

BLOWING THE DOORS OFF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

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“Replacement theology” is a buzzword (or buzzphrase) for something theologians refer to more formally as “supersessionism.” In simple terms, it’s the notion that the church, to one extent or another, has replaced Israel in the divine economy.

Some supersessionists prefer the more euphemistic term “fulfillment theology.” That is, the church (as the New Israel) is the fulfillment and embodiment of the OT promises. Yet another term is “absorption theology.” That is, ethnic Israel isn’t so much replaced as it is *absorbed* into God’s ongoing purpose for the church. Come on, now—who can complain about being *absorbed*?

Replacement/fulfillment/absorption theology comes in numerous “flavors.” In his book *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), R. Kendall Soulen identifies three main types of supersessionism: punitive, economic, and structural. The Wikipedia article on “Supersessionism” draws on Soulen’s work and summarizes the three main varieties of supersessionism in this way:

Punitive supersessionism is represented by figures such as Hippolytus, Origen, and Luther. It is the view that Jews who reject Jesus as the Jewish Messiah are consequently condemned by God, forfeiting the promises otherwise due to them under the covenants. (Although, both Origen and Hippolytus expected the Jewish people to be restored as a whole alongside the Gentiles in the last days.)

Economic supersessionism ... is the view that the practical purpose of the nation of Israel in God's plans is replaced by the role of the church. It is represented by writers such as Justin Martyr and Augustine. (Again, Augustine explicitly expected a restoration of the Jewish people alongside the Gentiles in the last days.)

Structural supersessionism is Soulen's term for the de facto marginalization of the Old Testament as normative for Christian thought. In his words, “Structural supersessionism refers to the narrative logic of the standard model whereby it renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping Christian convictions about how God’s works as Consummator and as Redeemer engage humankind in universal and enduring ways.”

So there are many shades and nuances of meaning when we use this term “Replacement Theology.” We could probably find some aspects of supersessionist theology that most people in this room would agree with. However, my concern in this paper is with expressions of supersessionism that disallow national Israel’s future role in God’s plan for the world.

When believers take an extreme, anti-Zionist position, they’ve crossed over a line that I believe could place them at cross-purposes with God himself. I use the term “anti-Zionist” here referring to someone who alleges that the modern State of Israel is irrelevant—or worse, illegitimate—in the 21st century Middle East.

Continuity, of course, is a primary talking point in the conversation about supersessionism. Are there two “peoples of God” (Israel in the OT and the church in the NT, as dispensationalists and others suggest)? Or (as the Reformed perspective suggests) has it always been the church (OT & NT)?

In the late 1980s, John Feinberg edited a compilation of views entitled *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988). In it, a galaxy of evangelical scholars, primarily from the Reformed (Covenant) and Dispensational camps, faced off on this question. The covenantal apologists, of course, defended continuity; the dispensationalists (and others, like Moo and Kaiser) defended discontinuity (that is, OT Israel and the NT messianic community are distinct entities).

We’re not going to settle the theological issues here; and I doubt that any of us here would claim that we have all the answers. However, my concern is more practical in nature.

The problem is that what we *believe* determines how we *behave*. Wrong thinking can result in wrong actions. (If you *think* the light at the intersection is green when it’s really red, you could be in trouble!)

LCJE represents various denominations and agencies that are focused on Jewish outreach. We struggle to recruit Christians to our cause. We want them to understand the need to reach Jewish people with the Good News of Jesus the Messiah. What makes our job more difficult, however, is that many Christians aren’t thinking rightly about these things.

For example, some Christians think the Jewish people don’t *need* the Gospel because they have their own covenant—whether it’s the Abrahamic Covenant or the Sinai Covenant. We call this Dual Covenant theology.

If these folks are right, then we can pack up our things and go home today—because we’re expending a lot of time, money, and energy here at LCJE for no good reason.

Other Christians think the Jewish people don’t *deserve* the Gospel because they’re just a bunch of apostates. This was Martin Luther’s thinking in the latter part of his life—burn down their synagogues, raze their houses, confiscate their holdings (*On the Jews and Their Lies*, 1543). They say Luther was old, sick, and cranky at the time (he died only three years later); nonetheless, his polemic has been used over and over during the past 450-plus years to justify a great deal of mischief against the Jewish people, including some tragic episodes—like the pogroms and the Holocaust.

So again, wrong thinking very often leads to wrong actions. And when Christians think wrongly about Israel and the Jewish people, they won’t see the need to reach out to them. That’s why it impacts our work as promoters, encouragers, and enablers of Jewish evangelism.

I wonder if it might be true that those groups that are the most wrong about Israel (theologically) are also the ones that have the most difficulty recruiting people from among their ranks for the work of Jewish evangelism?

