at such a misuse of the sacred text. Furthermore, he would also be repulsed by the knowledge, should it be revealed to him, that our evangelistic endeavor intends for him to come to realize that his Jewishness is really passé in the sight of God. Of course Paul never had such an intention, but those who follow Hoekema's eschatology certainly do. Hence this reference to God's "ancient covenant

⁸ Ibid., p. 145. The author footnotes that his interpretation "is competently set forth in Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy*, chapters 3 and 4."

⁹ Ibid., p. 147.

¹⁰ Anthony A. Hoekema, "Amillennialism," *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse, p. 185.

people” involves dubious meaning. The reference to “the urgency of the church’s mission to the Jews” also appears to be fraught with both questionable terminology and intentions, and quite unlike that which is genuinely Pauline. And in the same breath to mention “a world in which there is still a great deal of anti-Semitism” while European history indicates that the Christian Church in general, over the centuries, has fostered this great shame through the Augustinian eschatology that Hoekema espouses, is enough to leave one completely breathless.

