



Is the Church the new Israel?



**An indepth look into replacement
theology.**

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The idea that the Church is the “new” Israel is by no means a modern phenomenon, but it has recently made a comeback, particularly in “Restorationist” circles. The doctrine is usually called “Replacement Theology”, and means that the Church has finally and forever replaced Israel in the purposes of God.

Our purpose in these pages is to define what the Replacement Doctrine actually says, and to ask whether it is in fact true to the teaching of scripture. We shall ask, and seek to answer, the questions: “Do the Jewish people as such still have any significant place in the plan of God?” “Do God’s territorial promises to Israel still stand?” and “Does the modern State of Israel have prophetic significance, or is it an historic accident?”

Extreme Views of Some Christians

At the start, let it be said that the extreme views of some Christian “Israel fanatics” may have provoked understandable cynicism in some Christian quarters. This booklet does not seek to argue an extreme case, such as that Jews do not need to repent and turn to Jesus their Messiah, or that the policies of the modern State of Israel are always right. We are setting out to explore what the Bible actually teaches concerning Israel.

A short definition of the Replacement Doctrine

1. Israel has been replaced by the Christian Church in the purposes of God, or, more precisely, the Church is the historic continuation of Israel.
2. The Jewish people are therefore no longer “Israel”. They are just another people group, like all other nations and religions, who need, and can receive, salvation in Jesus Christ.
3. Apart from salvation, and incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Jews have no future, no hope, and no calling.
4. Since Pentecost, Israel, properly so-called IS the Church.

How the Replacement Theologians argue their case

1. To be a son of Abraham is to have faith in Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:29 shows that sonship of Abraham is seen in spiritual, not national terms.
2. The promise of Canaan to Abraham was only a “starter”. The real promised land is the whole world (Romans 4:13). It will be the Church that inherits the world.
3. The nation of Israel was only the seed of the future church which would arise, incorporating people of all nations (Malachi 1:11)

4. Jesus taught that the Jews would lose their spiritual privileges, and be replaced by another people (Matthew 21:43). The question raised by the apostles in Acts 1:6, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” is ignored by Jesus as unworthy of comment.
5. A true Jew is anyone born of the Spirit, whether he is racially Gentile or Jewish (Romans 2:28-29).
6. Paul shows that the Church was really the same “olive tree” as was Israel. Therefore to distinguish between Israel and the Church is, strictly speaking, false. Indeed, people of Jewish origin need to be grafted back into the Church (Romans 11:17-23).
7. All the Old Testament promises made to Israel, unless they were historically fulfilled before the first coming of Christ, are now the property of the Christian Church. They are not to be interpreted carnally and literally, but spiritually and symbolically. Therefore OT references to Israel, Jerusalem, Zion, and the Temple, when they are predictive, refer to the Church (2 Cor. 1:20). In the NT all these things are understood spiritually (see Galatians 4:21-26; 6:16; Eph 2:19-22; Hebrews 12:22).

The Attractions of Replacement Theology

1. It is historically well rooted in the Church (Church Fathers, Luther, the Reformers).
2. It has an intellectual appeal, because it does not require literal interpretation of the Bible.
3. It has a freshness appeal, because it goes along with a view of the “Last Things” that cuts across dispensationalist teachings current in the Church, represented inter alia by the Scofield Bible, which many believers had become disenchanted with.
4. It appeals to that side of human character, which has difficulty in acceding to the election of others.

Having stated the case, which the Replacement teachers would put forward, let us now consider how other Christians, who believe that the Jews are still special to God, would argue their case.

A General Statement

1. To be a son of Abraham is open to all by faith, but physical sonship still exists. Israel (the Jews), have and will have an important place in the purposes of God.
 2. By no means is it true that every Israelite has been, is, or shall be, saved.
3. Unlike any other nation, Israel has been chosen by God for his purposes of redemption for the whole world.

