

# **FAIRBAIRN VS. FAIRBAIRN**

Or

Does the Scripture prophesy a national  
restoration of Israel to its ancient land?

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For Professor Nicholas

## A. INTRODUCTION

### (1) Historical Introduction

Patrick Fairbairn has two essays to his credit on the future prospects of the Jews. The first was written in 1840 and espoused the opinion that there would be a national restoration of the Jews to their ancient territory (*The Prophetic Prospects of the Jews*). From this premillenarian position Fairbairn later changed, so that a chapter in his book, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (1856), dealing with this issue, puts forward the so-called spiritualistic interpretation that the Church is now the Israel of God.

The purpose of this essay is to compare the two essays of Fairbairn and enlarge on the issues that grow out of it, specifically as they bear on the vital subject of the interpretation of prophecy.

### (2) Presuppositions (or Hermeneutics)

In the 1840 essay Fairbairn expressed his basic hermeneutical principle thus:

...the fulfilment of what is already past, affords the best rule for determining the sense of what is yet to be fulfilled in the prophecies which concern the Jews as a people.<sup>1</sup>

Using this principle, Fairbairn makes the all-important conclusion:

...if in the one part the fulfilment that has taken place be unquestionably a literal one, we must look for a literal fulfilment in the other also; of it, through means of a figure, an event of a certain description was in the earlier part of it clearly predicted concerning them, by a change afterwards introduced into that figure, we are to look only for a corresponding change in their condition, in the process of time to be developed, not for an even, in which they have no peculiar or special interest at all.<sup>2</sup>

We should note that Fairbairn does not contend for this principle, but merely states it since, as he thought, it so readily commends itself to every intelligent mind.<sup>3</sup>

In his second essay Fairbairn does not appear to have in mind the purpose of clearly refuting his previous beliefs, as he makes no direct reference to them. The different approach, however, is very striking, although in this case there is no formal statement of hermeneutical principle. Having surveyed the three possible approaches to the prophetic future of the Jewish people, there are two basic principles that emerge from the ensuing discussion. Firstly, Scripture must be compared with Scripture so that the fundamental principles are first clearly seen.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, his method clearly shows that it is with the New Testament that the whole argument must begin.

## B. FAIRBAIRN'S SELF-CRITICISM

Although he does not openly engage in self-criticism, this section will put the two essays side-by-side and critically compare them.

### (1) Discussion of Presuppositions

As Pieters noted in his introduction to *The Prophetic Prospects of the Jews or Fairbairn vs. Fairbairn*, both essays when read independently appear equally convincing, at least when the basic presuppositions are assumed. The basic principle of literalness in the first essay

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<sup>1</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, *The Prophetic Prospects of the Jews*, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 244.

seems obvious, but it is far to facile, as Fairbairn came to realize. What might seem right to human reason is not necessarily espoused by the Scriptures.

Fairbairn's basic refutation of the principle of literalness is to compare the conclusions gleaned by applying this principle to the prophecies of the Old Testament with the plain statements of the New Testament. He nowhere finds any evidence for a national restoration of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

## (2) Consideration of Typology

Here is the central principal consideration that led to Fairbairn's volte-face. In a previous section<sup>6</sup> he endeavoured to show the typical character of the Levitical dispensation in its religious institutions, in the people upon whom it was imposed and in the inheritance promised. Then building on the principle "...the predications of the future continually took the form and image of the present or the past",<sup>7</sup> he shows why a literal fulfilment is not necessary, even in the case when the first half of a prophecy has already and indisputably been fulfilled literally.<sup>8</sup> There is progressive development in the kingdom of God and the work of Christ introduced a higher class of relations. The prophecies of the Revelation of John are a similar example.<sup>9</sup>

## (3) Critiques of Literalism

- Fairbairn notes that a literalistic hermeneutic would give rise to self-contradictory statements, as for example in Zechariah 12:11-14. Where are the genealogical records to separate the Jews into their ancient families? See also Isaiah 66:21, Ezekiel 44:5 and chapter 48, Malachi 3:3.<sup>10</sup> Where are the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites and Ammonites today? (Cf. Isaiah 11:14).<sup>11</sup>
- Arguing from the design of prophecy Fairbairn states that one result of literalism is the belief that one of the purposes of prophecy is to map out historical occurrences in advance (although this charge is generally refuted today). This Fairbairn vigorously rejects:

