

SOUTHWESTERN ASSEMBLIES OF GOD UNIVERSITY

Department of Bible and Theology

Systematic Theology I

THE 3123

Professor: Koo K.D. Yun

The Problem of Supersessionism in Systematic Theology

Name: Joshua Tallent

E-mail: joshuastallent@lionmail.sagu.edu

Semester: Fall 2203

Date: November 9, 2023

Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century (after the horrors of the Holocaust were revealed), a growing number of theologians have been wrestling with and rethinking the doctrine of supersessionism, the teaching that the Church has replaced or superseded Israel as the people of God and has become the “New Israel.”¹ This teaching, first introduced by Church Fathers in the second century, has become engrained in Christian systematic theology and is now the accepted assumption of most believers, regardless of personal theological training.

However, supersessionism, also called replacement theology, is detrimental to Christian theology, flying in the face of the message of the Scriptures themselves and relegating the Chosen People to, at most, a peripheral role in the plan and purposes of God. While purporting to promote a positive understanding of God’s work of redemption, it instead calls into question His nature as the covenantal and unchanging God of Israel.²

To better understand this issue, we will establish the Biblical basis and the importance of the central role of the Jewish people in the plan of God, explore the roots of the doctrine of supersessionism in the teachings of the second-century church fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, and examine some examples of how supersessionism is expressed in evangelical theology today. Then, with that foundation in place, we will suggest a correction to this doctrinal deficiency by developing a new narrative of systematic theology from a post-supersessionist perspective.

¹ Michael J. Vlach, "Various Forms of Replacement Theology," *MSJ*, 2009: 59.

² Malachi 3:6, “For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, the sons of Jacob, have not come to an end.”

The Centrality of Israel

From the introduction of Abraham in Genesis 12, to the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, to the return to the Promised Land under Joshua, to the repentance call of the prophets, and throughout the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the Apostolic witnesses, the Scriptures are clear that the nation of Israel, the Jewish people, are the unique, exclusive, chosen people of God. God defines His covenant with Abraham and with Abraham’s descendants in Genesis 17:7-8 as “everlasting,” and also promises them the Land of Israel “as an everlasting possession”:

“⁷ I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁸ And I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land where you live as a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”³

Jeremiah foresaw the coming of the Messiah and the renewal of that everlasting covenant, proclaiming that God would make “a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”⁴ More importantly, God confirmed through the prophet that the people of Israel will always be His chosen people.

And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, “Have you not observed what these people have asserted, saying, ‘The two families which the LORD chose, He has rejected them’? So they despise My people as no longer being a nation in their sight. This is what the LORD says: ‘If My covenant for day and night does not continue, and I have not established the fixed patterns of heaven and earth, then I would reject the descendants of Jacob and David My servant...’⁵

The Apostle Paul reaffirms multiple times that the status of the Jewish people is secure, saying in no uncertain terms, “God has not rejected His people, has He? Far from it!”⁶ Paul also

³ Genesis 17:7–8, *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020).

⁴ Jeremiah 31:31. See also 31:32-37.

⁵ Jeremiah 33:23–26.

⁶ Romans 11:1.

closes his main discussion in Romans 9-11 with the reminder that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable,”⁷ a statement specifically reiterating that the Jewish people are God’s chosen people. Jean-Miguel Garrigues explains Paul’s argument quite eloquently:

According to Saint Paul, Israel is “not rejected” (Rom 11:1, 11), since there is a “remnant” (Rom 11:5) which has believed in its place, serving as the “first fruits” (Rom 11:16). Israel is nevertheless “put aside” (Rom 11:15), “cut off” (Rom 11:17) from the messianic mission with respect to the gentiles (cf. Acts 13:44-46), but nonetheless maintained in “the election” (Rom 11:28) with all its prerogatives (Rom 9:4-5) while awaiting an “assumption which will be the equivalent of life coming out of the dead” (Rom 11:15).⁸

