

Michael J. Vlach

The Church as a Replacement of Israel:

An Analysis of Supersessionism

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: DEFINING SUPERSESSIONISM

Many Christians throughout church history have held the view that the New Testament church has permanently replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God. According to Alister E. McGrath, a “wide consensus” existed in the early church that “the church is a spiritual society which replaces Israel as the people of God in the world.”¹ Ronald E. Diprose also notes that this view known as “supersessionism” or “replacement theology” has been “an accepted position of a majority within Christendom from postapostolic times until the middle of the nineteenth century.”²

Purpose

Discussions concerning supersessionism are not new but interest in this issue has increased significantly in recent decades. This can be seen in the number of books and articles that address the relationship between Israel and the church and the traditional view that the church has replaced Israel as God’s people. Yet even with increased interest in this topic, supersessionism has not often received thorough attention as a theological topic in its own right. Most theological dictionaries and systematic theologies do not specifically address it or they treat supersessionism as a subset within discussions of ecclesiology.³ This

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2d. ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 461–62. See also E. Glenn Hinson, *Understanding the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 6; N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 447; Richard B. Hays and Joel B. Green, “The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers,” in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 222.

² Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 32. House says replacement theology has been “the consensus of the church from the middle of the second century A.D. to the present day, with few exceptions.” H. Wayne House, “The Church’s Appropriation of Israel’s Blessings,” in *Israel, the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 77.

³ In research for this work, several theological dictionaries and encyclopedias were examined. None mentioned “supersessionism” or “replacement theology” as a theological category. See Alan Richardson and John Bowden, eds. *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1983); Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds. *Dictionary of Theology*, 2d. ed. (New York:

work, though, intends to make a contribution to theology by addressing supersessionism as its own theological category. This includes a survey of the major historical, theological, biblical, and hermeneutical factors involved with supersessionism.

To summarize, the purpose of this book is to provide a systematic presentation and analysis of supersessionism. It will do so by considering five areas. First, this work will explain the primary introductory issues related to supersessionism. This includes a definition of supersessionism and a survey of how this perspective is related to the various areas of Christian theology. It will also examine the various forms of supersessionism.

Second, this work will offer an overview of supersessionism in church history. This involves a discussion of the origin and development of supersessionism along with a survey of the replacement view from the Patristic Period through the Modern Era.

Third, this work will look at the case for supersessionism. This includes a discussion of the major arguments most often made on behalf of supersessionism. In doing this, statements from leading advocates of the supersessionist view will be presented. Although not all supersessionists are agreed on every biblical text and theological argument, this work will present the hermeneutical and theological arguments most often made on behalf of the supersessionist view.

Fourth, this book will present the case against supersessionism, or put another way, it will look at the case for non-supersessionism. This will include a presentation of the major arguments most often used to support the idea the nation Israel will experience a future restoration and that the church is not identified as Israel. Likewise, not all who promote non-supersessionism are agreed on every biblical text and theological argument, but the arguments pre-

Crossroads, 1981); Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds. *A New Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992); Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds. *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988); F. L. Cross, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); J. D. Douglas, ed. *New 20th Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984); Karl Rahner, ed. *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

sented here are the ones most commonly used to support the non-supersessionist view.

Fifth, this work will present an overall evaluation of supersessionism.⁴ This evaluation will involve a critique of the arguments made for and against supersessionism. In sum, it will try to answer the question posed by Wolfhart Pannenberg: “On a Christian view, does the church replace and crowd out Israel as the people of God? Or from the standpoint of Christian faith, does Israel continue to be God’s chosen people alongside the church?”⁵

Many works have promoted supersessionist and non-supersessionist perspectives,⁶ but this book is unique in that compiles and evaluates the most important theological arguments on both sides of the debate, as no existing work has yet done. Thus, the reader will become aware of how both supersessionism and non-supersessionism have been presented and defended.

In the end, though, we will go beyond just a presentation of both positions. We will also offer our own evaluation as to which view is more correct. To summarize, while supersessionists have correctly identified significant points of continuity between Israel and the church, this work will argue that the

⁴ In doing this, we affirm the unity of Scripture. Thus, Scripture, when properly understood, cannot be said to simultaneously affirm supersessionism and reject supersessionism. This does not mean that there are no tensions in regard to this issue or that there are no complexities that hinder a complete understanding of supersessionism, but mutually exclusive assertions within Scripture on this issue are not accepted. For example, we disagree with Bruner’s statement: “We find ourselves with two major Israelologies in the New Testament: no hope for Israel (Matthew), hope for Israel (Paul).” Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 835.

⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 469.

⁶ Works that promote a supersessionist perspective include: Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983); Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979); Raymond O. Zorn, *Christ Triumphant: Biblical Perspectives on His Church and Kingdom* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997); O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2000). Works that openly promote a non-supersessionist approach include: Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*; R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); David Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles and the Church: A New Perspective on History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1995); House, *Israel, the Land and the People*.

biblical witness does not support the supersessionist view that the church is the new Israel that permanently supersedes national Israel as the people of God.

