

Why Israel Still Matters

The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 shook international Jewry and greatly influenced the thinking of the Christian world. The Jews had resisted the power of Rome for years, but the Romans ultimately responded with unprecedented slaughter and cruelty, carrying out what was described by the early historian Josephus as a terrible holocaust.

The gentile church fathers interpreted this devastation as an indication of God's rejection of the Jewish people—in spite of the statement in Romans 11:28 that Israel was elect or chosen because of the patriarchs. Some church fathers still believed in Israel's final conversion at the end of this age, but the general thrust in Christian theology at that time was toward "replacement"—the idea that, under the new covenant, the church is the replacement for Israel.

Replacement theology made sense of two realities. The first was the fact that the nation of Israel as a whole did not embrace Yeshua. The second was the holocaust of A.D. 70 and the devastation that occurred when Rome crushed the second Jewish revolt under Bar Kochba in A.D. 135. It called for a different approach to biblical interpretation, a way of reading the Bible that saw the passages concerning a positive and everlasting future for Israel as referring to the destiny of the church.

Numerous Scriptures in the New Testament seem to warrant this new approach. Some verses say that all true Christians, being in Messiah, are the children of Abraham. Some state that, like the Jews, gentile Christians are a "chosen nation, a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV).

Romans 2 describes true Jews as not only those who are physically born Jewish but also those who are spiritual Jews. And Galatians 6 arguably refers to all believers, Jew and

gentile, as the Israel of God. Because of the interpretation of these statements and others, replacement theology was developed. Christians learned to read the passages concerning Israel as predictive of the church and its destiny. The church was understood as the new and true Israel.

“Replacement theology” is the term coined by opponents of this theology. Proponents use the term “fulfillment theology” instead. They see the meaning of the promises to Israel as ultimately fulfilled in the church, which began with a group of saved Jews and then included those called from the nations. The ongoing meaning of the word “Israel” is this body of Jews and gentiles—the body of Christ. In scholarship, this view is called “supercessionism,” the idea that the church has superceded national-ethnic Israel.

The tragedy of replacement theology is that it led to the gentile rejection of the legitimacy of Jewish life in Jesus, which was the foundation for anti-Semitism. A Jewish community of Yeshua’s followers, if embraced by the rest of the church, would have made anti-Semitism impossible. As the saved remnant of Israel, they would have been a living testimony of the continued election of the Jewish people.

Without the anti-Semitic attitudes, prejudices and viewpoints within the historical churches, the Nazi Holocaust would never have occurred. The doctrine of the election of Israel is a bulwark against anti-Semitism.

After the Holocaust most major mainline denominations officially repudiated replacement theology, the largest being the Roman Catholic Church. But as the impact of the Holocaust has waned and these denominations have been influenced by Arab propaganda concerning Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, replacement attitudes and views have begun to resurface.

Of great concern is that replacement theology is currently being espoused by many charismatic Christians who see the

church as exclusively being at the center of God's purposes. They view any claims for Israel or the Jewish people as prejudice and a type of unethical respect of persons not in accord with the gospel.

What Does the Bible Say?

Replacement theology raises the central question of the authority of the Bible and how to interpret biblical texts. There are two basic approaches to text interpretation today. One is the liberal relativistic approach, which says that texts do not have an objective meaning. A text means only what it says to any person who is reading it. Thankfully evangelicals, and many nonevangelicals as well, reject such an approach.

The other approach to text interpretation involves seeking to understand two things: What did the author intend to say (author intent), and what would the targeted audience have understood (audience criticism)?

When you read the texts concerning the promises to Israel according to author intent and audience criticism, you come away with a very clear conclusion. These texts promise that the ethnic people Israel, who later were called the Jews, have an election that can never be lost. It is secure because of the election of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants. Though there may be punishment and scattering, this ethnic-national group will always continue as a people (see Lev. 26:44).

In addition, there are numerous promises to them that have yet to be fulfilled. These promises include an ultimate return to their land, from which they will not again be plucked up (see Amos 9), and a fulfillment of everlasting glory.

Ezekiel 36:24-28 states these promises clearly: ""For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. ... I will give you

a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God'"" (NKJV).

In this passage on the new covenant, parallel to Jeremiah 31, we have an amazing promise to the ethnic-national people that has not yet been fulfilled. The meaning is plain: The promise of their being born again is connected to their return to the land. What a clear and powerful promise!

To yield replacement meaning, this passage and others have to be read symbolically or metaphorically. Thus Scriptures that refer to Israel's regathering must be understood as the gathering of the church to Jesus in the end—unless they are speaking only about the return from Babylon in the sixth century B.C.

Yet the latter is impossible, since that return never led to the glory of Israel as described by the prophets nor was it a return that was close to the proportions predicted. Only a minority of Israelites returned, and then they were under foreign domination during most of the ensuing centuries.

Another possibility is to read Israel's inheritance as the church's inheritance of the kingdom, or of the earth, or of heaven. But such a reading is simply not supported by the text and in no way can be proven to be the intent of the author or the nature of the understanding of the audience.

We should note that Paul considered the Old Testament adequate for "doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). The idea that the New Testament has to repeat something clearly stated in the Old for it to be valid is nothing but a prejudice that undercuts the authority of the Hebrew Bible.

The New Testament and Israel

What are we to make of the texts from the New Testament that are used to support replacement theology? Yes, by analogy the New Testament applies language from the Hebrew Bible concerning Israel to the church. However, this does not imply that the church is a replacement for Israel; it simply points to new revelation regarding the body of Christ.

In addition to Israel, God has a priesthood that He gathers from all nations who fulfill an analogous role to Israel and have analogous promises. But the people are not a literal nation among the nations like Israel, and they do not have the same promises. They are raised to a status equal to the Jewish believers in Yeshua and become one with them.

This view leaves the promises of Israel intact and reads them straightforwardly. It reveres what the actual text says. Many Christians are told that the New Testament reinterprets the Old. However, this interpretation must be limited to new insights and applications that do not change the original intention of the text.

Here is a caveat. *If the meaning of the New Testament is what replacement teachers claim, then the Jewish people would be duty bound to reject it.* Why? Because new revelation must always be tested by its coherence to the revelation already given and received.

This was a clear principle given through Moses in Deuteronomy 13 and 18. Replacement teaching clearly violates the natural reading of the Hebrew texts.

We should note that replacement theology is not only unnecessary but is also a violation of the clearest passage in the New Testament that speaks directly about Israel—Romans 9-11.

Here Paul claims that Israel is still the people who possess

the Torah, the promises and the service to God and from whom has come the Messiah (see Rom. 9:1). He argues that the saved remnant of Israel, of whom he is representative, proves that the nation as a whole still counts. He dogmatically affirms that God has not rejected His people (see v. 11:1) but that the gifts and call of God to Israel are irrevocable (see v. 29). Though enemies of the gospel, they are beloved and elect for the sake of the patriarchs, and ultimately, all Israel will be saved (see v. 26).

Clearly, Paul looks forward to eschatological fulfillment for Israel. There is no replacement theology here.

What we have to realize as believers is that the purposes of God for Israel and the church are intertwined. The capstone victory of the church is Israel's salvation, which will lead to the salvation of the nations. The two-pronged mission of the church is making Israel jealous and engaging in world missions. For the church to give up one prong would be tragic.

The church is called to support Israel's return to the land, comfort the Jews and embrace and support Messianic Jewish ministries in prayer and finances. These tasks are especially important in a day when we are seeing so much gain in Jewish ministry. However, I am confident that God will stave off tragedy and that the church will embrace its full role to see all Israel saved.

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