

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 13

Hoekema's and Merkle's Approaches to Old Testament Restoration Prophecies

A pivotal issue separating amillennialists and premillennialists is the treatment of the Old Testament collage of images of the coming kingdom by the authors of the New Testament. Not much disagreement surrounds the general contours and specific content of the Old Testament language and imagery; what is contested is whether the fulfillment of that figurative picture is applied exclusively to the present age in a spiritual sense; exclusively to the future age in a more literal sense; or both spiritually in the present and literally in the future. In the following excursus I interact with two representatives of the amillennial approach—Anthony Hoekema and Benjamin Merkle—offering some critiques of their position from my own Irenaeian both/and approach to the fulfillment of Old Testament language and imagery.¹

Hoekema's Approach

Anthony Hoekema articulates an older but classic perspective on the New Testament writers' reception of Old Testament promises. He presents the “eschatological outlook of the Old Testament” by looking at several “revelational concepts”: (1) The coming redeemer, (2) the kingdom of God, (3) the new covenant, (4) the restoration of Israel, (5) the outpouring of the Spirit, (6) the day of the Lord, and (7) the new heavens and the new earth.² We have seen in our exploration of the coming kingdom in the Old Testament that the coming kingdom, the new covenant, the restoration of Israel, and the new heavens and new earth were essential coextensive—

¹ My intention in this excursus is not to “pick on” Hoekema and Merkle, but to better clarify my “both/and” approach by contrasting it with representative amillennial alternatives. As established in chapter 3 of *The Fathers on the Future*, both Hoekema and Merkle (and all amillennialists who assume a similar approach) affirm the foundational eschatological truths of the Christian faith—the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the restoration of creation.

² Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 4–12.

that is, they all referred to the same period of time and establishment of the eschatological kingdom on earth. The coming redeemer is the key to the establishment of this kingdom, and the day of the Lord is the means by which God brings about judgment and purifies the earth in a way, allowing the kingdom to be established in its fullest sense (see chapter 15 in *The Fathers on the Future*).

While we should have no major quibbles over Hoekema's summary of the eschatological outlook of the Old Testament, we do note that it is rather abstract and generalizing, placing an emphasis on certain aspects that are prominent in the New Testament; but as a faithful, balanced description of the emphases of the Old Testament itself, they fall short. For example, while the "new covenant" is explicitly mentioned only in Jeremiah 31:31–34, the language of the reunification of Israel and Judah, the repentance and return of the tribes of Israel to the promised land, and a restoration of the kingdom centered in Jerusalem is repeated over and over again. In fact, these elements are explicitly what Jeremiah 31:31–34 means by the "new covenant." Also, the coming redeemer is inextricably linked in the Old Testament to the restoration of Israel, the establishment of a throne in and over Jerusalem, and blessing in the land itself, which then extends to the entire world and all creation. Hoekema's treatment of the Old Testament expectation, in other words, deals in broad generalities, which are really New Testament themes and emphases read back into the Old Testament expectations.³ This seems to amount to a kind of question-begging, in which the assumption (priority of the New Testament over the Old Testament) drives the selection of the Old Testament content itself, resulting in selective evidence.

Yet, this is precisely the point. Hoekema's first chapter is not really an eschatological outlook of the Old Testament, but an eschatological outlook of the New Testament superimposed upon the Old Testament to serve as its organizing framework. This is precisely his methodological and hermeneutical presupposition, as well as the presupposition of many in the same eschatological tradition that follow. For example, Kim Riddlebarger writes:

Historically, Protestant interpreters have argued that the New Testament provides the controlling interpretation of the Old Testament. The goal of the interpreter of eschatology is to determine how prophecies made in the Old Testament are treated and applied by writers of the New. If the New Testament writers spiritualize Old Testament prophecies by applying them in a nonliteral sense, then the Old Testament passage must be seen in light of that New Testament interpretation, not vice versa. Moreover, a major step toward finding an answer to the millennial question is to develop a contextual framework of interpretation from the New Testament itself.⁴

³ Some use phrases like "the NT storyline will be a transformation of the OT one in the light of how the NT is seen to be an unfolding of the OT" (G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 6). Or themes of the Old Testament are said to have been "transposed and transformed" (Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2012], 598).

⁴ Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 50–51. Cf. the similar approach in Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 280.