4. Through Israel the promised Redeemer and Messiah came into the world. Both the first and second comings of Jesus are to be on their territory.
5. Because the religious leaders of Israel refused Jesus, He was condemned to the cross. Without this there would have been no salvation. Part of Israel's election, therefore, was to ensure that the Messiah would die.
6. Individually, Jews, as well as Gentiles, can only be saved in this age through faith in the person and work of the Messiah, Yeshua (Jesus).
7. Historically, a large part of the nation (though by no means all, if we are to believe the record of the Book of Acts) rejected the true Messiah, and for that reason lost possession of their land, and their destiny as a priestly people for a season.
8. There has, in all the centuries since Christ, been a number of Jews, who came to know and love Jesus, though at the expense of being swallowed up in a Church, which by this time had forgotten its Jewish origins.
9. The Jewish people are unique in human history: they retained their identity as a people, despite having no homeland or political structure, despite frequent attempts at genocide and forcible conversion, and despite their own desires to become indistinguishable from their Gentile neighbours.
10. God made some very clear promises to the Jews as a people. How could He possibly redefine them to apply to another people without being charged with deviousness?
11. Since the 1840s there are more Jews believing in Jesus than since the First Century.
12. The State of Israel has been reestablished, though yet in unbelief. It has been so far preserved remarkably, if not miraculously, though many crises. Those who believe in the sovereignty of God within History find in this the marks of Divine Providence.
13. There is yet to be a time when Jews in large numbers will turn to Jesus, having a strong influence on the evangelization of the Gentile world.
14. In our day there are significant congregations of Hebrew-speaking Jews in Israel, who proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Saviour to their own people. They are not part of any Gentile denominational organization. They bear the marks of a fresh direction in the work of God.

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES SAY ABOUT ISRAEL

1. The general pattern of scripture is that its histories and predictions are literal, though often trimmed with poetic and pictorial language. This allows for the use of “type” and “antitype” in scripture. This can be checked by reference to significant examples of fulfilled predictions in the Bible.
2. The prophecy about the altar at Bethel. 1 Kings 13:2 gives the prediction, and 2 Kings 23:15-17 shows the fulfilment.
3. Messiah is to be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14 & Matthew 1:23).
4. Messiah will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). For those who spiritualize the prophecies, it would not have mattered had He been born in Birmingham.
5. Messiah will ride into Jerusalem on an ass (Zechariah 9:9 & Matthew 21:5).
6. Messiah will suffer excruciating pain at the hands of men (Psalm 22).
7. Messiah will be killed, and buried in a rich man’s grave (Isaiah 53:8-9).
8. Messiah will be alive again after His death (Isaiah 53:10).
9. If in the case of fulfilled prophecy the fulfillment is literal, then it is logical to expect unfulfilled prophecies to be literal also. Thus, when God speaks of Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel in the last days, we can accept this at face value. Jesus, for example, predicted the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:2), and that Jerusalem would be dominated by the Gentiles till much later in history (Luke 21:24). How can this be interpreted of the Church? In fact the predictions were fulfilled in AD 70 and 1967. The Bible, of course, also refers to the “heavenly Jerusalem”, but there is no difficulty in perceiving when it means the earthly or the heavenly Jerusalem.

Meaning of ‘Israel’ and ‘Jew’ in the New Testament:

There are about 77 references to “Israel” in the New Testament. One refers to the land of Israel, and the rest refer to the Jewish people either historically, in their unbelief, or as the believing remnant. The one reference which is debated is Galatians 6:16, where Paul says “as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God”. In view of the fact that the word “Israel” never refers elsewhere in scripture to the Christian Church, it is best to interpret Galatians 6:16 as referring to the body of Jews, who believe in Jesus, who are, of course, part of the Church

The word “Jew” or “Jews” occurs over 190 times in the NT. It always refers to the Jewish people, whether to those who rejected the Messiah, or to those who accepted Him. It is never used to describe a Gentile Christian. Romans 2:28-29, far from extending the title of “Jew” to Gentile Christians is actually restricting “true

Jewishness” to those Jews, who are circumcised in heart, i.e., who accept Jesus, and are born of the Spirit.

While insisting that Jews and Gentiles within the Church constitute “one new man” (Ephesians 2:15), and that the spiritual standing of Jews and Gentiles in Christ is equal (Galatians 3:28; 6:15), Paul did make a practical distinction, not only between men and women, but also between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. This is illustrated by his attitude to his two colleagues, Timothy and Titus; Timothy, who was Jewish, he circumcised (Acts 16:3), but he sternly resisted pressure to circumcise Titus, because he was a Gentile (Galatians 2:3). Paul did not teach that either Jews or Gentiles had a superior position within the ecclesia on grounds of race. This outlaws discrimination against anyone within the church on ground of his racial origin.

Paul in fact distinguishes between three groups of people in the world: “Jews, Gentiles, and the Church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:32). This means that a Christian has transcended his racial background, though for practical purposes he is still a member of his own nation.

The evidence of the Epistles of James and Peter:

James addresses his epistle to “the twelve tribes in the Diaspora” (literal translation). Clearly he saw the Jewish Christians, to whom he was writing, as still Israelites. He describes their meeting as a “synagogue” (2:2 literal Greek). Peter was given an “apostleship to the circumcision [i.e. to the Jews]” (Galatians 2:8). This is why Peter’s first epistle is written from Babylonia, where the largest First Century Jewish community resided (1 Peter 5:13), and was addressed to “chosen exiles of the Diaspora” (1 Peter 1:1 literal Greek).