Before beginning this evaluation of supersessionism, though, one point of clarification is necessary. Although much recent discussion concerning supersessionism has centered on the issue of Christian anti-Semitism,⁷ this work will not focus on anti-Semitism or assume that there is an inherent connection between the doctrine of supersessionism and anti-Semitism. Undoubtedly, many Christian leaders in church history were anti-Semitic, and anti-Semitism has often gone hand-in-hand with replacement theology. The close connection between the two cannot be ignored. But some have affirmed supersessionism, not because they were anti-Semitic, but because they believed it to be consistent with the biblical witness.⁸ Thus, while acknowledging the influence of anti-Semitism upon supersessionism, this work will focus primarily on the hermeneutical and theological arguments most associated with the supersessionist position.

Importance of Supersessionism to Theology

In recent years, a greater awareness of the relationship between supersessionism and the major categories of Christian theology has developed. R. Kendall Soulen, for example, points out that current perceptions toward supersessionism are “fraught with profound implications for the whole range of Christian theological reflection.”⁹ Craig A. Blaising asserts that issues related to supersessionism affect the doctrines of God, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology,

⁷ Rosemary Ruether, for example, has argued that anti-Semitism is at the heart of the Christian message and that to be a Christian is to be anti-Semitic. See Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974). See also Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

⁸ Woudstra writes, “The idea of the church replacing Israel is not to be understood as a form of advanced anti-Semitism, as is done by some.” Marten H. Woudstra, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 237.

⁹ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), x.

gy, and eschatology.¹⁰ Although it is beyond the purpose of this work to examine fully how supersessionism relates to all aspects of Christian theology, a brief sketch of this relationship will highlight the importance of the supersessionist view to theology.

Doctrine of God

Supersessionism has implications for the doctrine of God because God is described in Scripture as “the God of Israel” and the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”¹¹ What do these titles mean and what are their implications for national Israel and the church? Clark M. Williamson tries to make a connection between supersessionism and the doctrine of God when he claims that supersessionism has led the church to an idea of God that is closer to Greek thought than to the biblical concept of God: “Because the Christian tradition de-Judaized itself and interpreted itself as both anti- and better-than Jewish, its classical doctrine of God tells us more about pre-Christian, Greek understandings of God than about the living, covenantal God of the Bible.”¹²

Christology

Supersessionism is important to Christology since it affects the significance given to Jesus’ Jewishness and the Jewish titles he carried such as “Messiah” and “Son of David.” Blaising, for instance, believes that supersessionism has not given proper significance to the Jewishness of Jesus:

One of the most obvious effects of supersessionism in traditional Christology is the effacement of the Jewishness of Jesus from Christian confession. It is remarkable that the great creeds and confessions of the faith are silent on this point, being satisfied simply with the affirmation of Christ’s humanity. However, in Scripture, not only the

¹⁰ Craig A. Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44:3 (2001): 443–50.

¹¹ Williamson writes, “The God of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel, of Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, David. Because the Father of Jesus Christ is the God of Israel, Israel is connected with our faith in God; the connection with the people Israel is part of the church’s proclamation of its faith in God. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms the identity of the God of the church with the God of Israel.” Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel*, 44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 202–03.

Jewishness of Jesus, but his Davidic lineage are central features of the gospel.¹³

Others, too, have linked Christology to supersessionism. According to Williamson, “Jesus Christ is . . . the ‘hinge’ upon which the replacement of Jews with Gentile Christians turns.”¹⁴ James Carroll asserts that, “A new Christology, faithfully based in the Scriptures . . . will in no way support supersessionism.”¹⁵ These statements by Blaising, Williamson, and Carroll, regardless of their accuracy, highlight the importance of supersessionism to the doctrine of Christology.

Soteriology

In the last century, several churches and denominations have reacted strongly against supersessionism. This reaction has implications for the doctrine of soteriology. Some Christians, in their opposition to supersessionism, have asserted that Jews can be in a right relationship with the God of Israel without placing their faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, some Christians have adopted what is known as “two-covenant theology.” According to this perspective, ethnic Jews are redeemed through their faithfulness to Torah while the mostly Gentile church is accepted by God on the basis of Jesus Christ’s redeeming work.¹⁶ Eric Gritsch, for example, in a publication of the Lutheran Council in the USA, states that there is no longer any need for a Christian mission to Jews:

There really is no need for any Christian mission to the Jews. They are and remain the people of God, even if they do not accept Jesus Christ as their Messiah. Why this is so only God knows. Christians should concentrate their missionary activities on those who do not yet belong to the people of God, and they should court them with a holistic witness in word and deed rather than with polemical argument and

¹³ Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” 445.

¹⁴ Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel*, 168.

¹⁵ James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 587. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 28–37.