It is part of the latter (i.e. prophecy) to inculcate great principles, to lay open the springs of God's moral government, to awaken earnest longings and expectations regarding the good in prospect for the people of God, and indicate the greater lines and more marked characteristics of those spiritual movements on which the destinies of the church and the world are to turn.<sup>12</sup>

## C. THE PLACE OF THE JEW AND THE JEWISH ECONOMY IN THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

The issue raised by Fairbairn's change of belief concerning the restoration of the Jewish nation is centred around the purpose of God in making the Jewish people His own special people (Amos 3:2). The question is not whether God still has a special purpose for the Jews

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 246-253.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 255-270.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 270.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 275.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 271.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 281.

<sup>11</sup> The discussion in Fairbairn's previous essay should be noted here, *The Prophetic Prospect of the Jews*, pp. 34ff.

<sup>12</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, op cit, p. 283.

within the Church He is building;<sup>13</sup> rather, the issue is particularly with the dispensationalists who maintain that God still has a purpose for the Jew, outside and parallel to that which He has for the Church. So the question becomes: Is there, or is there not, a fundamental connection between Israel and the Church?

#### (1) The Premillennial Dispensational Argument

Ryrie considers that at the heart of the premillennial argument is a consideration of the Abrahamic covenant and whether or not it is still in force.<sup>14</sup> It is particularly to the national promises that Ryrie appeals as, according to him, these have not yet had complete fulfilment. He is referring to the promises that Abraham's seed would be a great nation (Genesis 17:6), that the covenant would be established with his seed (v. 7), and that the land of Canaan would be an everlasting inheritance (v. 8). No defence is made of these claims as they avowedly depend upon the principle of so-called literal interpretation. Both Walvoord and Ryrie depend upon this principle which was the very one that Fairbairn gave up.

If prophecy is fulfilled literally, it is evidence that it was intended to be interpreted literally. In the study of the Abrahamic covenant, it is of great significance that those portions of the covenant which has been fulfilled in history have followed the literal pattern.<sup>15</sup>

For the dispensationalist, the inevitable conclusion is that the unfulfilled element will also come to pass literally. In refuting amillenialist writings (such as Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*) they lay great stress on the unconditionality of the covenant in its every aspect.

#### (2) Refutation of the Premillennial Dispensational Argument

It is insufficient to use any hermeneutical principle and on that basis alone determine whether or not a prophecy has been fulfilled. We must ask, what say the Scriptures? What says the Divine Interpreter Himself? Here we will confine ourselves to just one element of the total picture, that of the land of Canaan promised to Abraham.

- The fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. The Old Testament clearly indicates that in this respect the Abrahamic covenant has been fulfilled despite avowals to the contrary by dispensationalists. It was specifically on account of the covenant with Abraham that God brought the Jews out of Egypt (Exodus 2:24, 6:4,8, 32:13, 33:1, Number 32:11). Moses' discourse in the plains of Moab just before entry into Canaan is based on the supposition that this is what God had promised to Abraham (Deuteronomy 1:6, 6:10, 9:5, 30:20, 34:4). The Scripture also unequivocally declares that the promise was fulfilled shortly after this time (Joshua 24:11, cf. Genesis 15:18-21, 1 Chronicles 16:18, 2 Chronicles 20:7, Nehemiah 9:7-9, Psalm 105:42-44, Ezekiel 33:24). Yet not only was the land promised, it was promised for ever. Because of their repeated idolatries the whole nation was exiled from the land and although some returned, never again (at least until 1948?) was the whole land occupied by the Jewish nation.
- The New Testament and the Abrahamic covenant. Because of the possible equivocation on this last point it is necessary to question the attitude of the New Testament to the Abrahamic covenant as regards the land in particular. Is there to be a future return of the Jewish nation to the land long ago promised to Abraham, as the Old Testament seems to indicate (e.g. Isaiah 11:11, 62:4, Jeremiah 24:6, Zechariah 10:10)? Fairbairn answers his own question by examining many New Testament passages and concludes that "there is

<sup>13</sup> Post-millennialists would maintain this view from Romans 11:26, and Fairbairn cautiously adopted this view.

