

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 37

REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY

The biblical truths presented in this lesson on Israel in the land drive a stake through the very heart of Replacement Theology or supersessionism as it is sometimes called. At least anyone giving an honest reading of Scripture should come to that conclusion. This heretical doctrine teaches that the church has replaced Israel because Israel rejected the Lord Jesus Christ at His First Advent. It may be defined this way: “[T]he NT Church is the new and/or true Israel that has forever superseded the nation Israel as the people of God.” [Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* p. 12]. All the blessings God promised to Israel have been transferred to the church, however, all the curses God promised Israel for unbelief remain on the Jewish people which is, of course, very convenient for Replacement theologians but it is also quite incorrect. If the Scriptures are read according to a normal, literal method of interpretation, then the Bible clearly teaches that national Israel still has a purpose in God’s plan and the nation has not been replaced by the church. That has been proven over and over from the Word of God in past few weeks here in this study. God promised to enact curses against Israel for disobedience and rebellion, which He has done, but He also promised the preservation and restoration of Israel and He has been true to His word to this point on that issue. The literal interpretive method completely defeats Replacement Theology because the Bible does not support it. The only way to arrive at it is to subvert the Scriptures by ignoring and changing the parts of the Bible that otherwise defeat Replacement Theology.

Replacement theologians had better be very careful about what they say, about what they teach people, and about how they act towards Israel. Paul warned that as easily as Gentiles were grafted into the tree whose root is the Jewish covenants and who are nourished by those same covenants, those same Gentiles can be just as easily removed. The Abrahamic Covenant promises curses for those who curse Israel and Replacement Theology is certainly classified as a curse against that nation. Finally, those who teach the Word of God to other people are going to be held strictly accountable for how they interpreted and taught it.

Romans 11:17–24 ¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²²Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³And they al-

so, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree?

Genesis 12:3 ³And I will bless those who bless you, And the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

James 3:1 ¹Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.

It didn't take the early church long to turn against the Jews and to claim the church had replaced Israel. We know the Jews persecuted the early church and that was a factor in turning against the Jewish people. Very early in church history, theologians began calling Jews "Christ killers" and used that as a justification for turning against them. Unless otherwise cited, all of the following quotes from the early church fathers are from David W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, pp. 362-365.

"Ignatius (c. AD 36-108) wrote that Jesus Christ suffered 'at the hands of the Christ-killing Jews.'" [Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* pp. 35-36].

Barnabas: "Let us see if this people [the Christians] are the heirs, or if it is the former [the Jews]. Let us see if the covenant belongs to us or to them. (c. 70-130)."

Justin Martyr: "God blesses this people [i.e., Christians], and calls them Israel, and declares them to be His inheritance. So why is it that you [Jews] do not repent of the deception you practice on yourselves, as if you alone were Israel? (c. 160)."

Justin Martyr: "We, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelite race.... (c. 160)."

Irenaeus: "The elder nation rejected Him, saying, 'We have no king but Caesar.' But in Christ every blessing [is summed up], and therefore the later people have snatched away the blessings of the former from the Father—just as Jacob took away the blessing of Esau. For this reason, Jacob suffered the plots and persecutions of a brother, just as the church suffers this self-same thing from the Jews. (c.180).

Tertullian: "In this manner, the 'lesser' people—that is, the later people—have overcome the 'greater' people. For they acquire the grace of divine favor, from which Israel has been divorced. (c. 197).

Cyprian: "According to what had been foretold in advance, the Jews had departed from God. They had lost God's favor, which had been given them in times past and

had been promised them for the future. Instead, the Christians have succeeded to their place..." (c. 250).

Cyprian: "... So the Gentiles, rather than the Jews, attain to the kingdom of heaven..." (c. 250).

Cyprian does not understand the Kingdom program at all—and neither do the rest of these early church fathers. The Kingdom has been postponed; it is not here now. When it arrives, it will be fulfilled to and with the Jewish nation just as God promised. When Israel gets replaced by the church, the revelation God provided concerning the Kingdom is abandoned. That means the Bible is being incorrectly taught and people are being led astray, that is, away from the truth God originally intended people to know.