The Teaching of the Apostle Paul

Paul was a Jew, and also the chosen apostle to the Gentiles. (In fact I cannot find even one non-Jewish apostle in the NT). Paul’s epistle to the Romans is the theological heart of the NT. Chapters 9-11 contains his mature teaching about Israel. Look now in detail at what he says, and see that Paul does not replace Israel by the Church.

1. The Jews, even in their rejection of Jesus are still Israelites (Romans 9:4)
2. To Israel still belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants [including the new covenant], the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises (Rom 9:4)
3. The main body of Israel has forfeited salvation through rejecting the Messiah (Romans 9:30-33; 10:21).
4. Paul desires and prays for their salvation (Romans 10:1-4). There is no anti-Jewishness in Paul’s heart – quite the opposite (Romans 9:1-3).
5. Israel is not finally rejected (Romans 11:1-2). Even in OT times, there was only a

remnant of true believers among a nation largely composed of unbelievers. In Paul's day, nothing had changed (Romans 11:2-6).

6. God has judicially blinded the unbelieving majority to the truth (Romans 11:7-10).

7. The majority of unbelieving Israel has been temporarily set aside to give an opportunity of salvation to the Gentiles, but Gentile salvation is meant to provoke Israel to envy (Romans 11:11).

8. Israel has paid the price of rejection to give the Gentiles a chance. However, their restoration is assured, and will be "Life from the dead" (Romans 11:12-16).

9. Unbelieving Jews are like olive branches cut off from their own tree. Believing Gentiles are wild live branches grafted in. But Gentiles are not to boast against Jews, because God is able to graft them in again. The Olive Root speaks of the spiritual riches, which flow from God via the Patriarchs, which the Church (composed of Jews and Gentiles) now enjoys, and which unbelieving Israel has temporarily lost Romans 11:17-24).

10. A future national repentance is expected for Israel. This is laid before us as a mystery (a secret which can now be revealed Rom 11:25-27). Compare Zechariah 12:10, where the prophet also speaks of a national repentance towards a Messiah, who is also God.

11. Israel, even in its unbelief, is chosen and loved by God Rom 11:28)

12. "As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes" (Rom 11:28). This alone should bring about great thankfulness and love towards the Jews from Gentile Christians.

13. "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). This is firm ground on which to believe that God has not rejected Israel.

14. Paul still identifies himself as a Jew, after becoming a Christian (Acts 21:39).

15. The NT Epistle addressed to the "Hebrews" is a warning to Jewish believers not to return to Judaism as a religious hope, but it clearly still sees these believers as Jewish.

The Teaching of Jesus

1. Our Lord Jesus does not teach the permanent rejection of Israel. In the parable of the Tenants of the Vineyard in Matthew 21:33-44 He says: "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof". This is a threat, not to the Jewish people as such, but to their leaders, specifically the chief priests and Pharisees (see verse 45).

2. Jesus foresees a time when the religious Jewish inhabitants of Jerusalem will accept Him as Messiah, and this will precede His return (Matthew 23:37-39).
3. Jesus promises the apostles they will rule the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30).
4. Our Lord's first mission was to Israel rather than to the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5-6).

The promises of God to the Jews:

God solemnly promised a land to Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21). This promise is reiterated in sevenfold affirmation in Psalm 105:8-10. Reading this passage carefully, it is hard to escape the literal meaning for Israel, and instead to apply it metaphorically to the Church. Indeed, it is such violence could be done to clear statements of God, that the apparent promises in the NT to the church would be capable of reinterpretation, and of reapplication to some new people. (Why not to the Moslems, who claim to have replaced the Church?)

Looking closer at this psalm, it speaks of "He hath remembered His covenant for ever... which covenant He made with Abraham; and His oath unto Isaac; and confirmed the same to Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant: saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance". These words, "covenant", "oath", "law", "everlasting covenant", if they have any meaning, must surely show the clear will of God, that Israel should possess the land of Canaan.

God's plan for Israel

1. God's purpose for Israel has always depended on His initiative and election, but Israel's enjoyment of God's blessings has depended on their response as a righteous nation (Deut 7). Israel is promised abundant blessing, when living in a right relationship with God (Lev 26:1-13; Deut 28:1-14), but God promised discipline (not rejection) when the nation rebelled (Lev 26:14-46; Deut 28:15-68). Scattering among the nations was the ultimate disciplinary measure, with the promise of regathering ultimately to fulfil His purpose (Deut 30).
2. God promised David a royal dynasty reaching eternal dimensions in Israel's Messiah (2 Sam. 7:11-17; 1 Chron. 17:10-15). Matthew demonstrates that Jesus is that Messiah (Matthew 1:1-16). The angel Gabriel tells Mary that her Son will "reign over the house of Jacob for ever" (Luke 1:33). The name "Jacob" can hardly apply to the Church. Right now, He is still related to Judah, and to David (Rev. 5:5; 22:16).
3. The church will not be complete without Israel. Romans 11 speaks of Israel's "fulness" (verse 12), and "the fulness of the Gentiles" (verse 25). The Greek word is *pleroma* (πλήρωμα). The implication is clear: Israel is the final topstone of the Church, in the same way that she provided all the NT apostles, and the foundation members of the body of Christ back in the First Century. The national salvation of Israel will