The Jews are a central element in the process of universal redemption. Abraham Joshua Heschel points out that the Jews serve as witnesses of God in the world, and thus ensure that God’s presence is felt throughout history, and even today. He says, “Without the people Israel, the Bible is mere literature. Through Israel, the Bible is a voice, a power and a challenge.”⁹ Paul agrees with that assessment of the centrality of the sons of Jacob, reminding the believers in Rome that the Jewish people have the rightful claim to all of the fundamental elements of the faith, including “the adoption as sons *and daughters*, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the *temple* service, and the promises,” along with the patriarchs and even the Messiah himself.¹⁰

Dr. Michael Wyschogrod, a prominent figure in Jewish-Christian relations in the 20th century (and whom I had the pleasure to study under at the University of Houston in the late

⁷ Romans 11:29.

⁸ Jean-Miguel Garrigues, “Does the Permanence of Israel’s Election Today Contradict the Universality of Salvation through Jesus?,” in *Covenant and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Mark S. Kinzer*, ed. Jonathan Kaplan, Jennifer M. Rosner, and David J. Rudolph (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023), 52.

⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 45.

¹⁰ Romans 9:4–5, italics in original.

1990s), engages this question of Jewish election in his book *The Body of Faith*. He recognizes the incongruity of the idea that God would elect the Jewish people, a people who are chosen based on their physical relationship to Abraham instead of on their own righteousness or piety (and even when they lack it).¹¹ However, that is exactly what God did. Wyschogrod says,

The God of Abraham chose this people as his vehicle in history, so that his identity is irrevocably attached to this people because he made himself known to man as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, thereby conferring on this people a defining function in regard to this God. There is thus created a relationship of great intimacy between a people constituted by its divine election and a God who chooses to appear in history as the God of this people. The relation remains absolute... if God is thought about in isolation from the people of Israel, the grave risk arises that the God so conceived is not the true God, namely the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.¹²

So, God enacted an everlasting covenant with Abraham and his physical descendants through Isaac and Jacob, and God declares that the New Covenant is also enacted with those same descendants, the people of Israel. How, then, did Christian theology get to the idea that the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God?

The Roots of Supersessionism

The problem is that this message of the unique calling of the sons of Jacob has been removed from the standard Christian narrative of scripture, what R. Kendall Soulen calls the “canonical narrative.”¹³ Since the second century, Christian theology has developed with an unwarranted bias against the Jewish people based on a narrative of the scriptures that, with the sole exception of the first three chapters of Genesis, ignores the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures

¹¹ Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God in the People of Israel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1996), 66-67.

¹² *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 13.

as unnecessary for theology or Biblical interpretation. Soulen traces this “standard canonical narrative” of Biblical interpretation all the way back to the writings and theological foundations of the second-century Church Fathers Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.¹⁴

According to Soulen, the standard canonical narrative focuses on God’s role as Consummator and Redeemer. It tells the story of history in this way: “God’s intention to consummate the human pair whom God has created, the first parents’ disobedience and fall, the redemption of lost humanity in Christ, and final consummation.”¹⁵ Notice what is missing in this story: the entirety of God’s covenant relationship with Israel, and essentially the entirety of the Hebrew scriptures.

This standard canonical narrative first appears in the writings of Justin Martyr (c. 100 – c. 165 CE). Justin designed a framework for scriptural interpretation that divided the Hebrew Bible into “foreground” and “background” dimensions, removing from the background dimension any theological value or religious significance.¹⁶ His overall goal was to prove that the Hebrew scriptures point to the Messiah, and as a result they point to a new reality, one in which “the true spiritual Israel” is made up of Christians, not the physical sons of Israel:

For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham... are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ...¹⁷

He later takes this point to its logical conclusion:

... understand, therefore, that the seed of Jacob now referred to is something else, and not, as may be supposed, spoken of your people... even so it is necessary for us here to

¹⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁷ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho.” *ANF* 1:200, chapter 11.

observe that there are two seeds of Judah, and two races, as there are two houses of Jacob: the one begotten by blood and flesh, the other by faith and the Spirit.¹⁸