Justin Martyr, Origen, and Augustine had a tremendous amount of influence on the development of Replacement Theology and that influence was based on other than literal hermeneutics. Justin applied the OT promises God made to Israel to the church which is still done today. Origen developed allegorical hermeneutics and forced that hermeneutical system into the interpretive process; he elevated the so-called spiritual sense of Scripture over the literal meaning. The literal meaning of Scripture is for babies; it is the spiritual meaning to which the mature believer should aspire. It should be obvious that the spiritual sense is derived only from the mind of the interpreter and has no foundational basis in the literal meaning of what the Holy Spirit wanted written in the Scriptures. Origen made this interpretive method normative within the church and it remained that way until the Reformation. The church became the spiritual Israel as opposed to physical Israel being the carnal Israel. Augustine was a full-fledged supersessionist and believed the title "Israel" referred to the church.

Augustine did one thing that proved to be beneficial to the Jewish people. During his time, there was a lot of discussion concerning the role of the Jewish people in the world. The question was, "If the church has replaced Israel or is the true Israel, then why do the Jews continue to exist?" Augustine's answer was they were witnesses to "the faith preached by the prophets, witnesses of divine judgment, and witnesses of the validity of Christianity." This served to be the basis for Christianity tolerating the Jews in society. This doctrine shielded European Jews from some persecution, bad as it was, that otherwise would have been much worse. This was important during the Crusades because the Roman Catholic Church stepped up its persecution of what they thought were heretics and that included the Jews. [Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* p. 41]. Augustine did interpret some prophecies literally so he understood God was not finished with the Jews completely, but his understanding was that individual Jewish salvation placed the Jewish people into the church as they individually came to faith, and Israel's salvation did not refer to Israel's national salvation. Many of the church fathers held that view, that is, God is done with Israel as a nation but He will save many Jewish people at the end to be part of the church.

In the Medieval period, supersessionism was totally accepted as accurate biblical dogma. The Roman Catholic Church was completely in charge of not only theology but life during that time and what they told you the Bible said was to be believed—or else. The or else being they would cut you off from the Eucharist which meant you lost your salvation. In the alternative, the or else could mean you were burnt at the stake for being a heretic. Churches of that time period had art work depicting the doctrine of Replacement Theology. “[A]t the south entrance of the Strasbourg Cathedral in France stood two female statues. One represents *Ecclesia* (the church) while the other symbolizes *Synagoga* (the synagogue). *Ecclesia* stands triumphant with a crown on her head and a royal robe draped across her shoulders. Head up, her gaze is confident, and her posture is noble. The staff and chalice in her hands represent her divine authority. *Synagoga*, however, is looking down, and a veil covers her eyes. The staff she carries in her right hand is broken, and the Torah she holds in her left hand appears ready to slip. *Synagoga* stands defeated.” [Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* p. 52]. Similar statues can be found at Reims Cathedral in northern France and at Notre Dame in Paris.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, immediately after his conversion was favorable towards the Jews. He assumed they would flock to a Protestant church after suffering so much and for so long at the hands of the Roman Catholics but when that didn't happen, he turned on the Jews with a vengeance. Eventually, he embraced the Replacement Theology doctrine that true Israelites were those who accepted the New Covenant, that is, Christians. Luther's writings were so virulent that Hitler was able to use some of Luther's writing to justify his treatment of the Jews during the Holocaust. “Very troubling indeed, Martin Luther's (1483-1546) virulent Anti-Semitism would be used as fuel for the fire in the holocaust. In his later ministry, Luther made extremely harsh comments about the Jews even though he was concerned about their plight in his younger years. Rather than be embarrassed by Luther's tirades against the Jews, Bishop Martin Sasse of Thuringa enthusiastically published a collection of his 'Anti-Semitic vitriol shortly after *Kristallnacht*'s orgy of anti-Jewish violence. Appallingly, in his foreword, he applauded the burning of the synagogues and the coincidence of the day: “'On November 10, 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany.'” [R. Mark Musser, *Nazi Oaks: The Green Sacrifice of the Judeo-Christian Worldview in the Holocaust*, p. 411].

Calvin believed the church was the new Israel and he believed Jewish Israel would one day be converted to Christianity and become part of the church.

One of the very noticeable characteristics about Replacement Theology dogma is the reliance on historical theology. This is also a characteristic of progressive dispensational theology. Interestingly, their history seems to start with Augustine rather than some of the earlier church fathers who were premillennial.