<sup>14</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, ch. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Walvoord, John F. *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 147

no distinct announcement of the national restoration and settlement of the Jewish people in Canaan.<sup>16</sup> This is only to be expected as the inheritance of Abraham's seed is identical with that of the Church. The writer to the Hebrews does not consider the inheritance of the earthly Canaan to be the ultimate fulfilment of the promise (Hebrews 11:13-16). John Brown succinctly summarizes:

The grand ultimate object of the faith and hope of the patriarchs was not Canaan, nor the blessings of the external economy to be established there; it was substantially the very same object which Christianity more clearly holds out to our faith and hope – spiritual, eternal happiness in the enjoyment of God in heaven.<sup>17</sup>

The presence of the believer with the Lord in heaven is the ultimate inheritance which was also Abraham's, for to it Canaan pointed. The inheritance promised to Abraham and to his seed is inseparable from the work of Christ (Galatians 3:16,18-19). Peter describes this inheritance gained for His people by Christ as one with is "Imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven..." (1 Peter 1:4). And no different inheritance was ever conceived for the faithful Israelites, as even after possession of the land they still considered themselves as strangers and exiles in the earth (Psalm 39:12, 119:19, 1 Chronicles 29:15, cf. Hebrews 11:13). Walvoord would agree with this conclusion also but still wants to campaign for a future earthly hope.<sup>18</sup> Apart from there being no obvious such reference in the New Testament, this future earthly hope would deny the fulfilment of all things in Christ with its heavenly goal (Hebrew 12:22ff.).

### (3) The Jews and the Jewish Economy in the History of Redemption

- The place of the Abrahamic covenant – Galatians 3. Geerhardus Vos has summarized the place of Abraham in God's plans in the following way:

The election of Abraham, and in the further development of things in Israel, was meant as a particularistic means towards a universalistic end.<sup>19</sup>

The Israelite nation, formally constituted at Sinai (Exodus 19:6), were there given the law in all its aspects (Exodus 19ff. chapters). In Galatians 3 Paul develops the relationship between the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants and shows how they point forward to Christ. The Mosaic covenant, far from abrogating the covenant made with Abraham, was added in order that it might be fulfilled (v. 17). If allowed to continue, their transgressions would ultimately have led to the Israelites being completely mingled with the surrounding nations and their abominable practices (v. 19).<sup>20</sup> This ordering of things, being "imprisoned" by the law, was to remain only until the coming of the Messiah (vv. 19,24). Is the Mosaic covenant thereby fulfilled in Christ and the Abrahamic still unfulfilled? If the law had accomplished its confining work to guarantee the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, then what prevents the fulfilment of that promise? Clearly nothing, for Paul shows that it has been fulfilled in Christ, having final reference to Him (vv. 14,16 & 19).

- The centrality of redemption in Christ. At this point it should be asked if it could be otherwise that any promise is not fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Ryrie thinks this is too narrow a conception of the unifying principle of the Bible, for "salvation is only one facet of the

<sup>16</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, op cit, p. 253.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, John, *Hebrews*, p. 519.

<sup>18</sup> Walvoord, John F., op cit, p. 253.

<sup>19</sup> Vos, Geerhardus, *Biblical Theology*, p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, John, *Galatians*, pp. 148ff.

diamond of the glory of God".<sup>21</sup> While it is true that salvation does not include elect angels, for example, but neither were the Scriptures written for angels (see 1 Peter 1:12). The fact is that the last days of God prophesied in the Old Testament came to full realization with the coming of the Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). The Son ushered in the *eschaton*, and in the telescopic view of the Old Testament (what is called 'prophetic foreshortening'), both blessing and judgement were associated with that day (see for example Joel 2:28-32). In the enlarged perspective of the New Testament, Christ's coming is seen as two instalments, the intervening Church Age being part of the Last Days. Both comings are of Christ, and so there is no room in the Old Testament for predictions concerning individual events in this age as it allows no time between these two events.<sup>22</sup>