Justin doesn't stop there, though. He not only espouses the replacement of the Jewish people with the "true spiritual Israel," he also suggests that "the old Israel and its institutions never had divinely authorized credibility in the first place,"¹⁹ and that the commandments in the Law, including circumcision, Sabbath, and the festivals were imposed on Israel, "namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts."²⁰

Justin was the first to use this terminology of the "true spiritual Israel" or the "new Israel," but he certainly was not the last to use it or to promote this theology of supersessionism. Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 202 CE) also interprets the covenants of God with the Jewish people, as shown in the Hebrew scriptures, as "a prefiguration of God's decisive act of redemption in Christ and the church."²¹ Irenaeus is also just as clear in his supersessionism as Justin Martyr is, stating without compunction, "But in Christ every blessing [is summed up], and therefore the latter people has snatched away the blessings of the former from the Father, just as Jacob took away the blessing of this Esau."²²

Supersessionism in Evangelical Theology

Unfortunately, the standard canonical narrative, with its rejection of the core of the Hebrew Scriptures and the resulting supersessionism, has persisted to this day. Systematic

¹⁸ Ibid., 267, chapter 135. Reference found in Terence L. Donaldson, "Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition," *JMJS* No. 3 (2016): 7.

¹⁹ Ralph J. Korner, "Post-Supersessionism: Introduction, Terminology, Theology. *Religions* 13 (2022): 1197.

²⁰ Justin Martyr, 203, chapter 18.

²¹ Soulen, 41.

²² Irenaeus, "Against Heresies." *ANF* 1:493, book 4, chapter 21, brackets in original.

theology textbooks perpetuate these ideas, building on the standard narrative and reassigning the covenants God made with the physical descendants of Israel to the Church, the “New Israel.” As Ruth A. Breusch, a Pentecostal missionary in the 20th century, said, “this Church is the New Israel, the people of God, under the new covenant. ‘New’ because Gentile believers are now included.”²³ At the same time, these systematic theology textbooks unironically expound on the unchanging, faithful character of God, and his covenant-keeping nature, because “[t]he Lord evinces His faithfulness through keeping His promises.... If God were ever to stop upholding his promises, then he would be repudiating his own character.”²⁴

Michael J. Vlach provides a helpful survey of how supersessionism is taught by Christian theologians. One key example he cites is Bruce K. Waltke, who makes the unambiguous claim that the New Testament teaches the “hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant.”²⁵ Waltke also says, “The Jewish *nation* no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place has been taken by the Christian community which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel.”²⁶ Relying on the details outlined in Soulen’s work, Vlach identifies three main types of supersessionism in modern theologies:²⁷

1. Punitive Supersessionism, which says that the Church has replaced Israel as a punishment for the Jewish people’s rejection of Jesus as Messiah.

²³ Stanley M. Horton, *Systematic Theology* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007), 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments : Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg. (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 274, Logos. Also quoted in Vlach, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 275, emphasis in the original. Also quoted in Vlach, 59n10.

²⁷ Vlach, 60-65.

2. Economic Supersessionism, which says that God’s plan was to replace Israel with the universal Church from the beginning.
3. Structural Supersessionism, which “unifies the Christian canon in a manner that renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping conclusions about how God’s purposes engage creation in universal and enduring ways.”²⁸

Regardless of the approach, all three types of replacement theology have the same end in mind, the rejection of the Jewish people as the chosen people of God, and the institution of the Church as the “new Israel” or the “true spiritual Israel,” the true recipients of the promises given to Abraham, and the true people of God.

A New (Old) Narrative

So, where do we go from here? How can we undo the last 1900 years of replacement theology and reinstate the people of Israel in their rightful place as the chosen people of God?

I believe we first need to reaffirm a clear understanding of the faithfulness of God and his enduring, everlasting, unbreakable covenant with the descendants of Jacob. When God promises Abraham that the covenant He is initiating will be a ברית עולם, an everlasting covenant,²⁹ faithful followers of God are obligated to treat those words as true. And when he tells the nation of Israel, which has just been led into captivity, that there is nothing they can do that will make Him reject them,³⁰ we are obligated to believe that statement of God’s fidelity and faithfulness, as well. The

²⁸ Soulen, 31.