¹⁶ For a detailed explanation of two-covenant theology see Michael G. Vanlaningham, “Christ, the Savior of Israel: The ‘Sonderweg’ and Bi-covenantal Controversies in Relation to the Epistles of Paul” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1997).

cultural legislation. The long history of Christian anti-Semitism calls for repentance, not triumphalist claims of spiritual superiority.¹⁷

In this case, a particular reaction against supersessionism has a bearing on the issue of Christian particularity and what Jews must believe to have a relationship with God.

Ecclesiology

Supersessionism has an important connection to ecclesiology¹⁸ because it affects how one views the identity of the church and its members. Supersessionists assert that the church is now the true Israel and that its members are the true Jews. Supersessionists also view the church as completely fulfilling God's covenants originally made with national Israel. In addition, supersessionism influences how one views the role and mission of the church. According to Edmund P. Clowney, who holds a supersessionist perspective, "This understanding of the church as the new and true Israel in Christ must inspire our mission in the contemporary world."¹⁹

Eschatology

Along with ecclesiology, eschatology is the area of doctrine most closely related to supersessionism. With supersessionism there is no expectation concerning a future restoration of national Israel. Thus, there is to be no unique identity for the nation, no temple, and no special role of service for Israel to the nations. Instead, many of the Old Testament expectations are fulfilled spiritually in the church.

Blaising argues that supersessionism fits "hand in hand" with a "spiritual-vision eschatology" in which "earthly life" is viewed "as a symbol of spiritual realities."²⁰ Because a literal restoration of national Israel "would demand a national and political reality in the eschaton" supersessionism coincides with the spiritual-vision eschatology model in "denying a future for

¹⁷ Eric W. Gritsch, "Luther and the Jews: Toward a Judgment of History," in *Luther and the Jews* (n.p.: Lutheran Council in the USA, 1995), 9.

¹⁸ Diprose views supersessionism as being especially relevant to the areas of ecclesiology and eschatology. See Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 4.

¹⁹ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*. Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 163.

²⁰ Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," 448–49.

Israel.”²¹ The spiritual vision eschatology model, according to Blaising, is contrasted with “new creation eschatology” in which the physical aspects of the eschaton are given more consideration.²² Those who hold to this latter eschatological model are more likely to posit a future for national Israel.

Recent Events

Issues related to supersessionism have become even more significant in light of events of the last century. The Holocaust, the establishment of the modern state of Israel, and controversies in the Middle East have pushed questions and issues concerning supersessionism to the forefront of theological discussions. Commenting on the significance of the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel, Soulen states, “Under the new conditions created by these events, Christian churches have begun to consider anew their relation to the God of Israel and the Israel of God in the light of the Scriptures and the gospel about Jesus.”²³ This consideration includes a “revisiting [of] the teaching of supersessionism after nearly two thousand years.”²⁴

The acceptance or rejection of supersessionism may also influence how one views the modern state of Israel and events in the Middle East. Timothy P. Weber, for example, has attempted to show how evangelical dispensationalists, who reject supersessionism, have had a significant impact on how many Americans view Israel.²⁵ These dispensationalists, who believe Israel will one day believe in Jesus Christ and possess the land of Palestine, have offered significant moral and financial support to Israel. In return, significant Israeli leaders have embraced the support of evangelical dispensationalists.²⁶ According to Weber, “The close tie between evangelicals and Israel is impor-

21 Ibid., 449.

22 Ibid.

23 Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, x.

24 Ibid.

25 Timothy P. Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” *Christianity Today* (October 5, 1998): 39–49.

26 Weber gives the example of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaking to the Voices United for Israel Conference in Washington D.C. in April of 1998. Most of the three thousand attendees at the conference were evangelical dispensationalists. According to Weber, Netanyahu stated, “We have no greater friends and allies than the people sitting in this room.” Weber, “How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend,” 39.

tant: it has shaped popular opinion in America and, to some extent, U.S. foreign policy.”²⁷

Defining Supersessionism

So far we have discussed the relationship of supersessionism to the various areas of theology. In this section we will attempt a precise definition of supersessionism. Various titles have been used in identifying the view that the church has permanently replaced Israel in God’s plan. As Woudstra observes, “The question whether it is more proper to speak of a replacement of the Jews by the Christian church or of an extension (continuation) of the OT people of God into that of the NT church is variously answered.”²⁸ The most common designation used in recent scholarly literature to identify this position is “supersessionism.” Commenting on this term, Williamson writes, “‘Supersessionism’ comes from two Latin words: *super* (on or upon) and *sedere* (to sit), as when one person sits on the chair of another, displacing the latter.”²⁹ In addition, the title “replacement theology” is often viewed as a synonym for “supersessionism.”³⁰

Several theologians have offered definitions of “supersessionism” or “replacement theology.” According to Walter C. Kaiser, “Replacement theology . . . declared that the Church, Abraham’s spiritual seed, had replaced national Israel in that it had transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant

27 Ibid.

28 Woudstra, “Israel and the Church,” 237. Woudstra believes that the terms, “replacement,” and “continuation” are both acceptable and consistent with biblical teaching. See also G. B. Caird, *New Testament Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 55.

