

# Replacement Theology – Part 1

## Introduction

Does God have a future plan for the Nation of Israel, or has God replaced ethnic Israel with the body of Christ known as the church? This has been the debate among believers in the church since post-Apostolic days, even though the Apostle Paul's question and answer statement should be enough to settle the matter: "Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!"<sup>1</sup>

## The Covenant God Made with Israel

The term Israel in this lesson refers to all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that are also called the Jews and Israelites. The Jewish nation is unique among all nations of the world in that God made a covenant with them calling Israel His "special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth."<sup>2</sup>

Covenants were an accepted part of life in Abraham's day, being understood as an agreement between two parties that bound them together in some way. They were almost always "conditional" requiring both parties to share responsibility for keeping them. However, the covenant God made with Abraham and promised to Abraham's descendants was "unconditional" as demonstrated by the action God took to ratify His covenant.

It was customary in the time of Abraham for two parties to formalize a covenant by dividing the bodies of animals that had been slaughtered and laying the pieces opposite one another. Then, both parties would ratify their covenant "by blood," walking between the two pieces, making the covenant official and binding. Abraham might have expected God would have him pass between the pieces, but when the sun was going down, "a deep sleep fell upon Abram."<sup>3</sup> God did not awaken Abraham but instead passed through the pieces by Himself demonstrating without a doubt that He alone was responsible for fulfilling the land covenant that God made with Abraham and his descendants, Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 11:1 NKJV

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 7:6 NKJV

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 15:12

In His covenant with Abraham, God made promises directly to Abraham personally, including giving Abraham a great name and making from Abraham's descendants a "great nation."<sup>4</sup> God also promised that His covenant with Abraham would be passed on to Abraham's physical descendants, the Nation of Israel as "an everlasting covenant,"<sup>5</sup> which would include the promise of a specific geographical land area described as encompassing land "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates."<sup>6</sup> God was very clear in telling Abraham, "To your descendants I will give this land"<sup>7</sup> "forever"<sup>8</sup> as an "everlasting possession."<sup>9</sup> Finally, in His covenant, God made a universal promise to bless all peoples of the world of every dispensation, saying to Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>10</sup>

### The Claim of Replacement Theology

Despite the fact God clearly demonstrated that His covenant with the Nation of Israel is unconditional, everlasting and forever, and that God has pronounced the Nation of Israel to be His "special treasure" above all other nations, some church leaders have made the claim that God has rejected Israel and replaced national Israel with the church. The technical name for this belief is "Supersessionism," but it is commonly and appropriately called Replacement Theology. This doctrine basically teaches that "God has rescinded all His promises to Israel and those promises have been given to the church."<sup>11</sup>

"The label, 'replacement theology,' does not appear to be well-received by some. Several (supersessionists) have noted that they would rather be known as 'fulfillment theologians' or some other title that is more positive."<sup>12</sup> In the minds of some, Israel as a nation has not been replaced as the people of God, because Israel never had that identity. In their minds, Israel has always been simply a picture of what the church fulfills, that is, the true people of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 12:2

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 17:7

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 15:18

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 12:7

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 13:15

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 17:8

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 12:3

<sup>11</sup> David Dunlap, *Replacement Theology*, (Gospel Folio Press, Port Colborne, ON 2012), p.16.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Vlach, Ph.D., "Various Forms of Replacement," (The Master's Seminary Journal, Spring, 2009).

Among supersessionists, there are differences of thought regarding how to view Israel's relationship with God and with the church, as well as Israel's future salvation and existence.

- Punitive Supersessionism points to Israel's rejection of God, especially God's Messiah, as the reason God has, in turn, rejected Israel. In other words, national Israel was punished for wickedness and forfeited all claim to being the people of God.
- Economic Supersessionism is not primarily concerned with God's rejection of Israel. Rather, those who hold this view believe it was always God's intent that the identity of those known as "the people of God" would transfer from an ethnic people called Israel to a universal body of people called the church as soon as the church appeared on earth.
- Structural Supersessionism is perhaps the most difficult variation to grasp, as it focuses on how the canon of Scripture is understood. Basically, it minimizes the role of the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, thereby minimizing God's identity as the "God of Israel" and minimizing the history of God's dealings with the Jewish nation. Structural supersessionism "renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping Christian convictions."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, among supersessionists, there are some who take a severe approach and some who take a more moderate or mild approach to the future of Israel. Those who take a severe approach do not believe in any future salvation or restoration of Israel. Those who are more moderate take a restrained approach, believing in salvation for Israel as a nation but no future restoration to a place of prominence among the nations.

### The Seeds of Replacement Theology

It seems significant that the author of Hebrews was inspired to write the following clear warning to the church, likely before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., against allowing animosity to take root and spread: "looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, p.33 [Soulen is Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C.]

become defiled”<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, the “poisonous root” of anti-Semitism that took hold of some post-Apostolic church leaders has certainly and negatively influenced many in the church through allegorical interpretation.

The seeds of Replacement Theology were sowed early in church history. The two main elements that influenced post-Apostolic church leaders toward supersessionism were 1) a growing animosity in the church toward the Jews and 2) the prevailing Greek philosophy of the day.

The New Testament Church began in Jerusalem in the early 30’s A.D. and was made up predominantly of Jewish believers. The majority of people in the Jewish nation continued to reject Christ and severely persecuted Jewish and Gentile believers in the church. Following the stoning of Stephen around 36 A.D., the church in Jerusalem made up largely of Jewish Christians was scattered by persecution to other geographical locations. James encouraged these dispersed believers he identified as “the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad,” with the words “count it all joy when you fall into various trials.”<sup>15</sup> As a result of the witness of these scattered Jewish believers, many Gentiles came to believe in Jesus Christ, and in a relatively short period of time, the church changed from being predominantly Jewish to being predominantly Gentile. Astonishingly, church history shows that in a brief 100 years after the last of the Apostles had gone to be with the Lord, the seeds of anti-Semitism had taken root among the predominantly Gentile believers in the early church.