Though they may differ on the details, the general approach to the question “What becomes of all those Old Testament prophecies, promises, and prospects in the New Testament?” is similar to Hoekema’s straightforward answer: “*The Old Testament abounds with prophecies concerning future blessings for Israel. In the New Testament many, yet not all, of these prophecies are fulfilled in the person of Christ.*”⁵

Of course, things are a little more complicated than this, and Hoekema himself has to unpack his brief summary statement. The New Testament presents some of the Old Testament expectations as already realized and other expectations as not yet realized. He explains, “We must note, therefore, that what specifically characterizes New Testament eschatology is an underlying tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’—between what the believer already enjoys and what he does not yet possess.”⁶ In principle, this general approach of an “inaugurated eschatology” is sound. The coming of Christ has certainly fulfilled Old Testament prophecies; it also anticipates the fulfillment of more. And we may even agree that the New Testament believer “has both a richer experience of present blessings and a clearer understanding of future hopes than his Old Testament counterpart.”⁷ In fact, this seems to be self-evident.

As proof of the concept, Hoekema points to numerous Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled in some way by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection; thus, “in Christ the promised redeemer had indeed come” and “in Christ’s person the promised kingdom had come—although there would also be a final consummation of that kingdom in the future.”⁸ Hoekema says that “Jesus himself ushered in the kingdom of God whose coming had been foretold by the Old Testament prophets. We must therefore always see the kingdom of God as indissolubly connected with the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus’ words and deeds, miracles and parables, teaching and preaching, the kingdom of God was dynamically active and present among men.”⁹

As we are living in the “last days” or “this age”—the time between Christ’s first coming and his second coming—we look forward to “the last day” or “the age to come,” and “*the blessings of the present age are the pledge and guarantee of greater blessings to come.*”¹⁰ Since the present age is the “Messianic age,” the advent of the future age will involve “the Second Coming of Christ, the general resurrection, the Day of Judgment, and the new heavens and new earth.”¹¹ This simple scheme avoids any notion of an intermediate stage between the present age of the spiritual kingdom and the full realization of the new creation, an intermediate kingdom in which the present world is progressively liberated from its bondage to corruption, humanity gradually extends the dominion

⁵ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 1 (emphasis original).

⁶ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 14.

⁷ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 15.

⁸ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 16.

⁹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 43.

¹⁰ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 19–20 (emphasis original).

¹¹ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 32.

of paradise across the face of the earth, and all creation is ultimately renewed (see discussion in *The Fathers on the Future* chapters 2, 4, and 13).

As far as the vivid collage of images that create the picture of the coming kingdom in the Old Testament, Hoekema understands these to point to the final condition of “the new heavens and the new earth.”¹² But what of the actual details of this new creation in all these Old Testament passages—details of the centrality of Jerusalem, of the reunification of Israel and Judah, of the return of the exiles from the ends of the earth, of children being born for generations and generations, of bountiful crops and interminable lives? Relying on statements such as Galatians 6:15–16 that “clearly identifies the church as the true Israel,”¹³ Hoekema states that “promises which had been made to Israel during Old Testament times are fulfilled in the New Testament church.”¹⁴ Even if the former were true,¹⁵ it would not necessarily imply the latter any more than calling those who are in the church “a new creation” implies that there will not be an actual new creation in the future.

Commenting on Acts 13:32–34, 38–39, Hoekema says, “These promises and blessings, further, are interpreted as meaning, not a future Jewish kingdom in the millennium, but forgiveness of sins and salvation. The promises made to Israel, therefore, are fulfilled in the New Testament church.”¹⁶ Even if the latter is true, the conclusion only holds if one comes to the text with an “either/or” rather than “both/and” approach to prophecy. Can it be that just as the period of new creation/coming kingdom/new covenant is already present in a spiritual sense with the ascension of Christ and establishment of the church in a partial sense, so too these will be literally fulfilled in the future? This is a possibility many amillennial interpreters do not seem to take into consideration.