29 Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel*, 268, n. 9.

30 Diprose views the titles “replacement theology” and “supersessionism” as being synonymous. He also notes that the title “replacement theology” is a “relatively new term in Christian theology.” Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 31, n. 2. In this present work, we will use the titles “supersessionism” and “replacement theology” as synonyms. We acknowledge, though, that these designations may not be entirely satisfactory to those who view the church more as the *continuation* or *fulfillment* of national Israel. See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 333–34; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 1058–59.

given to Israel, which covenant Israel had lost because of disobedience.”³¹ Diprose defines replacement theology as the view that “the Church completely and permanently replaced ethnic Israel in the working out of God’s plan and as recipient of Old Testament promises to Israel.”³² Soulen argues that supersessionism is linked with how some view the coming of Jesus Christ: “According to this teaching [supersessionism], God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.”³³ Herman Ridderbos asserts that there is a positive and negative element to the supersessionist view: “On the one hand, in a positive sense it presupposes that the church springs from, is born out of Israel; on the other hand, the church takes the place of Israel as the historical people of God.”³⁴

These definitions from Kaiser, Diprose, Soulen, and Ridderbos appear consistent with the statements of those who explicitly declare that the church is the replacement of Israel. Bruce K. Waltke, for instance, declares 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.”³⁵ According to Hans K. LaRondelle, the New Testament affirms that “Israel would no longer be the people of God and would be *replaced* by a people that would accept the Messiah and His message of the kingdom of God.”³⁶ LaRondelle believes this “people” is the church who replaces “the Christ-rejecting nation.”³⁷ Loraine Boettner, too, writes, “It may seem harsh to say that ‘God is done with the Jews.’ But the fact of the matter is that He is through with them as a unified national group having anything more to do with the evangelization of the

31 Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “An Assessment of ‘Replacement Theology’: The Relationship Between the Israel of the Abrahamic–Davidic Covenant and the Christian Church,” *Mishkan* 21 (1994): 9.

32 Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 2.

33 Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 1–2.

34 Ridderbos, *Paul*, 333–34.

35 Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 274. He also states, “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” (275). Emphasis in original.

36 LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy*, 101. Emphasis in original.

37 *Ibid.*

world. That mission has been taken from them and given to the Christian Church (Matt. 21:43).”³⁸

When comparing the definitions of Kaiser, Diprose, Soulen, and Ridderbos with the statements of those who openly promote a replacement view, it appears that supersessionism is based on two core beliefs: (1) national Israel has somehow completed or forfeited its status as the people of God and will never again possess a unique role or function apart from the church; and (2) the church is now the true Israel that has permanently replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God. Supersessionism, then, in the context of Israel and the church, is the view that *the New Testament church is the new Israel that has forever superseded national Israel as the people of God*. The result is that the church has become the sole inheritor of God’s covenant blessings originally promised to national Israel in the Old Testament. This rules out any future restoration of national Israel or any idea that Israel can still possess a unique identity or function in the plan of God.

Variations within Supersessionism

While all supersessionists affirm that the church has permanently superseded national Israel as the people of God, there are variations within supersessionism. Three major forms of supersessionism are punitive supersessionism, economic supersessionism, and structural supersessionism.

Punitive Supersessionism

“Punitive” or “retributive” supersessionism emphasizes Israel’s *disobedience* and *punishment* by God as the reason for its displacement as the people of God. As Gabriel J. Fackre explains, this form of supersessionism “holds that the rejection of Christ both eliminates Israel from God’s covenant love and provokes divine retribution.”³⁹ With punitive supersessionism, according to Soulen, “God abrogates God’s covenant with Israel . . . on account of Israel’s

³⁸ Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1957), 89–90. According to Bright, “The New Testament triumphantly hails the Church as Israel . . . the true heir of Israel’s hope.” John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), 226.

³⁹ Gabriel J. Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 148.

rejection of Christ and the gospel.”⁴⁰ Because the Jews reject Christ, “God in turn angrily rejects and punishes the Jews.”⁴¹

Belief in punitive supersessionism was common in the Patristic Era. Hippolytus (c. 205), for example, promoted punitive supersessionism when he declared:

And surely you [the Jews] have been darkened in the eyes of your soul with a darkness utter and everlasting. . . . Furthermore, hear this yet more serious word: “And their back do you bend always.” This means, in order that they may be slaves to the nations, not four hundred and thirty years as in Egypt, nor seventy as in Babylon, but bend them to servitude, he says, “always.”⁴²

Origen (c. 185–254), too, espoused a form of punitive supersessionism: “And we say with confidence that they [the Jews] will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind. . . .”⁴³ Lactantius (c. 304–313) also asserted that the Jews were abandoned by God because of their disobedience:

For unless they [the Jews] did this [repent], and laying aside their vanities, return to their God, it would come to pass that He would change His covenant, that is, bestow the inheritance of eternal life upon foreign nations, and collect to Himself a more faithful people out of those who were aliens by birth. . . . On account of these impieties of theirs He cast them off forever.⁴⁴

Punitive supersessionism was also held by Martin Luther. For him, the destruction of Jerusalem was proof of God’s permanent rejection of Israel:

“Listen, Jew, are you aware that Jerusalem and your sovereignty, together with your temple and priesthood, have been destroyed for over 1,460 years?”. . . For such ruthless wrath of God is sufficient evidence

⁴⁰ Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 30.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hippolytus, *Treatise Against the Jews* 6, ANF 5.220.