Growing anti-Semitic language by church leaders caused the church to view the tragic events happening to Israel as a sign and as proof of God’s rejection of Israel, because Israel had rejected God’s Messiah. The first Jewish revolt against Rome resulted in the Roman General Titus entering Jerusalem in 70 A.D., burning the temple and killing tens of thousands of Jews. That event was followed by the second Jewish revolt from A.D. 132-135 which resulted in the Roman General Julius Serverus completely destroying Jerusalem, knocking down the walls, leveling the city and killing more than half a million Jews. The response of the church was to view the horrors of those events as confirmation that God had rejected forever the nation of Israel.

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<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 12:15 NKJV

<sup>15</sup> James 1:1-2

This was the response of Justin Martyr only 25 years after the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 135. He wrote that the Jews “justly suffer” and the Jewish cities were justly “burned with fire.”<sup>16</sup> From history we know Justin Martyr was a true defender of Christianity and was beheaded for his faith in Christ. However, Justin Martyr was influenced by growing anti-Semitism in the church, and he concluded that Christians “are the true Israelitic race.”<sup>17</sup>

This hatred of the Jews by some in the early church led to extreme and heretical conclusions. Marcion who lived from A.D. 85-160 insisted on a literal interpretation of those portions of Scripture he deemed worthy of being in the canon. However, Marcion rejected any connection between Judaism and Christianity and argued strongly that the Old Testament be cut from the canon of Scripture, as in his opinion, it was for the Jews only and not for the church. In A.D. 144, the church at Rome rejected Marcion’s argument and excommunicated Marcion. However, instead of cutting the Old Testament from the Canon, the post Apostolic church leaders cut the nation of Israel from the Old Testament!

At the end of the 4th century, John Chrysostom, known as a great orator, wrote eight sermons to believers of the church of Antioch. His intent was very likely to persuade members of the church not to be involved in the coming Jewish feasts. However, Chrysostom’s writings also expressed his rejection of Israel as having any future as the people of God. He wrote, “Do not be surprised that I called the Jews pitiable. They really are pitiable and miserable.” In his fourth sermon, Chrysostom wrote, “Jews are abandoned by God and for the crime of deicide, there is no expiation possible.”<sup>18</sup>

A problem remained for anti-Semitic church theologians of how to resolve the matter of unfulfilled promises and prophecies that the Old Testament Scriptures clearly declared God had intended for Israel. As a solution, church theologians turned to a method of interpretation being formulated and promoted by a number of post-Apostolic church leaders, partly because of the influence of a Hellenistic Jew.

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<sup>16</sup> Justin, “Dialogue with Trypho,” James Donaldson, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), [Source: Dunlap, David, Replacement Theology, Gospel Folio Press, 2012].

<sup>17</sup> Renald E. Showers, *The Coming Apocalypse*, (The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos* “Against the Jews,” a series of eight homilies, [http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom\\_adversus\\_judaeos\\_01\\_homily1.htm](http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/chrysostom_adversus_judaeos_01_homily1.htm)

Philo Judaeus, better known as Philo of Alexandria, lived among the largest Jewish Dispersion of the first century in Alexandria. Philo was born around 15-10 BC and died sometime around 45-50 AD, so he was a contemporary of Jesus Christ as well as Josephus who at times used Philo as a resource. Philo received a Jewish/Greek education and early in life became interested in Greek philosophy that proved to be a major factor in Philo's writings and influence. Philo believed the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, could only be interpreted allegorically in the same way the Greek poems, "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," were being interpreted. Allegory was used in Hellenistic interpretation to solve the problematic immoral activities of the gods. Philo applied allegory to what he thought was distasteful portions of the Old Testament such as Lot's incest with his daughters and the polygamy among the patriarchs.

Anti-Semitic feeling continued in the church to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. The great Martin Luther (1483-1546) who took such a courageous stand against the Roman Catholic Church by his declaration of justification by faith alone, nevertheless took a harsh attitude towards the Jews near the end of his ministry. At the beginning of the Reformation, Luther encouraged the church to be kind to the Jews, but it seems that in the last decade of his life, Luther took a strong anti-Semitic view of Israel. Near the end of his life, Luther wrote a tract, "Concerning the Jews and Their Lies," in which he called the Jews "A miserable and accursed people." Luther wrote, "What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? . . . I shall give you my sincere advice: First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn . . . Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed . . . Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them . . . Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb . . ." <sup>19</sup>

Present day church leaders continue the narrative that God has rejected Israel. John Piper, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has said, "The promises made to Abraham, including the promise to the Land, will be inherited as an everlasting gift only by true, spiritual Israel, not disobedient, unbelieving Israel." <sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," written 1543, (Eulenspiegel Press, Princeton, USA 2015).

<sup>20</sup> John Piper, "Israel, Palestine and the Middle East," (Desiring God Resource library, March 7, 2004).

R.C. Sproul, Jr. of Ligonier Ministries, said, “We believe that the church is essentially Israel. We believe that the answer to, ‘What about the Jews?’ is, ‘Here we are.’”

### Summary

The warning given by the writer of Hebrews that any root of bitterness allowed to spread will negatively affect many people, has certainly proved to be true because of many post-Apostolic church leaders adopting anti-Semitic attitudes.

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