The same can be said of the passages from the Old Testament that were addressed as promises to Israel and that are applied to the New Testament church (e.g., Acts 15:14–18; Gal 3:28–29; Heb 12:22–24; 1 Pet 2:9). Even if this is the case (and I have no reason to deny them), they are not conclusive proof that a future, literal fulfillment is not also part of God’s plan. Yet the assumption that the Old Testament vision of the coming kingdom is entirely fulfilled in Christ and the church in a spiritual sense—thus ruling out a literal, future fulfillment—is the one actual argument against a future fulfillment of these promises. This works only if one adopts an either/or approach to the prophecies of the Old Testament. If one accepts a both/and approach, with the acknowledgment of a dynamic concept of the “kingdom of God,” then demonstrating that elements of the Old Testament expectation of a coming kingdom are fulfilled spiritually in the church today as the “spiritual seed of Abraham,” “spiritual Israel,” “spiritual Zion/Jerusalem,” “spiritual new

¹² Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 177–78.

¹³ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 197.

¹⁴ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 197.

¹⁵ The equation of the church as the true Israel in Gal 6:16 is not as secure as Hoekema alleges. See much more nuanced discussion in Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church*, SNTSMS, vol. 10 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 74–84.

¹⁶ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 197.

covenant,” “spiritual resurrection,” and “spiritual new creation” does nothing to preclude a future fulfillment for the literal seed of Abraham, literal Israel, literal Zion/Jerusalem, literal new covenant, literal resurrection, and literal new creation.

Regarding the numerous passages in the Old Testament that refer to an ultimate second exodus in which Israel will return to their land, Hoekema urges, “All the predictions of a restoration of the Israelites to their land so far examined have been literally fulfilled. There is no need, therefore, for anyone to say that we must still look for a literal fulfillment of these predictions in the far distant future.”¹⁷ Yet, only a surface reading of these promises without considering the permanence of the restoration, their association with other elements of the Old Testament collage like the new covenant, the reign of the son of David, and so on, could one limit the fulfillment of all these promises to the partial return of exiles from Assyria or Babylon. In sum, the argument that these passages were already fulfilled entirely in the past works only if one engages in selective evidence.

Merkle’s Approach

Merkle rightly notes, “One of the major reasons why some insist on a future millennium where Jesus will reign as king over the nation of Israel is due to the belief that many Old Testament prophecies are not yet fulfilled.... To spiritualize these promises, it is sometimes argued, does not do justice to the specific nature of these promises.”¹⁸ As an example, he cites Amos 9:11–15. Merkle asks, “Does this prophecy refer to a time in the future when God will restore the nation of Israel and grant them unprecedented peace and prosperity? A time when their cities are restored, their enemies are defeated, and their lands yield abundant crops? Or, should this prophecy be interpreted symbolically referring to a time when God will bless his covenant people in ways that words cannot really describe.”¹⁹ In response to this either/or question, Merkle maintains that “certain prophecies, especially Old Testament restoration prophecies regarding the nation of Israel, should be interpreted symbolically” because of “(1) the true nature of biblical religion, (2) the unique genre of biblical prophecy, (3) the symbolic manner in which the New Testament interprets Old Testament prophecies, and (4) the central role of Jesus’ death and resurrection in salvation history.”²⁰

Regarding Merkle’s first point, I reject the underlying assumption that “the Christian faith is a religion of the heart. It is not primarily external but internal. Mere outward, external religion is

¹⁷ Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 208.

¹⁸ Benjamin L. Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies Regarding the Nation of Israel: Literal or Symbolic?” *SBJT* 14.1 (2010): 14. This is generally true, though one does not necessarily need to affirm a literal future millennium (thousand-year reign) as the stage upon such prophecies will be fulfilled. The Old Testament collage of the coming kingdom does not explicitly mention a 1000-year reign.

¹⁹ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 15.

²⁰ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 15.

never the goal of our faith. God is primarily interested in the deeper, inner faith of His people.”²¹ Not only does this sound like a gnosis-like mysticism that only concerns itself with the salvation of the individual soul (something, I am sure, Merkle would also reject), it also neglects the overarching creation-fall-redemption narrative that involves the reconciliation not only of individuals but of all creation—the internal and the external, the spiritual and the physical, the heavenly and the earthly, the invisible and visible. Merkle does briefly affirm that “God is interested in the physical aspect—even in heaven” because, for example, “the Bible clearly teaches that believers will be given a physical, resurrected body.”²² Nevertheless, he asserts that to expect a “tangible, earthly kingdom” during which Israel, under the Messiah, would ruler over the nations with an “abundance of wealth and prosperity” would be to reverse God’s plan of redemption; it would be to “go back to the shadows and images” of the old covenant.²³