²⁹ Genesis 17:7.

³⁰ Jeremiah 31:31-37, 33:23–26.

Apostle Paul is unwavering on this point, “I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? Far from it!... God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.”³¹

With that foundation of fidelity in mind, we can then renew our understanding of the particularity of God’s calling of the Jewish people. As Anglican theologian Gerald McDermott says, “the pattern of both Testaments is that God saves the world (the universal) through Israel (the particular).”³² McDermott points out that God’s promise to Abraham was that through him (the particular) all the nations of the earth (the universal) would be blessed, and Jesus affirms this particular/universal nature of salvation when telling the Samaritan woman, “salvation [universal] is from the Jews [particular].”³³

Then, understanding God’s faithfulness to Israel and his desire to bless the world through the physical descendants of Jacob, we must take on the difficult task of revising the standard canonical narrative, repudiating the supersessionism of the Church Fathers and later theologians, and developing a new narrative that includes and centralizes the Jewish people and their unique relationship with God as a central element in the narrative. Maybe we can rely on Paul’s outline in Romans 9:4-5 (“Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and daughters, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple service, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh.”) to expand on the standard canonical narrative (“God’s intention to consummate the human pair whom God has created, the first

³¹ Romans 11:1-2.

³² Gerald R. McDermott, *Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently about the People and the Land* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017), 113.

³³ *Ibid.*, 114, and John 4:22.

parents' disobedience and fall, the redemption of lost humanity in Christ, and final consummation."³⁴), like this:

God's intention was to consummate the human pair whom He created. The first parents disobeyed and fell, bringing humanity into a state of separation from the Most High. So, God chose one nation as His own special people, adopting them as His own sons and daughters. He gave to them the glory of His revelation, choosing to make an everlasting covenant with them that will stand until the end of time itself. He also gave to them His righteous instructions (תורה) and the temple service to teach them how to obey and worship him. He promised them that the land of Israel would be theirs as an eternal inheritance and that they would be a blessing to the entire world because of their special relationship with Him. Through the nation of Israel, God brought the promised Messiah, who provided the redemption of lost humanity, and, in the end, He will bring about the final consummation of all things.

While this narrative is substantially longer than the elevator pitch established by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, a systematic theology founded on this narrative will be substantially more consistent with the actual story of consummation and redemption found in the entirety of the scriptures—the story told by and about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

³⁴ Soulen, 25.

Bibliography

- Donaldson, Terence L. "Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition." *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting*, no. 3 (2016): 1-32.
- Garrigues, Jean-Miguel. "Does the Permanence of Israel's Election Today Contradict the Universality of Salvation through Jesus?" Pages 44-53 in *Covenant and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Mark S. Kinzer*. Edited by Jonathan Kaplan, Jennifer M. Rosner, and David J. Rudolph. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2023.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967.
- Horton, Stanley M. *Systematic Theology*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007.
- Irenaeus. "Against Heresies, Book 4." In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, chronologically arranged, with brief notes and prefaces by A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY and Peabody, MA: Christian Literature Publishing Company/Hendrickson Publishers, vol. 1, 462-525.
- Korner, Ralph J. "Post-Supersessionism: Introduction, Terminology, Theology." *Religions* 13 (2022): 1195-1206. <https://doi.org/10.3390/>
- Martyr, Justin. "Dialogue with Trypho." In *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, chronologically arranged, with brief notes and prefaces by A. Cleveland Coxe. Buffalo, NY and Peabody, MA: Christian Literature Publishing Company/Hendrickson Publishers, vol. 1, 194-270.
- McDermott, Gerald R. *Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently about the People and the Land*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2017.
- Soulen, R. Kendall. *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Vlach, Michael J. "Various Forms of Replacement Theology." *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 2009: 57-69.
- Waltke, Bruce K. "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual." Pages 262-287 in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.* Edited by John S. Feinberg. Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988, Logos.
- Wyschogrod, Michael. *The Body of Faith: God in the People of Israel*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson, Inc., 1996.