- Canaan and redemption. Let us again take the example of the inheritance promised to Abraham and ask what is its relationship to Christ? Abraham and his seed were chosen out of the mass of humanity, as on two occasions sin had reached such proportions that the fulfilment of the proto-evangelion (Genesis 3:15) was in danger (so Genesis 6:5 & 11:1-9). Abraham and his seed were God's peculiar possession in order that the true religion might be maintained. The land of Canaan was their inheritance in order that they might be separate from the surrounding nations and thus being preserved, the fulfilment of history might come. Thus when the Messiah came, the distinctiveness of the Jewish race in God's purposes vanished, as the task to which they were called was completed (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11).

#### D. LITERAL AND SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

The question, which cannot be avoided, is whether the above interpretation does justice to any 'normal' canon of Biblical interpretation. Much has been written on the hermeneutics of prophecy. The premillennial dispensationalist will immediately appeal to many Biblical texts and their 'clear' import, and demand that the Bible speak of a return of the Jewish nation to the land of Canaan. It is this that must now be discussed.

##### (1) The Terminology

In common parlance, dispensationalists are said to hold to a literal or normal hermeneutic, and amillenialists to a spiritual hermeneutic, as far as the interpretation of prophecy is concerned. These terms are very confusing and Bernard Ramm shows that there are many variations on this theme.<sup>23</sup> For the sake of clarity such terminology will purposely be avoided in this section. Neither the so-called literal or spiritual hermeneutic is the exclusive domain of any one '-ism'. This is not to imply that they are different hermeneutical principles. The dispensationalist insists that 'Israel' always means precisely Israel and may never be identified with the Church.<sup>24</sup> All amillenialists concur that at least sometimes in the Scriptures Israel refers not to the Jewish nation but to the Church.<sup>25</sup> This is a fundamental difference, for if Israel can never mean the Church, then the so-called unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament must refer to a restored national Israel; but if not, then there is no such necessity.

<sup>21</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> For this perspective consult, Vos, Geerhardus, *Pauline Eschatology*.

<sup>23</sup> Ramm, Bernard, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 220-225.

<sup>24</sup> Walvoord, John F., *op cit*, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> Hendriksen, William, *Israel and the Bible*, pp. 53-57.

## (2) Israel and the Church

It was in paying attention to the New Testament that made Fairbairn to change his mind. So two questions must now be asked. Is the word 'Israel' ever applied to the Church? Are prophecies to Israel ever applied to the Church? One example in each case will have to suffice in order to show that Israel and the Church cannot be completely separated in the Bible.

- Galatians 6:16. Is the "Israel of God" the Church? Ryrie considers that if this is answered in the affirmative "it would weaken the premillennial position considerably".<sup>26</sup>
  - i. The use of καί, translated "and" in KJV, NASB, ESV, "even" in NIV, but not translated in the RSV. Specifically the question is whether "Israel of God" is separated from the first part of the verse by the καί, or whether it is explicative. It can have either meaning. Walvoord bases his rejection of the explicative understanding (which would be "even" or "that is" the Israel of God) by insisting on the simple meaning "and".<sup>27</sup> Thereby he wants Paul to be separating both Gentile and Jewish believers ("all who walk by this rule") from Israel. However, in view of the peculiar message of Galatians this is impossible (see below)! Since it is admitted by all that καί can mean either 'even' or 'and' in this context, and as it makes good sense either way, the interpretation must be based on other factors.<sup>28</sup>
  - ii. Context of Galatians. Paul's one concern in writing to the Galatians is to root out the Judaizing error that Gentiles needed to be circumcision and other peculiar Jewish ordinances to be truly saved. This is denounced as another gospel (1:6-7, see 2:21). Paul traces the doctrine of justification by faith right back to Abraham (the father of the Jews!), thus firmly grounding gospel principles in the Old Testament (3:6-9). So believers are united as the seed of Abraham (Israel?) in Christ (3:26-29). It is to this argument that he returns at the conclusion of the letter affirming that with God marks in the flesh are vanity as regards salvation. What matters is the circumcision of the heart, the new creation.<sup>29</sup> Having concluded this, can it be possible that Paul now turns to Israel by physical descent and specially single them out? And if Israel is to be distinguished from those who walk according to the rule Paul had laid down, then how are they exempt from the rule? Can there be peace or mercy to either Jew or Gentile apart from this rule, the new creation?
  - iii. Conclusion. The only option is that Paul is referring to those who bear the fruits of a new creation the "Israel of God", which is none other than the Church of the firstborn, God's own peculiar possession (1 Peter 2:10-11).
- Amos 9:11-12 & Acts 15:14-18. The question that arises from the quotation of Amos by James is, was the apostolic era the beginning of the rebuilding of David's tabernacle?
  - i. The dispensational premillennial interpretation. Arguing for a negative response to the question, Walvoord expresses the crux of his point thus:
 