Merkle then cites Colossians 2:17 and Hebrews 8:5 to argue against this supposed retrogression of God’s plan of redemption. Yet Paul and the author of Hebrews do not say that the Old Testament prophecies of the coming messianic age are “shadows” or “images” of things to come. Paul says in Colossians 2 that old covenant laws—specifically dietary laws, festivals, new moons, and sabbaths—are the shadow of things to come; Christ is the substance. This is very different from saying that the prophecies of the Old Testament—which themselves tell us that the old covenant will one day pass away—are themselves the shadow of things to come. And Hebrews 8:5 calls the Old Testament sanctuary and its priesthood a “sketch and shadow” of the heavenly sanctuary, which Moses saw on the mountain. It does not say that the words of the prophets foreseeing an era that will follow and displace the old covenant system are “sketches and shadows.” That is, the Old Testament prophecies still awaiting a future fulfillment already talk of putting away the old covenant (Jer 31:31–34)—even the Ark of the Covenant (Jer 3:16). They are not themselves shadows and images but portray with vivid figurative language a time when the shadows and images are replaced by a new glorious reality.

Merkle also points out the “unique genre of biblical prophecy,” expressing the implications of this uniqueness in a manner that has become fairly standard among interpreters who do not see an actual this-world fulfillment of these prophecies:

Prophecy concerning the end of time or the coming of God’s kingdom is often described using metaphorical language. The prophets often employed earthly imagery to describe a heavenly reality. The messianic kingdom was often pictured as a return from exile and often included a rebuilt temple (built on mount Zion which will become the highest mountain), resumed temple sacrifices, and wild animals dwelling together peacefully. The reason for this was simple. The prophets spoke and wrote in terms that both they and their audience

²¹ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 15.

²² Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 16.

²³ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 16

would understand. They described the messianic kingdom in terms of concepts and imagery that was meaningful to the people of that day.²⁴

I have already granted that the Old Testament prophets painted their collage of images of the coming kingdom with figurative language. This is hardly disputed. What is disputed is how figurative the language is and whether the figurative application of the language in the New Testament exhausts its intended meaning. Will there not be peace in creation? Will the world itself not be restored and renewed? If these do not refer to actual conditions in the future, to what do they refer? If they are merely images to move people to hope, they are not figures but fables—merely symbols with a spiritual or moral meaning, not symbols with an actual referent. Merkle says the prophets used this earthly language of bountiful crops, return from exile, peace among animals, etc. “to describe a more profound heavenly reality—a reality that finds its fulfillment in Christ.”²⁵ However, it seems to me that repeated, specific, detailed descriptions of restoration of Israel to the land—including reference to clear boundary markers (Jer 31:38–40)—are not the most intuitive, effective, and efficient symbols God could employ to point to a “heavenly reality...that finds its fulfillment in Christ.” And simply to ignore these details results, again, in selective evidence.

Like many before and after him, Merkle provides several examples in which the New Testament interprets the Old Testament prophecies symbolically—Joel 2:28–32/Acts 2:14–21; Amos 9:11–12/Acts 15:16–17; Jer 31:31–34/Heb 8:8–12; Exod 6:7; 19:5–6; Isa 43:20–21/1 Pet 2:9–19).²⁶ I do not dispute that these passages apply the Old Testament to New Testament spiritual realities. To do so would be to neglect facts. What I do reject is the a priori either/or assertion, which is an unwarranted presupposition. Because some New Testament passages apply Old Testament prophecies spiritually to the church rather than to a literal Israel in the future, Merkle concludes: “The New Testament writers do not seem to expect the Old Testament prophecies about the nation of Israel to be fulfilled literally.”²⁷ The either/or approach is hard at work in the statement, “A literal fulfillment was not expected but rather New Testament writers correctly saw fulfillment in Christ and in the gospel.” The *not... but rather* markers reveal a lot about the limits one places on the use of the Old Testament. Merkle and others establish a reasonable rule: “We must learn from how the New Testament writers themselves interpreted the Old Testament.”²⁸

Yet by approaching the biblical data with a presupposed either/or choice, the question is cast in terms of a false choice, the fallacy of bifurcation, which “occurs when the arguer presents the

²⁴ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 16. Also see similar assertions in Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 51 and Routledge, *Old Testament Theology*, 279.

