

In Support of Supersessionism

In this article I offer a simple argument for the historic christian doctrine of *supersessionism*—the teaching that the Church (Jew and Gentile) has inherited the status as God's chosen people, and are spiritually living out the identity and promises made to ancient Israel. You may have heard of this doctrine by other labels, *fulfillment theology* or *replacement theology*. Let me first say that I do affirm a future restoration of the Jewish people. I believe the New Testament alludes to an eschatological revival among the Jewish people (Rom. 11:25–27) and I actively pray to that end. While scripture is not clear exactly how this will come about, one thing is certain, Jews will be saved by repentance and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God's only program of salvation is through His Son; there is no other name by which man can be saved.

Contemporary Challenges

Before we jump in, it seems right to recognize the unique challenges specific to our time when seeking to understand supersessionism.

1. *Misrepresentation*. Popular teachers often only highlight an extremist version of replacement theology that teaches that the Jewish people have been forever cut off and cast aside, with no future redemptive purpose. The more moderate view that I hold is actually consistent with many respected teachers throughout church history. From Augustine (Patristic era), to Jonathan Edwards (First Great Awakening), to contemporary teachers like John Piper, many theologians have affirmed both supersessionism and an eschatological restoration of the Jewish people.
2. *Demonization*. Another common challenge we face is that many modern teachers unnecessarily identify this historical christian doctrine with the very real evil of antisemitism. While the institutional church has been guilty of antisemitic sins (among many others over the centuries), I find it irresponsible to concretely associate supersessionism with antisemitism. *It is possible* to simultaneously affirm that unbelieving Israel has been cut off from God's olive tree, believing Gentiles have been grafted in (Rom. 11:17–20) *and* maintain a true desire and prayer for the Jewish people to be saved (Rom. 10:1). Paul held those beliefs in tandem and he lived free of antisemitism.

When popular teachers make these kinds of broad-brush claims, they produce church cultures that lack charity in theological discourse, practice straw-manning, and maintain a general unwillingness to study other views. This is not the way.

It is vital that we maintain christian virtue in our practice of christian theology. It's in that spirit that I wish to continue.

The Basic Argument

I argue that Paul's olive tree language (Rom. 11:17–20) of unbelieving Jews *cut off* and believing Gentiles *grafted in* is best understood in light of other clear New Testament teaching. Namely, Israel's rejection of Messiah, her subsequent judgment, and the New Testament pattern of applying the identity, calling and promises of historic Israel to the Church. When the centerpiece of Paul's Israelology (Rom. 9–11) is read in light of these teachings it is reasonable to conclude that unbelieving Israel has been superseded by the Church, True Israel.

ISRAEL'S REJECTION OF MESSIAH & JUDGMENT

The gravity of Israel's rejection of Messianic fulfillment is portrayed in the gospels. Eschatological judgment was promised to cities who rejected kingdom ministry (Matt. 11:20–24). Woes were pronounced to religious leaders who rejected Messiah (Matt. 23:1–33). The temple would be torn down (Matt. 24:1–2) and Jerusalem would be left desolate (Matt. 23:37–39). The record of history shows that the early Christians believed the Fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) was in fact the sign of God's judgment against Israel for her rejection of Messianic fulfillment.¹

In the heat of His passion week, Jesus gave this prophecy concerning unbelieving Israel,

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits (Matt. 21:43).

Israel's historical rejection of Messianic fulfillment and Jesus' subsequent declarations of her judgment was the backdrop at which Paul declared that the unbelieving branches of Israel had been *cut off* from God's olive tree. It is therefore not unreasonable to equate the unbelieving branches being *cut off* with ceasing to exist as the people of God.

THE SONS OF ABRAHAM

Birthright has always been core to Israel's covenantal claim. To be a descendant of Abraham was to be chosen by God, distinct among the nations and ultimately of the lineage of faith. This is why it was so shocking and offensive for Jesus to tell literal Jews that they were not in fact true sons of Abraham, *rather sons of the devil (Jn. 8:39–47)*. Jesus was making a critical distinction: *not all descendants of Abraham are truly God's people, but only those who receive Him by faith*. Paul develops this concept at length (Rom. 4; Gal. 3). Especially noteworthy is Gal. 3:7–9, 29:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

Both Jesus and Paul rejected the notion that unbelieving Israel were true sons of Abraham. Instead they applied this core identity marker of Israel to the Church. Augustine comments,

Let therefore no Christian consider himself alien to the name of Israel.²

CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE

Paul further develops the birthright argument in Galatians 4, and he does so with even greater shock factor. While contrasting the family line between Isaac (the child of promise) and Ishmael, Paul allegorizes the mothers, Hagar and Sarah.

¹ Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews & the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 6.

² Augustine of Hippo, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), 8:550.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written,

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.” So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

Paul spiritually applies the identity of Hagar's descendants to unbelieving Israel (Jerusalem) and the descendants of Sarah, the free woman, to the Church—the people of the heavenly Jerusalem. Imagine the radical offense this was to first century Jews as Paul identified ethnic Jews as *descendants of Hagar* and believing Gentiles as *descendants of Sarah!*

Both Jesus and Paul assert that True Israel is not identified by bloodline or ethnic heritage, but by faith in Christ.

CIRCUMCISION

Perhaps the most unique identity marker of Israel was the covenantal practice of circumcision. *Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin*, Paul boasted in reference to his old identity (Phil. 3:5). Yet he also spiritually applied the concept of circumcision to the Church,

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Phil 3:3).