Instead of identifying the period of Gentile conversion with the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David, it is carefully distinguished by the first (referring to Gentile blessing), and after this

<sup>26</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Walvoord, John F., *op cit*, pp. 169-170.

<sup>28</sup> This paragraph has been updated since it was written in 1973.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 2:28-29 are very relevant verses in this connection, but neither Ryrie nor Walvoord deal with them in the books mentioned. John Brown's commentary on Galatians should be read here with much profit, being written before dispensationalism became popular.

(referring to Israel's coming glory). The passage, instead of identifying God's purpose for the church and for the nation of Israel, established a specific time order.<sup>30</sup>

He is aware of the objection that such an assertion by James would be completely irrelevant in the context, yet in his discussion there appears to be circularity of argument. Before his exposition he assumes the temporal succession of Israel's judgement, Gentile opportunity and Israel's supremacy.<sup>31</sup> Yet this is what has to be established! Also it is a strange method of reasoning to insist on a literal interpretation and then conclude that the tabernacle of David is "an expression referring to the whole nation of Israel". This is hardly literal!

- ii. Meaning of "tabernacle". The Hebrew word in Amos translated tabernacle (sookkah) is most commonly used for the feast of tabernacles or booths. It is never used in relation to the tabernacle or temple of the Lord.<sup>32</sup> It carries the implication of lowliness or low-estate,<sup>33</sup> as opposed to the glorious house of David (2 Samuel 7:11,13,16, etc.). Amos is prophesying about the royal dynasty of David, therefore, and not the nation as a whole, and thus there is a distinct Messianic reference.
- iii. Context in Amos. It is agreed with the dispensationalist that this prophet is fulfilled after Israel's judgement, which occurred in 722 for the northern kingdom, and 587 B. C. for the southern kingdom (see Amos 9:4). Other prophecies also point to a restoration of the house of David in the person of the Messiah (e.g. Isaiah 11:1ff.). But Amos has nothing to say about the Gentiles in the intervening time, although certain facts might be inferred.
- iv. Context in Acts. As regards the apposition in James' words of 'first' and 'after this', the import is quite different from that which Walvoord supposes. Although the quotation from Amos is basically from the LXX (Septuagint) rather than the Massoretic Text, the quotation as a whole must first be put in the context of Amos 9 and not of Acts 15:14. It is not after God's visitation of the Gentiles, but after God's judgement on Israel, that the tabernacle of David will be rebuilt. Simeon had related how God has first visited the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius (Acts 15:8-9, see Acts 10). That this was a remarkable event is shown by the thorough preparation that Peter received to purge him of his Judaistic tendencies (Acts 10:9ff.).
- v. Purpose of James' use of Amos. Summing up the whole matter, James shows how God's visitation of the Gentiles as well as the Jews (15:9) is exactly what Amos had prophesied. In the context, James specifically puts the Gentile together with the Jew by using the word λαός (laos), which is constantly used in the LXX (Greek translation of the Old Testament) of Israel to denote them as God's peculiar possession separated from the Gentiles. In conclusion, this quotation by James of Amos 9:11-12 is designed to show that the coming of the Messianic Davidic King has opened wide the door of the kingdom to the Gentile as well as the Jew (see John 10:16, 11:52, Romans 15:9ff., Ephesians 3:6ff., 1 Peter 2:10).<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Walvoord, John F., *op cit*, pp. 205-206.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> That the LXX uses σκηνή is therefore strange, as it is the word used for the tabernacle, but the MT must be preferred.