²⁵ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 18. Cf. also Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 41–42. Italics in original

²⁶ He includes others, too, in passing, some that are subject to exegetical challenge: Mal 4:5–6/Matt 17:11–13; 2 Sam 7:12–16/Acts 2:29–35; 13:29–32 (“Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21). See also Briley, *Isaiah*, 1: 57–59.

²⁷ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21.

²⁸ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21

listener with only two choices (hence the prefix *bi*), when in fact there are other possibilities to choose from. In other words, the argument limits the options of choices, omitting possible alternatives.”²⁹ Essentially, this approach reads the New Testament authors with only two possibilities in mind regarding Old Testament restoration prophecies—*either* literal (and thus physical and future) *or* symbolic (and thus spiritual and present). Then, pointing to examples of the New Testament authors reading Old Testament restoration prophecies as symbolic, spiritual, and present, it is concluded, “Old Testament prophecies concerning the nation of Israel are fulfilled in Christ and in the gospel.”³⁰

Those who regard the fulfillment of Old Testament restoration prophecies as fulfilled entirely in Christ and the church often level a charge against those who see a fulfillment in the future: “One of the problems with interpreting Old Testament prophecies regarding the nation of Israel in a literal manner is that it tends to minimize the work of Christ, especially His suffering, death, and resurrection” because “the New Testament teaches that the death and resurrection of Christ are the climax of God’s work in redemptive history.”³¹ Though it is true that the resurrection of Christ is certainly the central redemptive act of God, it actually begins the final movement of redemptive history; it does not end it. It is not the finale of the symphony of creation-fall-redemption; it is the booming first note of the final movement, the thing that makes everything else possible, that establishes the triumphant melody of resurrection that will build to a crescendo and climax not with dying and going to heaven to be with Jesus, but with a glorious resurrection of the saints to reign with Christ over a new creation. That new creation, in which all sin, suffering, sickness, deception, death, and devil are banished forever—that is the climax of redemptive history. I would counter that to reduce all the detailed Old Testament restoration promises to “Christ and the church” minimizes the person and work of Christ more than seeing the glorious promises of ultimate restoration as fulfilled in the present *in* Christ and the church in a spiritual, anticipatory sense but also *through* Christ and the church in a physical, ultimate sense.

Merkle also asserts, quoting Bavinck, that “another problem with a literal interpretation is that the Old Testament consistently pictures a messianic kingdom that includes the restoration of the temple, the priesthood, and the temple sacrifices.”³² This is an inaccurate exaggeration of the actual picture. As I have demonstrated through my broad survey of Old Testament passages regarding the coming kingdom (see Go Deeper Excursus 11), it would be a great overstatement to say that the collage “consistently pictures” temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. Certainly, it consistently pictures a place—Jerusalem, Mount Zion—as the world’s spiritual and political center. And it includes a real city, with real structures, a real palace, and a real focal point of worship and instruction. Yet I also pointed out the surprising paucity of passages that could be interpreted as

²⁹ Jacob E. Van Vleet, *Information Logical Fallacies: A Brief Guide*, rev. ed. (Lanham, MD: Hamilton, 2021), 11.

³⁰ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21.

³¹ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21.

³² Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21. Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 94.

suggesting a full-fledged system of animal sacrifices in a re-built temple designed for that purpose.³³ Again Merkle perpetuates a false dilemma: “If we maintain that the prophet’s picture of the future must be literal, then we must take all the aspects literally.”³⁴

I have maintained from the start that to reduce the hermeneutical approach to the Old Testament prophets to *either* “literal” or “symbolic” is not sufficient. They employ poetic, figurative language, to be sure, but the question is: to what does the figure refer? Merkle and others themselves are not consistent with this either/or approach to Old Testament prophecy when they see reference to Christ being a descendant of David, coming from Bethlehem, etc. Every word has a context in its own passage; every passage has a context in its own book; every book in its own day; and every age has its context in the broad trinitarian creation-fall-redemption narrative centered on the person and work of Christ in his first and second comings. It does not advance the understanding of eschatology to assert an either/or approach when things are far more complicated and require much more nuance. This kind of “all-or-nothing” approach—again, a false dilemma—leads to the following: “If we insist that the nation of Israel will someday return to the Promised Land, rebuild the cities of Israel, and have Christ rule as their King, then we are also forced to include the notion that the Jews will again have a priesthood and offer sacrifices in the temple.”³⁵