⁴³ Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.22, ANF 4.506.

⁴⁴ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 4.11, ANF 7.109.

that they assuredly have erred and gone astray. . . . Therefore this work of wrath is proof that the Jews, surely rejected by God, are no longer his people, and neither is he any longer their God.⁴⁵

Economic Supersessionism

A second form of supersessionism is economic supersessionism. According to Soulen, economic supersessionism is the view that “carnal Israel’s history is providentially ordered from the outset to be taken up into the spiritual church.”⁴⁶ With this form of supersessionism, national Israel corresponds to Christ’s church in a merely prefigurative and carnal way. Thus, Christ, with His advent, “brings about the obsolescence of carnal Israel and inaugurates the age of the spiritual church.”⁴⁷ With economic supersessionism, Israel is not replaced primarily because of its disobedience but rather because its role in the history of redemption expired with the coming of Jesus. It is now superseded by the arrival of a new spiritual Israel—the Christian church.

Allegedly, the key figure in bringing about this expiration of national Israel’s role in redemptive history is Jesus Christ. According to Rudolf Bultmann, “The new *aeon* has dawned in the Christ-event.”⁴⁸ As a result, “The people of God, the true Israel, is present in the Christian community.”⁴⁹ Because of this “Christ-event,” the people of God is no longer an “empirical historical entity.”⁵⁰

Economic supersessionism, according to Soulen, “logically entails the ontological, historical, and moral obsolescence of Israel’s existence after Christ.”⁵¹ With his coming, Jesus, the ultimate Israelite, fulfills all God’s plans and

45 Martin Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” in *LW* 47:138–39. See also *WA* 53:418.

46 Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 181, n. 6.

47 *Ibid.*, 29.

48 Rudolf Bultmann, “Prophecy and Fulfillment,” in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. James C. G. Greig (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1969), 71.

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 Soulen, 30. Dubois writes, “Now that the messiah has come, the church—*versus Israel*—has taken the place of the ‘old’ Israel and the Jewish people no longer has any reason to occupy the historic land of Israel.” Marcel J. Dubois, “Israel and Christian Self-Understanding,” in *Voices From Jerusalem: Jews and Christians Reflect on the Holy Land*, eds. David Burrell and Yehzekel Landau (New York: Paulist, 1992), 65. Emphasis in original.

promises regarding Israel. All those who are in Jesus, then, are the true Israel. This is the approach of Vern S. Poythress:

Because Christ is an Israelite and Christians are in union with Christ, Christians partake of the benefits promised to Israel and Judah in Jeremiah. With whom is the new covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite. Thus one might say that Israel and Judah themselves undergo a transformation at the first coming of Christ, because Christ is the final, supremely faithful Israelite. Around him all true Israel gathers.⁵²

Several early church fathers espoused economic supersessionism.⁵³ Melito of Sardis, for example, declared: “The people [Israel] was precious before the church arose, and the law was marvelous before the gospel was elucidated. But when the church arose and the gospel took precedence the model was made void, conceding its power to the reality The people was made void when the church arose.”⁵⁴ A more recent advocate of economic supersessionism is Karl Barth.⁵⁵ He stated:

The first Israel, constituted on the basis of physical descent from Abraham, has fulfilled its mission now that the Saviour of the world has sprung from it and its Messiah has appeared. Its members can only accept this fact with gratitude, and in confirmation of their own deepest election and calling attach themselves to the people of this Sa-

⁵² Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2d. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 106. See also John W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1972), 106–07.

⁵³ Pelikan points out that Genesis 49:10 was sometimes used by the early fathers as evidence that the “historic mission of Israel” came to an “end with the coming of Jesus.” Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (100–600), vol. 1, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 56; Cf. Justin, *First Apology* 32, *ANF* 1:173.