<sup>33</sup> Allis, Oswald T., *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 313, note 9.

<sup>34</sup> Bruce, F. F., *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 309, note 37.

- Conclusion. If the exegesis of only the above two passages has been correct, the dispensationalist is caught rowing upstream against a very strong current! Both of these passages are admitted to be dispensationally of great importance (according to Schofield). Are they not so important as to be the Achilles heel or, to change the metaphor, the fatal chink in the armour? If only once it is conclusively proved that the New Testament uses the word Israel to mean the Church and applies a prophecy given to Israel in the Old Testament to the Church in the New Testament, then gone for ever is that rigid distinction between Israel and the Church absolutely insisted on by the dispensationalist. And the New Testament gives us not just one example but many.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Fairbairn changed his views so radically when he examined the Old Testament on the basis of its interpretation by the New Testament!

## E. FAIRBAIRN AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL IN 1948

### (1) The Relevancy of this Consideration

Much appeal in the argumentation on these matters has been made concerning what has actually transpired before our very eyes as a new Israeli nation has actually been set up in its ancient homeland.

The foundation of the State of Israel in recent years has been a part of the predicted regathering of scattered Israel back to their ancient land.<sup>36</sup>

Both the preservation of Israel since their dispersion and their home-coming after nearly two thousand years is described as miraculous.<sup>37</sup>

So, was Fairbairn misguided when he abandoned his hope in the restoration of Israel as a nation to the promised land? By what principles that he put forward can this event in 1948 be evaluated? Clearly, the error that has to be avoided is the use of the event as a lever in the interpretation of the Scripture. Loraine Boettner, for example, although a postmillenarian, refuses to be influenced just by historical events. Writing in the context of the present developments he says:

...it does mean that as any of them go back they do so entirely on their own, apart from any covenanted purpose to that end and entirely outside of Scripture prophecy. No Scripture blessing is promised for a project of that kind.<sup>38</sup>

### (2) The Application of Fairbairn's Principles

Fairbairn wrote many years before an actual return to Palestine could have been contemplated. But if alive now he would seem to have held essentially to the two-fold rebuttal that Hendriksen has put forward.<sup>39</sup>

- Fulfilment of prophecy. Many of the Old Testament restoration passages were fulfilled at the time of the return from exile in Babylon in 537/6 B.C. Fairbairn notes that in the midst of great judgements promised Israel, God also told of their restoration and the destructions of the surrounding nations, and this was fulfilled.

<sup>35</sup> See the impressive list in chapter 6 of Allis, Oswald T., *Prophecy and the Church*.

<sup>36</sup> Walvoord, John F., *op cit*, p. 185-186.

<sup>37</sup> Hulse, Erroll, *The Restoration of Israel*, p. 95. Hulse is a post-millennialist and seems to be implying in this and other statements that the 1948 return is a fulfilment of prophetic Scripture.

<sup>38</sup> Boettner, Loraine, *The Millenium*, p. 321.

<sup>39</sup> He devotes an entire section to this question. See Hendriksen, William, *Israel and the Bible*, ch. 2, Are the "Restoration of the Jews" Prophecies Being Fulfilled Today?

The mightiest and most imposing of the surrounding kingdoms came to nought; but Israel still existed... It seemed undeniable that most striking fulfilments have taken place of what no merely human eye could have foreseen, nor the shrewdest intellect anticipate.<sup>40</sup>

In another place Fairbairn is unwilling to grant that any prophecy given to Israel can be considered apart from their spiritual condition.