This is my concern—the link between belief and behavior, and how it impacts our outreach as Christians to the Jewish people.

Our friend and colleague Barry Horner shares this concern when he says, “If a Christian’s eschatology produces an indifference, detachment, or even antagonism towards things Jewish, though there continues to be manifest unbelief within national Israel, there is most likely something fundamentally wrong with that eschatological expression” (*Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* [Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009], xix).

Sandra Richter, in her *Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2008), presents a common Christian view of the modern State of Israel on pp. 229-33. It’s used as a text in some seminaries. What follows is a brief summary and critique of some of her key points on the aforementioned pages.

Examining the Book’s Claims Re: the Nation Israel

1. The Kingdom of God has been redefined.

Is the Kingdom of God on earth spiritual (the Reformed view) or physical (the Futurist view)? This is really the crux of the controversy. Too many people insist that it must be one or the other—physical or spiritual—when in fact it can just as easily be both (this is the fallacy of a false dilemma, by the way). That is, there’s a spiritual manifestation of the Kingdom on earth now; but someday, the walls will be blown off the spiritual kingdom to include a literal, earthly Kingdom with the Messiah on His throne in Jerusalem.

In EOE, the author suggests that the Kingdom, originally, was indeed physical (she calls this “Mosaic Israel”); however, she says the Kingdom has been redefined and is now spiritual. Israel, she says, was the heir of the promises only during the period when the nation was a theocracy. She evidently follows Josephus in defining the theocracy as Mosaic Israel—that is, Israel under the Mosaic Law.

Israel + the Torah (Law) = physical Kingdom of God on earth
Church + New Covenant = spiritual Kingdom of God on earth

It’s an interesting dichotomy—and it makes a nice, clean equation (above). The real question, however, is this: is it what the Bible teaches? You see, God is a bit of a Renegade when it comes to the outworking of His plan. He doesn’t always follow nice, clean diagrams or charts. Sometimes He *defies* them.

Perhaps the most glaring problem for the author's view is that in Jeremiah 31, the New Covenant is explicitly made with two earthly entities—namely, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom):

[31](#) "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— [32](#) not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. [33](#) But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. [34](#) No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

This is not to insist that the Northern and Southern Kingdoms must exist in the same way they did an ancient times in order for there to be a literal fulfillment of Jeremiah 31; the idea here is more to the point that the New Covenant is for *all* of the People of Israel (*Am Yisrael*).

Jeremiah's mentioning of specific geographic markers also lends itself to a literal interpretation in Chapter 31:

[38](#) "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, that the city shall be built for the LORD from the Tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. [39](#) The surveyor's line shall again extend straight forward over the hill Gareb; then it shall turn toward Goath. [40](#) And the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes, and all the fields as far as the Brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, *shall be* holy to the LORD. It shall not be plucked up or thrown down anymore forever."

Charles L. Feinberg, writing in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, offers this helpful synopsis of Jeremiah's presentation of the New Covenant in Chapter 31:

- a. The time of the covenant (v.31)—"The time is coming"
- b. The Maker of the covenant (v.31)—the LORD (vv.3, 20, 32, 35)
- c. The name of the covenant (v.31)—new (Rom. 11:27; Heb. 8:6–13; 10:14–18; also Matt. 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–25)
- d. The parties of the covenant (v.31)—"house of Israel" and "house of Judah" (cf. Ezek. 37:15–19; Rom. 9:4–5 the nation of the covenants)
- e. The contrasted covenant (v.32)—not like the old covenant: based on merit and works, susceptible of infraction, no enablement (non-fulfilling), did not give life (Gal. 3:21)
- f. The nature of the covenant (vv.33–34)—not dependent on external law nor human interpretation; law written on the heart; gives intimate knowledge of and fellowship with God, forgiveness of sins, and peace of heart
- g. The immutability of the covenant (vv.35–37)—the unchanging purpose of God reflected in the fixed order of nature
- h. The physical aspects of the covenant (vv.38–40)—rebuilt Jerusalem in holiness and permanence

- i. The Guarantor of the covenant (vv.31–40 “declares the LORD or the LORD says” (nine times), as though to swear by himself (cf. Heb. 6:17–18).

Frank E. Gaebelin, Geoffrey W. Grogan, Charles L. Feinberg et al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 6: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 574.

Futurists, then, would say that the New Covenant is between the LORD and the People of Israel. Its template is the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant rather than the conditional Mosaic (Sinai) Covenant—a covenant Israel broke (Jer. 31:32).