As evidence of this, Merkle cites Isaiah 56:6–7, which, in the context of Isaiah 56:1–8, clearly mentions keeping the covenant of the Sabbath, foreigners coming to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, etc. Yet this is a circumstance offered to Israel if they keep the stipulations of the old covenant, repent, and avoid the impending judgment and disaster—that is, what restoration and blessing would look like under full obedience of the old covenant. This is not a glorious picture of the “last days” of the messianic age seen in other passages. His second proof text, Isaiah 60:7, does form part of the restoration passages of the coming kingdom treated above under Isaiah 59:20–62:12; but it is separated from its broader context, which reveals that the offerings brought to the “altar” are not animal sacrifices of Israel, but the abundance of wealth from the nations: “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house” (Isa 60:6–7). Yes, the text mentions an “altar,” but this is a figure of speech for offering a gift to the God of Israel, as in no case in the Old Testament do foreigners present gold and frankincense on the altar. It may also be possible to take this passage a little more literally and envision a place that stands as the center of governance and worship that may involve non-bloody “sacrifices” like the altar of incense, which is why “frankincense” alone is mentioned. However, foreigners are not bringing animal sacrifices to the temple. Finally, Merkle

³³ Besides a literal handful of passages, the grand exception, of course, is the temple of Ezekiel 40–48, which I attend to elsewhere.

³⁴ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21.

³⁵ Merkle, “Old Testament Restoration Prophecies,” 21.

cites Isaiah 66:20–22, which envisions foreigners helping the exiles of Israel return to Jerusalem as “an offering” to the Lord, using the “grain offering” itself as a symbol for that future ingathering of people—not sacrifices. The reference to “priests and Levites” called from among the restoration does not itself demand that they would be engaged in a sacrificial system, for which there is no mention. Rather, the priests and Levites as part of the restored people of God would serve their pastoral and teaching functions in the future theocratic administration—ultimately fulfilling Israel’s original purpose of being “a light to the nations.”

Other passages argue against Merkle’s claim that Old Testament prophecies “consistently” present the restoration of Israel and all creation as inextricably linked to a temple with literal animal sacrifices. Jeremiah 3:16–17 seems to preclude the idea when it says the Ark of the Covenant—the center of the atoning bloody sacrifices of the Old Testament—will be completely forgotten. Jeremiah 30:18 and 31:21, 38 refer to rebuilding the city with no mention of a temple with sacrifices. Ezekiel 36:28–38 also paints a picture of restoration and abundance, but no sacrificial system; 37:21–28 refers to the restoration and rebuilding of a reunited Israel and Judah, but reference to God’s “sanctuary” remaining among them is an image of God himself dwelling among them, not to a sacrificial system. The same is the case of 39:25–29. Ezekiel 40–48, treated in chapter 14 of *The Fathers on the Future*, is the major exception to the rule that the Old Testament prophecies of the coming kingdom pay no attention to a restored system of animal sacrifices; but that can be reconciled by seeing it as a picture of what restoration would have looked like had Israel fully repented and fulfilled the requirements of the old covenant, as was the case in Isaiah 56:1–8.

The remaining passages cited by Merkle also do not mention animal sacrifices, though they certainly allow for a restoration of the people to the land, rebuilding of Jerusalem, and even a “temple” or “house of the Lord,” which in the messianic age would be the center of the theocratic rule of the Messiah, not a place of animal sacrifices (Amos 9:11–15; Obad 17, 21; Mic 4:1–2; 7:11; Hag 2:6–10; Zech 1:17; 2:1–5; 3:1–8; 6:9–15. Reliance on Zech 6:9–15; 8:3–23). In short, though these passages do establish Israel as the center of the world, a rebuilt and glorified Jerusalem as its capital, the coming Messiah as its king who rules from Jerusalem, and a rebuilt palace-temple as the destination for those who offer gifts and seek justice, they do not assert a restored system of animal sacrifices. It may be that Jewish readers read the reference to the house of the Lord in terms of its Old Testament function of a place for perpetual animal sacrifices, but such details are not explicitly part of these passages.