So far from it being the case, that the promises in Isaiah and the other prophets were all made to the Jews as a nation, it were nearer the truth to say, that no promises were made to them, simply in that capacity. The promises, in which they were more particularly interested, were made to Abraham and his seed; but to his seed only in the sense explained by the apostle (Rm. 4 & 9, Gal. 3); that is, to those who might spring from Abraham's loins, in so far – but in so far only – as they stood also in his faith and walked in his footsteps.<sup>41</sup>

It therefore seems clear that Fairbairn would not consider that the 1948 return represented a fulfilment of prophecy as it was in unbelief and rebellion against the Messiah. Also, Fairbairn would stick to his conclusion already noted, that the New Testament is totally silent as to this national restoration to the promised land.<sup>42</sup>

However, he is by no means averse to believing that there is “good yet in store for the natural Israel”,<sup>43</sup> but necessarily in relation to the Church of Christ, and therefore spiritual.

- Christological focus of prophecy. Prophecy cannot be considered apart from the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Here in particular, Fairbairn deals the death-blow to that system of Biblical interpretation which would allow God to bless such an unbelieving nation as the Jews and wonderfully restore them to ‘their promised land’.

Indeed, it is as true of the history, as of the prophecy of Old Testament Scripture, that it points to the incarnation and work of Christ for man's redemption as its great terminating object. There alone it finds its proper explanation and its adequate result.<sup>44</sup>

This point will be further taken up in the concluding remarks.

## F. CONCLUDING REMARKS

### (1) Redemptive-Historical Considerations

Fairbairn refuses to discuss prophecy outside the sphere of redemption in Jesus Christ, and if this necessitates what is referred to ‘spiritualizing’ the Old Testament, then Fairbairn also shows what the logical consequences of literalism have been and continue to be:

If, for example, the literalist school of interpreters among Christians are right in maintaining, as they do, that Christ has not yet appeared as King of Zion ... why should not ... Jewish writers be equally right in contending that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be the Messiah?.<sup>45</sup>

It has already been pointed out that Ryrie explains the goal of dispensationalism to be the glory of God, but not just in redemption. The two principles involved have been neatly summarized by Ladd (who opposes them):

God has two peoples, Israel and the Church, and two programmes – a theocratic programme for Israel and a redemptive programme for the Church. Israel is a national people with material

<sup>40</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, *op cit*, p. 228.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 246.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 286.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, Appendix F, pp. 505-506.

blessings and an earthly destiny; the Church is a universal people with spiritual blessings and a heavenly destiny.<sup>46</sup>

Can it really be possible to make such a statement agree with the following Scriptures?

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17).

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44).

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me... (John 5:39).

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory (2 Corinthians 1:20).

How important, it must again be stressed, is Fairbairn's initial presupposition to interpret the Old Testament by the New Testament.

## (2) Basic Hermeneutical Principle

The volatile 'literalist' vs. 'spiritualist' debate is off-centre. It is always dangerous to append terms to views unless adequate safeguards are given by way of explanation. The implication from the first conclusion is that the Old Testament economy is essentially one of type pointing to the antitype, to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The types, being patterns of the heavenly realities (Hebrews 8:5, 9:1, 10:1), could never continue unchanged. The truths they revealed always remain, but the external forms have passed away. It is in this context that Old Testament prophecy must be viewed as it looks forward to the coming of the heavenly realities in Christ. Thus prophecies of heavenly things are themselves in the form of the types of the old dispensation. Fairbairn must be allowed to have the last word:

Hence the freedom, and the frequency also, with which prophecy, in its delineations of the future, serves itself of the antecedent facts and characters of history.<sup>47</sup>

The predications of the future continually took the form and image of the present or the past... The new can only be conceived of under the aspect of the old.<sup>48</sup>

## Postscript<sup>49</sup>

Since this essay was written in 1973 for an assignment while I was a student at Westminster Theological Seminary one of my teachers, O. Palmer Robertson has written two very relevant books: *The Israel of God* (2000) and *The Christ of the Prophets* (2004).

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Boettner, Loraine, *The Millenium*, p. 322.

<sup>47</sup> Fairbairn, Patrick, *op cit*, p. 44.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> "Well-prepared and well-written. Good balance between the citing of others' views and your own interaction. We have talked about the Amos-Acts passages since you wrote this" (Nicholas).