By faith, New Testament believers become a third party in the New Covenant and thereby participate vicariously in its blessings even before the principal (Israel) does! Paul himself saw the Abrahamic Covenant as the antecedent of the New Covenant (Rom. 4:9-12). Another Pauline metaphor sees NT believers as having been “grafted in” to the “tree” of true, Abrahamic faith (11:17).

2. The Kingdom of God will be redefined yet again at the Second Coming.

The author deserves some credit here because she recognizes the problem posed by the Second Coming. That is, if the Kingdom of God has been redefined so that it's now a spiritual kingdom (whose army fights unseen opponents with spiritual weapons) rather than a visible kingdom (whose army engages flesh-and-blood enemies in actual warfare), what are we to do with Armageddon?

Some people handle this by spiritualizing Armageddon, too (along with everything leading up to it). However, if we keep redefining *everything*, where does that stop? It's obviously problematic (unless we adopt a view like Preterism) if we say the Second Coming is only spiritual and doesn't involve any sort of divine intervention in the real, physical world.

Professor Richter addresses the problem by saying that the Kingdom of God will be redefined *again* at the Second Coming. At this point in the Eschaton, we have the Armageddon Campaign—boots on the ground fighting and maneuvering in real-life warfare. The Kingdom of God will be at war in the real world.

Her approach here is not unlike the dispensational view that the kingdom currently exists in its “mystery” (spiritual) form on earth but will also become manifest in its physical form when the Messiah returns.

3. Because there are believers in all nations, God no longer favors any nation over another.

Where the author is going with this, I think, is obvious; she's saying that God has no dog in the Middle East fight. Therefore, we shouldn't take sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That appears to be the thrust of her thinking here.

No one disputes that there are born-again Palestinian believers. Those of us who have ministries in Israel know this very well. Many of us minister to Palestinian/Arab believers when we have opportunities to do so. However, the presence of believers on either side (Palestinian or Israeli) should not be the determining factor as we formulate our own position vis-à-vis the Mideast faceoff between Israel and her enemies.

Why is so much ire directed at evangelicals who side with Israel, as though it's wrong to take sides? What about the many liberal groups that unabashedly side with the Palestinians? Desmond Tutu and the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center, for instance, declare without hesitation that the "Israeli occupation of Palestinian land [is] 'a sin against God and humanity'" ("The Kairos Palestine Document" accessed online at www.fosna.org). They also make no secret of the fact that they believe Israel should *not* be a Jewish state (*Ibid.*). So evidently it's okay for Tutu and other liberation theology people to side with the Palestinians, but Bible-believing evangelicals shouldn't side with Israel.

4. God doesn't distinguish between nations and individuals under the New Covenant.

This is a classic non sequitur. It goes like this—in the New Covenant dispensation, there are believers in virtually every nation; therefore, God no longer distinguishes between nations in His dealings with humankind. The conclusion simply does not follow the premise.

We would certainly agree that all *individuals* are the same with respect to salvation (Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 3:22; 10:12). Whether we are Jewish or non-Jewish, we are all lost and in need of salvation through the shed blood of the Messiah. We would also agree that believers in all nations are our spiritual brothers and sisters—including Jewish and Palestinian believers. (The messianic community in Israel includes both Jewish and Arab/Palestinian believers. This is nothing new. It's how it's always been.)

However, we're not talking here about individuals, but about *nations*. The point is that God has chosen the *nation* Israel to bring blessing to the rest of the world. Israel's national salvation at the close of this age, as anticipated in Romans 11:26, will be a sovereign act of God in which individual Jewish people will come to faith in their Messiah *en masse*. An entire nation of people will be saved in one day (Zech. 12:10-12). It will be a wondrous, glorious manifestation of God's amazing grace—and also of His determination always to keep His promises.

5. Under the New Covenant, Israel has no special status among the nations.

Doesn't this claim seem a bit odd in light of the fact that Israel and the LORD are the only two named principals in the New Covenant?

6. That “hilly patch of real estate on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea” is not the inheritance of future believing Israel (*Am Yisrael*, the “People of Israel”).

The author uses similar language several times in her book, as though references to mundane “hills” and “patches” of land somehow diminishes the significance of *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). Is the Land the inheritance of future believing Israel? Absolutely: *“Also your people shall all be righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified”* (Isa. 60:21).

Is the Land *all* of her inheritance? Certainly not. But it’s a very important part of the package.

We non-Jews often think too much like ... well, like non-Jews. The “Holy Trinity” of Judaism is comprised of the Land, the Book, and the People of Israel. It’s part of their identity and heritage. Take away any one of the three and the whole is diminished.

May the Lord correct our thinking on these matters wherever correction may be needed, and may His Word go forth in power to His ancient People, both in Israel and around the world.