⁵⁴ Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. S. G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 21.
⁵⁵ According to Soulen, “Barth’s theology of consummation embodies the logic of economic supersessionism as clearly as any in the history of the church. The incarnation brings Israel’s history to a conclusion in principle, after which Israel’s sole legitimate destiny is to be absorbed into the spiritual church.” Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 92–93.

viour, their own King, whose members the Gentiles are now called to be as well. Its mission as a natural community has now run its course and cannot be continued or repeated.⁵⁶

In line with an economic supersessionist viewpoint, N. T. Wright asserts that “Israel’s purpose had come to its head in Jesus’ work.”⁵⁷ As a result “Those who now belonged to Jesus’ people . . . claimed to be the *continuation of Israel in a new situation*.”⁵⁸ Wright also argues that, “Jesus intended those who responded to him to see themselves as the true, restored Israel.”⁵⁹

Structural Supersessionism

Soulen argues that there is a third form of supersessionism—*structural supersessionism*. This is a deeper form of supersessionism than both the punitive and economic positions, he claims, because it involves how the unity of the Christian canon has been understood:

The problem of supersessionism in Christian theology goes beyond the explicit teaching that the church has displaced Israel as God’s people in the economy of salvation. At a deeper level, the problem of supersessionism coincides with the way in which Christians have traditionally understood the theological and narrative unity of the Christian canon as a whole.⁶⁰

Whereas punitive and economic supersessionism are “explicit doctrinal perspectives,” structural supersessionism is more of a hermeneutical approach that concerns how the standard canonical narrative as a whole has been perceived.⁶¹ According to Soulen, “Structural supersessionism refers to the narrative logic of the standard model whereby it renders the Hebrew Scriptures largely indecisive for shaping Christian convictions about how God’s works as

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *CD III/2*, 584.

⁵⁷ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 457.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Emphasis in original. According to Wright, these who make up the redefined Israel were able to draw upon Israel’s images, read Israel’s Scriptures and “fulfil Israel’s vocation on behalf of the world” (457–58).

⁵⁹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 316. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 33.

⁶¹ Ibid., 181, n. 6.

Consummator and as Redeemer engage humankind in universal and enduring ways.”⁶²

Soulen argues that the standard canonical narrative model, which the church has accepted since Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, turns on four key episodes: (1) God’s intention to create the first parents; (2) the fall; (3) Christ’s incarnation and the inauguration of the church; and (4) the final consummation.⁶³ He says two facts stand out from the narrative content of this standard model.

First, the foreground of this standard model emphasizes God’s engagement with human creation in “cosmic and universal terms.”⁶⁴ Second, the foreground of this model “completely neglects the Hebrew Scriptures with the exception of Genesis 1–3!”⁶⁵ The standard model tells how God engaged Adam and Eve as Consummator and how God’s consummating plan for them was disrupted at the fall. The story, however, then “leaps to the Apostolic Witness” and the “deliverance of humankind from the fall through Jesus Christ.”⁶⁶ Thus, according to Soulen, God’s purposes as Consummator and Redeemer “engage human creation in a manner that simply outflank the greater part of the Hebrew Scriptures and, above all, their witness to God’s history with the people of Israel.”⁶⁷ What is the result of this leap over the Hebrew Scriptures? God’s identity as the God of Israel and his history with the Jewish people “become largely indecisive for the Christian conception of God.”⁶⁸

Soulen’s assertion that the church fathers completely neglected the vast majority of the Old Testament witness may be an overstatement. The church fathers did indeed grapple with the Old Testament on many occasions and the fathers, at times, linked a future for Israel with Old Testament promises. Yet Soulen may be correct that there is a lack of treatment from the fathers concerning national Israel’s role in God’s plan as explained in the Old Testament. According to Blaising, the “structural nature of supersessionism” has established “the deep set tradition of excluding ethnic, national Israel from the theological reading of Scripture.”⁶⁹

62 Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 181, n. 6.

63 *Ibid.*, 31.

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*, 32.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Ibid.*, 33.

69 Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” 442.

Variations on the Future of Israel

In light of the previous discussion concerning the variations of supersessionism, it might seem natural to assume that supersessionism always leads to the view that Israel and the Jews have absolutely no future whatsoever in the plan of God. While some hold to a stronger form of supersessionism in which no special significance at all is granted to ethnic Jews or Israel as a nation, not all supersessionists affirm a stronger form of supersessionism. Some supersessionists, while holding that the church is the new Israel that supersedes national Israel, assert that ethnic Israel, in some sense, still has a special place and future hope in God's plan.⁷⁰ While not asserting that there will be a restoration of national Israel, these moderate supersessionists hold that there is still a special place for ethnic Jews or national Israel in God's program.⁷¹

Ridderbos, for instance, believes there is "tension-filled unity" concerning Israel's rejection and its election.⁷² He asserts that, "the church takes the place of Israel as the historical people of God."⁷³ For him, "This means a new definition of the people of God, and likewise a new concept of Israel."⁷⁴ This belief, though, does not lead him to conclude that the historical people of Israel have permanently lost their role in the history of redemption.⁷⁵ For Ridderbos, the historical bond between God and Israel continues to be maintained with real significance: "Thus, on one hand Paul is able to see the church of the gentiles as endowed with all the privileges and blessings of Israel, and to see it occupy the place of unbelieving Israel, and yet on the other hand to uphold to the full the continuation of God's original redemptive intentions with Israel as the historical people of God."⁷⁶ According to Ridderbos, this tension regarding

⁷⁰ We are not asserting that these supersessionists are all agreed concerning the details of national Israel's future or that all would describe Israel's hope in the same manner.