involve the great bulk of her people coming to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, and thus finding her rightful place as part and parcel of the “ecclesia”, of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 16:18. This event will mean a lot of uncomfortable reconsideration for Gentile Christian theologians, as well as for the Rabbis!

4. When God promised a New Covenant to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31), He promised that there would come a day when the Jews should “all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them” (verse 34). Since such a blessing has never occurred in Israel’s history, this event is yet to come.

5. In Ezekiel 36 “the Lord Jehovah” declares 22 times concerning Israel’s restoration, both to her land, and to her Saviour, “I will” do it. Here are some of the things He will do:

- i. He will judge the nations for ill-treating Israel (36:3-7).
- ii. He will regather Israel to their promised land (verses 8-15).
- iii. He will judge Israel for shedding blood in the land, for preferring idols, and for profaning God’s name among the nations (verses 16-21).
- iv. He will make Israel righteous for the sake of His holy name, not for Israel’s sake (verse 22).
- v. As a result of Israel’s salvation, God will demonstrate to the nations that He is Jehovah (verses 23-28).
- vi. When all this has occurred, Israel will know rich spiritual and material blessings (verses 29-38), which Paul describes as “life from the dead (Rom 11:15)

God has no plan to replace Israel

1. Jeremiah 31:37: “If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done”

2. Jeremiah 32:37-41 “I will gather them out of all countries, whither I have driven them in mine anger... and I will bring them again unto this place... They shall be my people, and I will be their God.... I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever.... I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them to do them good... I will plant them in this land assuredly with my whole heart and my whole soul”. Such a promise was not fulfilled when a small number of exiles returned from Babylon.

3. Jeremiah 33:24-26 God quotes what His enemies were saying: “The two families [i.e. Israel and Judah] He has even cast them off”. Then He declares: “If my covenant be not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and

earth; then will I cast away the seed of Jacob, and David my servant”

Surely, if words bear any meaning at all, and God does not speak, like the Delphic Oracle, in indecipherable riddles, these promises must guarantee a spiritual and territorial future for the Jews?

The promises of God to His Church

Let us now consider only two of the promises made to the Church:

Matthew 16:18 “On this rock I will build my congregation, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”

Ephesians 1:11-14 “In [Him] we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will, that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory”.

If the clearly worded promises to Israel can be transferred, then how can we Christians be sure that the promises given to us shall not be transferred to some other people? God’s faithfulness to Israel’s promises is the measure of His constancy to us, His Church. The Church is “grafted in” to Israel’s olive tree. Her members are citizens of “the commonwealth of Israel” (Eph 2:12). How can we then doubt the equally specific promises of grace and election to Israel? If we do, we undermine the foundation of the Church itself.

Church History and Israel

It is sadly true that very soon after the death of the (Jewish) apostles, the Church began to hate and oppose the Jews. Many of the Church Fathers were rabidly anti-Jewish, as was Martin Luther, the great Reformer, in his latter years. However, many godly men have affirmed God’s continued purposes for Israel, men such as Bengel, the Wesley brothers, Horatius Bonar, Dr. J. C. Ryle, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, and Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones, to name but a few.

CONCLUSION

The whole dealing of God with Israel has been mysterious. Indeed, His purpose with the Church was mysterious also. It was not fully understood before the First Century AD, as Paul says in Ephesians 3:2-6.

If Israel’s leaders had not rejected Jesus, Jesus would not have died, and there would have been no atonement, or resurrection, and therefore no salvation, either for Jew or Gentile. Both the blindness of Israel, and the corruption of Pilate were necessary

to bring about God's redemption of the Human race.

In the light of what has been set forth in these pages, should we be amazed that our sovereign God has decreed the re-establishment of the territorial State of Israel, or that there are so many congregations of "Messianic Jews", or Jews believing in Jesus?

Both the State of Israel, and the calling out of Jewish assemblies are clear signs to believers that God's purposes are working out, and that exciting, though difficult, times are in view for both the Church and Israel. Surely we should begin to lift up our heads, for our redemption draweth nigh!

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