Also,

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation (Gal. 6:15).

For Paul, the preeminent Jewish symbol of divine election was reinterpreted in light of Christ and applied to the Church, signaling that it's not unbelieving Israel who bear the identity of God's covenantal people, but the new creation in Christ—True Israel.

RACE, PRIESTHOOD, TEMPLE & SACRIFICES & NATION

Peter and Paul contribute succinctly on this topic,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession (1 Peter 2:9).

...you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).

Both Peter and Paul invoked core elements of Judaism to shape the identity of the Church, signaling that the Church has been *grafted into* the identity of Israel, God's covenantal people.

PROPHECY

One of the first Old Testament quotations in Matthew is packed with hermeneutical insight pertinent to our discussion.

And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Matt. 2:15).

In this passage Matthew takes a prophecy concerning historic Israel's deliverance from Egypt and teaches that its ultimate fulfillment is realized in Christ. George Ladd calls this common practice of the New Testament writers *reinterpretation* because New Testament writers *reinterpret* prophecies concerning historical Israel to signal their ultimate fulfillment in Christ and the Church.³ Perhaps nowhere more clearly is the gravity of this practice (relative to our discussion) seen than in Romans 9, where Paul quotes prophecies from both Hosea and Isaiah:

As indeed he says in Hosea,

"Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'"

"And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called sons of the living God."

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved" (Rom. 9:25-27).

In his purposeful reinterpretation of prophecies concerning historical Israel, Paul was drawing a clear line to their ultimate fulfillment. Significantly, ultimate fulfillment is not in literal, eschatological Israel, but in Christ and His faithful remnant, the Church. True Israel.

LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

It seems clear to me that the Great Commission Jesus gave to *make disciples of all nations* is another way that Israel's calling as a *light to the nations* (Isa. 42:6) is fulfilled in Christ and the Church. Consider Simeon's prophecy regarding Jesus at the temple,

—a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:32).

It seems clear that this is what Jesus had in mind when He said,

³ George Ladd, *The Last Things* (1978), pg. 17.

I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd (Jn. 10:16).

Also critical is Paul's claim to King Agrippa that Messiah's mission was being fulfilled through his ministry:

—that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles (Acts 26:23).

According to Luke and Paul, Israel's divine calling as a *light to the nations* is fulfilled in Christ and His Church. The church has been entrusted with a stewardship to preach the good news of the kingdom (of Israel's God) to the nations. In this way, Christ and the Church fulfill Israel's calling as a light to the nations. Regarding the fulfillment of Israel's purpose in Christ, Sam Storms comments,

Jesus is Israel in the sense that God's purposes, promises, and predictions for the nation are fulfilled in his life, death, resurrection, exaltation, session and second coming. This principle of the consummate fulfillment of the nation's destiny in the person of Christ is necessarily extended to his spiritual body, the Church.⁴

PROMISED LAND

If we follow the New Testament pattern of spiritualizing Israel's identity, prophetic promises and calling and applying them to the Church, it logically follows that the issue of the promised land may also be reinterpreted in light of Christ's Great Commission to the Church as well as the New Earth. In the old covenant, the people of God were a mono-ethnic people group and the promised land was localized. But in the new covenant, True Israel is comprised of people from all nations and the promised land is dramatically extended. In this present age the promised land is realized everywhere disciples of Jesus are made.⁵ In the age to come the promised land is extended to the whole earth.⁶

I realize the above paragraph that spiritualizes the land may ruffle some feathers. Certainly the question of the covenantal claim on the land warrants more than a short paragraph. But that will have to wait for another discussion. This article is simply to articulate the plausibility of the doctrine of supersessionism, not defend it exhaustively. I will note however that a discussion regarding the covenantal claim of the Jewish people on the land will have to determine whether or not unfaithful, unbelieving Israelites have a covenantal claim to covenantal blessings and perhaps more importantly, whether the faithful remnant in Christ—the children of Abraham and heirs of the covenants, promises and the commonwealth of Israel⁷ are the true heirs.

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to represent the plausibility of supersessionism. I urge you now to read Paul's Israelology in Romans 9-11 in light of the New Testament teachings listed above. Consider what Paul is communicating when he says that unbelieving branches have been cut

⁴ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, (2015), pg. 185.

⁵ Matthew 28:18—20.

⁶ Revelation 21:1—3.

off from the olive tree and we Gentiles have been grafted in. Consider who are the people of God? Who is true Israel? Ladd offers a clear conclusion,

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.⁸

My own reading of Paul's Israelology in Romans 9—11 inspires the following convictions. I honor the Jewish people for their historical role in God's redemptive plan (9:4—5); I acknowledge that due to their unbelief they have been cut off from God's olive tree (11:19—20); I affirm that Christ and His Church have superseded Israel as heirs of the kingdom (11:17); I pray earnestly for the prophesied restoration of the Jewish people; and I categorically reject antisemitism, which has no place among the people of God (11:20—21).

Finally, I am open-handed in this reading of scripture. While I find security in knowing this is a historic doctrine of the Church, I am also aware the Church has gotten some things wrong. Consequently, I am actively asking God to correct me in any beliefs that require correction.

Until then, I say:

True Israel is the remnant faithful to YAHWEH. The Church is the only remnant faithful to YAHWEH. Therefore, the Church is True Israel.

⁸ George Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, (1974), pg. 250.