⁷¹ The key dividing line between supersessionism and the main form of non-supersessionism discussed in this dissertation is the issue of "restoration." Non-supersessionists hold to both a national salvation and restoration of national Israel. While moderate forms of supersessionism affirm a national *salvation* of Israel, they do not affirm a *restoration* of national Israel. Thus, both strong and moderate forms of supersessionism agree there will be no future restoration of Israel.

⁷² Ridderbos, *Paul*, 356.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 333–34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 334.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 360–61.

Israel's rejection and election is not inconsistent: "There is therefore no contradiction between the definition of the essence of the New Testament church as the people of God and holding to Israel as the object of God's irrevocable gift of grace and calling."⁷⁷

This dialectical approach concerning Israel's acceptance and rejection is found often in church history. Tertullian, for example, declared that the church had overcome Israel as the people of God and that Israel had been "divorced" by God.⁷⁸ Yet he also encouraged Christians to "rejoice" at the coming "restoration of Israel."⁷⁹

John Y. B. Hood asserts that there was a "dualistic view" concerning the fate of the Jews among theologians of the Middle Ages.⁸⁰ According to Hood, "Medieval Christians believed Jews would eventually accept Christ and be saved, but they also saw them as dangerous infidels who had been rejected and punished by God."⁸¹ Hood notes that Thomas Aquinas, like other medieval theologians of his day, accepted the supersessionism theory as a "given," yet Aquinas also held to a future salvation of the Jews.⁸² Aquinas attempted to deal with the "dualities" of this view. As Hood states, "He [Aquinas] made an effort to explain how it was possible for Jews to be at the same time chosen *and* rejected, ignorant *and* malicious Christ-killers, damned *and* destined for salvation."⁸³

John Calvin's views on Israel also appear to evidence a rejection/acceptance tension. According to Willem VanGemerem, "Some have seen the utter rejection of Israel in Calvin's writing, whereas others have also viewed the hope for national Israel."⁸⁴ Williamson, for example, believes there

⁷⁷ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 360.

⁷⁸ Tertullian, *PL* 2:598.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:996.

⁸⁰ John Y. B. Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), xii.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Aquinas believed in a future conversion of the Jews based on Romans 11. See Thomas Aquinas, *Sancti Thomae de Aquino Super Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos lectura*, 11.4 <<http://www.unav.es/filosofia/alarcon/cro05.html>> (Accessed on January 26, 2004). Especially significant is the statement in which Aquinas asserted that Paul believed all Jews will be saved in a general sense.

⁸³ Hood, *Aquinas and the Jews*, xii. Emphases in original.

⁸⁴ Willem VanGemerem, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 45:1 (1983): 142.

is a tension in Calvin's writings on this issue when he states, "On the one hand, Calvin strongly insisted that God's promise to and covenant with the people Israel was unconditional, unbreakable, and gracious. . . . On the other hand, Calvin often makes statements exactly opposing the above."⁸⁵

At times, Calvin made statements consistent with supersessionism. For him, the "all Israel" who will be saved in Rom 11:26 is a reference to the church composed of Jews and Gentiles.⁸⁶ He also took the interpretation that the "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16 refers to "all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, who were united into one church."⁸⁷ At other times, though, Calvin made statements that seem to indicate he believed in some form of a future for the Jewish people. For example, in his commentary on Isa 59:20, he stated:

Paul quotes this passage, (Rom. xi. 26,) in order to shew that there is still some remaining hope among the Jews; although from their unconquerable obstinacy it might be inferred that they were altogether cast off and doomed to eternal death. But because God is continually mindful of his covenant, and "his gifts and calling are without repentance," (Rom. xi. 29,) Paul justly concludes that it is impossible that there shall not at length be some remnant that come to Christ, and obtain that salvation which he has procured. Thus the Jews must at length be collected along with the Gentiles that out of both "there may be one fold" under Christ. (John x. 16). . . . Hence we have said that Paul infers that he [Christ] could not be the redeemer of the world, without belonging to some Jews, whose fathers he had chosen, and to whom this promise was directly addressed.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel*, 131.

⁸⁶ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 255.

⁸⁷ John Calvin, "Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians," *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 21, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–56; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 186.

⁸⁸ John Calvin, "Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah," in *Calvin's Commentaries*, 8:269.

