

# Israel and the Church Fathers

by Ronald E. Diprose

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My special interest in the place of Israel in God's eternal plan began with a conference in Florence, Italy, in 1990. The theme of the conference was the Church's response to Israel, "*La Chiesa di fronte a Israele.*" There were delegates from the Methodist, Waldensian, and Brethren Assemblies. After my exposition of Romans chapters 9 to 11—showing that God had not rejected his people, despite the unbelief of many—the Waldensian theologian who was chairing the Conference commented: "We [meaning most Waldensians and Methodists] must admit that we were wrong [in holding to Replacement Theology]". As a result, I decided to discover what had determined Christian thinking on this subject by reading relevant parts of the Patristic writings dating from the early Christian centuries. In order to do this research in a rigorous manner, I applied and was accepted into a doctoral program in Leuven, Belgium.

## DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACH REPLACEMENT THEOLOGY?

Opinions are divided on this vital point and much turns on the answer given. Some scholars take the hard language used by Jesus in speaking of those Jews who did not accept him as their Messiah as proof that anti-Judaism, leading to supersessionism, has its roots in the NT corpus. The Jews had been hoping for a political Messiah who would have freed Israel from the Roman yoke (Luke 24:21), whereas Jesus put off all such activity to his second advent (Luke 19:11-27; Acts 1:6-8).

In reality, the way Jesus described Jewish unbelievers was no different from the way the apostles describe all who refuse to believe the gospel (John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). The Hebrew prophets' denunciations of unbelieving Israel had been no less harsh, without any thought of disinheriting them of their status as God's elect people. The NIV translators made a serious blunder when they inserted the definite article in 1 Pet 2:10, to make Peter say that believers in Jesus are "*the* people of God" whereas Peter, like James in Acts 15:14, speaks of "*a* people of God". At the same time Peter states very clearly that all of God's ancient promises concerning restoration, including the restoration of Israel, will be fulfilled at Christ's second coming (Acts 3:21).

After studying the relevant passages I came to the conclusion that the NT does *not* teach Replacement Theology. Rather, it documents a heated "in-house" debate within Judaism. Meanwhile there are statements made by both Jesus (Matt 23:39), and Paul (Rom 11:1-2, 28-29) which clearly exclude Replacement Theology.

## THE COURSE OF POST-APOSTOLIC HISTORY

The origin of Replacement Theology is linked to a parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity following the disastrous Jewish war of 66-70 and the revolt against Rome led by Simon Bar-Kockba (132-135 A.D).

After these national disasters the Jews had to fight for survival in the Roman world. The oppressive political climate may be gauged by the fact that the Romans renamed the Jewish territories of Judea, Samaria and Galilee, “Palestine,” after Israel’s archenemies, the Philistines.

But the destruction of Jerusalem also meant the loss of a geographical identity for the Christian Church. The result was that Christian apologists sought to create a historical identity for themselves by claiming to be the rightful heirs of all that, in the past, had belonged to Israel. In other words, Replacement Theology was the product of a spirit of rivalry which grew up between the two monotheistic communities of faith.

The tactic of the non-Jewish church was to present itself as the only legitimate representative of Biblical monotheism, to the exclusion of the Jews. This entailed the appropriation of both the Jewish Scriptures and the promises made to the elect people. This operation was not as easy as it sounds because the name “Israel” appears over 2000 times in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, in order to appropriate the revelations entrusted to Israel (Rom 3:1-2), Christian spokesmen had to interpret allegorically everything related to the history and future of Israel. Just how arbitrary this was can be seen in the fact all predictions of judgment on the nation of Israel continued to be understood literally!

## ISRAEL IN CHRISTIAN WRITINGS OF THE 2ND TO 5TH CENTURIES

According to a pseudonymous writing, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, written during the first half of the 2nd century, the Church occupies the position that Israel was never worthy of occupying, and consequently, the Church is the true inheritor of the covenant and of all the promises made to Israel. In his passion to express contempt for the Jewish people, this author was prepared to overturn the meaning of the Biblical text. For example, physical circumcision was deemed to be a transgression that a wicked angel had induced the Israelites to do (IV, 3-4), while the temple was described as a habitation of demons and full of idolatry (XVI). In particular, chapter XIII sets the stage for a long-standing tradition that continued up until the time of Augustine, of completely overturning the meaning of Gen 25:21-23 and making Esau stand for Israel and Jacob for the Church.

Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho a Jew* (ca. 140), shows the same contempt for the institution of circumcision as is seen in *The Epistle of Barnabas* (XIV, 2; XIX). Moreover Justin articulated the latent Replacement Theology evident in Barnabas in precise terms by calling Christians “the true Israelitic race” (CXXXV), making the Church a complete substitute for Israel.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon from 177 until 195, is remembered mainly for his defense of the authority of the apostolic writings over against the Gnostic writings. Although he did not engage in a polemic with the Jews, he shared the view that the Church had replaced Israel completely and definitively and thus allegorized all prophetic passages which have Israel in view (*Against Heresies* V, 34).

Tertullian (160-225), despite the sober tone of his *Answer to the Jews*, built upon what had become the standard interpretation of Gen 25:23 and Rom 9:11-12. It is worth quoting him at length on this point:

Accordingly, since the people or nation of the Jews is anterior in time, and [greater] through the grace of primary favor in the Law, whereas ours is understood to be [less] in the age of times, as having in the last era of the world attained the knowledge of divine mercy: beyond doubt, through the edict of divine utterance, the prior and [greater] people—that is, the Jewish—must necessarily serve the [less]; and the [less] people—that is, the Christian—overcome the [greater] (Tertulliano, *Risposta ai Giudei* I).

So Tertullian—and Augustine after him (*The City of God*, XVI, 35)—make the Church descend from Jacob, when in reality it was the twelve tribes of Israel and also Christ who were descended from him (Rom 9:5). And they paradoxically identify all the actual descendants of Jacob with Esau!

With Tertullian we find theological reflection based upon Replacement Theology. He begins by accepting Replacement Theology as a theological presupposition. Then he applies his rigorous logic to this presupposition, attributing his conclusion to an “edict of divine utterance”, thus making the Christian people formally superior to the Jewish people. What is more ominous is that he spells out the logical consequence of his reasoning by saying that the lesser people must overcome the greater while the “greater” people (i.e. Israel) must serve the “lesser” people (i.e. the Christian Church, see *Risposta ai Giudei* I). This declassing of Israel, as the servant of the Church, theoretically based on a divine edict, found many unhappy applications, particularly from when Emperor Constantine began creating formal legislation that reflected it.

I could continue quoting from the writings of Origen and Augustine, and from the anti-Judaic sermons of Chrysostom. In all of these writings we would find further demonstrations that Replacement Theology was a presupposition in the Patristic writings. In all cases the essential role of ethnic Israel, God's elect people, was either forgotten or negated. They were substituted by the Christian Church, which was considered the true Israel, spiritual in nature. Jesus had said: "salvation is of the Jews" but now the Jewish identity of Jesus and the apostles, and almost all of the Biblical authors, was ignored, while the elect people were despised.

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