“The historical Christian teaching always has been that national Israel was a type of the church, and that the church replaced Israel on the Day of Pentecost. This view holds

that God made two sets of promises to Israel—natural promises and spiritual promises. All earthly promises to Israel have been either fulfilled or invalidated because of disobedience. All spiritual promises are being fulfilled through the church, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles alike. Main points of Historical Christian Teaching:

1. God has always had but one spiritual people, represented by the remnant in every generation.
2. God's promises to Israel were conditional.
3. All earthly promises to Israel have either been fulfilled or invalidated through disobedience and unbelief.
4. Israel was a type of the church and was superseded by the church.
5. The church was prophesied in the Old Testament, *In Old Testament language*.
6. Christ was, and is, the only Hope of Israel. And Israelites (Jews) will be saved only if they accept him during *this* age.
7. The first advent of Christ completed Israel's redemption, and manifested the Israel of God (the church) referred to in Galatians 6:16.
8. Christ instituted a Jewish-Gentile church.
9. All unfulfilled spiritual promises to Israel are being fulfilled through the Christian church.
10. This does not represent a change in God's plan, but evidences progressive revelation."

[William E. Cox, *Biblical Studies in Final Things*, pp. 46-47].

Here are some examples of what contemporary theologians have to say.

George Eldon Ladd: "The Jewish nation which has rejected the offer of the Kingdom of God has therefore been set aside as the people of God and is to be replaced by a new people.... It follows that if Jesus proclaimed the messianic salvation, if he offered to Israel the fulfillment of her true destiny, then *this destiny was actually accomplished in those who received his message*. The recipients of the messianic salvation became the true Israel, representatives of the nation as a whole. While it is true that the word 'Israel' is never applied to Jesus' disciples, the idea is present, if not the term. Jesus' disciples are the recipients of the messianic salvation, the people of the Kingdom, the true Israel.... The disciples constituted not a new Israel but the true Israel, not a new church but the true people of God; the righteous nation that keeps the faith; the true *qahal Jahweh* [congregation of God] who have been summoned by Jesus into the blessings of the messianic fulfillment.... We may conclude that the saying about founding the church fits the total teaching of Jesus and means that he saw in the circle of those who received his message the sons of the Kingdom, the true Israel, the people of God.... it [the church] is a historical manifestation of a new fellowship brought into being by Jesus as the true people of God who, having received the messianic salvation, were to take the place of the rebellious nation as the true Israel." [George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed., pp. 249-250, 255, 261].

Hank Hanegraaff: “[H]istoric Christianity has always believed in one people of God based on *relationship* rather than race.... It [the 144,000 Jewish evangelists of Revelation] represents true Israel—not by nationality but by spirituality, not by circumcision of the flesh but by circumcision of the heart.... [Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code*, pp. xx, 125]. As you may well imagine, Hanegraaff is especially critical of literal hermeneutics. “The second thing we must never do is attempt to press the language system of Revelation into a literalistic labyrinth. Indeed, the literal-at-all-cost methodology of people like LaHaye is interpretive suicide when it comes to apocalyptic genre.” [pp. 132-133]. Hanegraaff is an amillennial preterist and he has to use spiritual hermeneutics to maintain his theology. This approach renders the Bible a casualty of his theological warfare against Israel and premillennial dispensationalism.

Louis Berkhof: “It is very doubtful, however, whether Scripture warrants the expectation that Israel will finally be re-established as a nation, and will as a nation turn to the Lord. Some Old Testament prophecies seem to predict this, but these should be read in light of the New Testament. Does the New Testament justify the expectation of a future restoration and conversion of Israel as a nation? It is not taught or even necessarily implied ... He [Jesus] does not hint at any prospective restoration and conversion of the Jewish people. This silence of Jesus is very significant.” [Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 699]. This assertion is completely untrue. The first twelve chapters of Matthew are full of just such expectations that Israel will be restored one day and the Kingdom promises will be fulfilled. Acts and Revelation reveal those truths. Paul addresses those issues in some of his epistles. Men like Berkhof have willingly blinded themselves on the altar of theology.

Vlach claims that since the holocaust and the reestablishment of Israel, Replacement Theology has diminished somewhat. That may have been true right after World War II and that was a significant factor in the establishment of the Jewish state, but it is no longer true. Today, it seems that Replacement Theology and anti-Semitism around the world are in full bloom. Most mainline denominations today are supports of the Boycott, Divest, Sanction (BDS) movement against Israel; those denominations not only hate Israel but they are advocates for Islam which advocates for the destruction of not only the Jewish state but also the complete annihilation of the Jewish people.

The only real brake on the movement of supersessionism in this age is dispensational theology. Dispensationalism is the only theological system that is completely dedicated to understanding what the Bible has to say about the nation of Israel. Understanding the Bible leads to understanding that God still has a program for Israel as a nation.

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