More recently, a dualistic view of Israel can be found in the writings of George Ladd. Ladd asserts that the church is now the new “spiritual Israel.”⁸⁹ Yet he also believes, “The New Testament clearly affirms the salvation of literal Israel.”⁹⁰ He bases this conclusion on his study of Romans 11. Commenting on Rom 11:26 and its statement that “all Israel will be saved,” Ladd declares, “It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this means literal Israel.”⁹¹ Millard Erickson, too, holds that the church is the new Israel, yet he also believes in a salvation of national Israel: “To sum up then: the church is the new Israel. It occupies the place in the new covenant that Israel occupied in the old. . . . There is a special future coming for national Israel, however, through large-scale conversion to Christ and entry into the church.”⁹² He also says, “There is, however, a future for national Israel. They are still the special people of God.”⁹³

Wayne Grudem, in his discussion of Israel and the church, espouses a supersessionist view when he states that “many New Testament verses . . . understand the church as the ‘new Israel’ or new ‘people of God.’”⁹⁴ Yet he also declares that the Jews have a future in the plan of God: “I affirm the conviction that Rom. 9–11 teaches a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people.”⁹⁵ Karl Rahner says Israel still possesses some role in salvation history: “The church is made up of Jews and pagans. . . . But the unfinished role of Israel in salvation history is also recognized (cf. Rom. 9–11).”⁹⁶

As these quotations show, it is possible to believe that the church is the new Israel while still holding to a large-scale conversion of the Jews. This salvation, though, is usually viewed as being in conjunction with an incorporation into the Christian church. While affirming a future salvation of the Jews,

⁸⁹ George Eldon Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), 25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1053.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 861.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 861, n. 17.

⁹⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 338.

supersessionists do not see this salvation as inferring any special role for Israel apart from the church. As Erickson explains:

In Romans 9 and Galatians 3, for example, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Paul regarded the church, Jew and Gentile alike, as the true heir to the promises originally made to national Israel. It does appear that there will be a period of special favor toward the Jews and that they will in large numbers turn to God. It seems likely, however, that this will be brought about through their being converted and integrated into the church rather than through God resuming the relationship He had with them, as the chosen or covenant nation, in the Old Testament.⁹⁷

So in addition to affirming the existence of three variations of supersessionism—punitive, economic, and structural—it is also valid to affirm that there are various degrees of supersessionism. A stronger form of supersessionism holds that there is no special future whatsoever for national Israel or ethnic Jews as a group. A milder or more moderate form of supersessionism holds that the church supersedes national Israel as the people of God, but it also asserts that there may be a future *en masse* salvation of Jews into the Christian church.

Distinction Between Supersessionism and Non-supersessionism

Much of this chapter has been devoted to defining and describing supersessionism. Yet supersessionism must also be understood in light of its theological opposite—non-supersessionism. Non-supersessionism, in regard to the relationship between the church and Israel, is the view that Israel, as a nation, still maintains a unique identity and role in the plan of God that is in some ways distinct from the church. Although God is at work in the mostly Gentile church, national Israel still has a special place in God's program; its role has not been superseded by the church. Some non-supersessionists hold that ethnic Jews are currently in a saving relationship with God based on their relationship to the Torah. Other non-supersessionists hold that Israel will be saved and restored as a nation in connection with the return of Jesus Christ. Important to this latter form of non-supersessionism, which this work will primarily focus on, is the belief that national Israel will undergo not only a national salvation, but

⁹⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 123–24.

also a national restoration.⁹⁸ This restoration includes the idea that national Israel will once again have a special identity and function in the plan of God that goes beyond incorporation into the mostly Gentile church. At a minimum, this restoration appears to involve a literal, physical possession of Israel's promised land and a special place of service for Israel among the nations.⁹⁹ It is this belief in a restoration of national Israel that distinguishes non-supersessionism from all forms of supersessionism.

Conclusion

Supersessionism is the view that the church is the new Israel that supersedes national Israel as the people of God. Issues related to this perspective affect views concerning the doctrines of God, Christology, soteriology, and especially ecclesiology and eschatology.

Supersessionism exists in three main forms. First, punitive supersessionism asserts that national Israel has been permanently rejected as the people of God and replaced by the church because of its disobedience. Second, economic supersessionism stresses the Christ-event as the main reason for the cessation of national Israel's role in the plan of God. Third, structural supersessionism refers to the narrative logic whereby the Hebrew Scriptures are viewed as being indecisive for shaping Christian convictions about how God's works as consummator and redeemer engage humankind in universal and enduring ways.

Variations also exist within supersessionism concerning the future of Israel in God's plan. Stronger forms of supersessionism assert that there will be no large-scale conversion of the Jews. Milder forms of supersessionism hold that there may be a large-scale salvation of the Jews at the time of Christ's return. Both sides agree, though, that the church is now "Israel" and that Israel will not be restored as a nation.

Lastly, the theological opposite of supersessionism is non-supersessionism. Non-supersessionism asserts that national Israel still has a special identity and role in the program of God. Non-supersessionism holds

⁹⁸ Fruchtenbaum makes this distinction between a national "salvation" and "restoration" of Israel. See Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel, 1989), 119–21.

⁹⁹ Some would say the restoration of Israel also includes a rebuilt Jewish Temple. The idea of Jewish restoration usually does not include the ideas that the Jews, as a race, are superior to others or that the Jews will receive spiritual blessings that are not accessible to believing Gentiles.

that the church is not identified as Israel and that Israel will undergo a national restoration that involves a physical possession of Israel's land and a special role of service for Israel among the nations.