

What Is Replacement Theology?

by Ronald E. Diprose

Before defining Replacement Theology, it might be helpful to give an example of how this way of thinking has been assumed in much of Christendom. There is a worldwide movement which presents itself unabashedly as replacing Israel but hardly ever encounters any criticism by doing so. I refer to the movement which has given itself the name of “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” When members of this movement knock on doors they rarely meet with the skepticism they deserve because of their claim to be God’s special Witnesses. In reality this claim is a bit like an American citizen presenting himself or herself as a Russian Ambassador!

WHO’S WITNESSES?

Some time ago I was confronted with this claim at my front gate. My daughter-in-law had witnessed to two young members of the local Watchtower congregation, creating some doubts in their minds about the orthodoxy of their religious profession. Consequently one of the local leaders paid us a visit. It was Saturday morning and I happened to be at home, so I went personally to talk with this gentleman. After introductions, I asked him where his organization had got its name from. He answered, correctly, that it was from Isaiah chapter 43. Then I put a series of questions to him:

“But are not the people that God addresses here descendants of Jacob? Don’t the words, *‘You are my witnesses’ declares the Lord* refer to these people? After all, the same passage contains a significant prophecy concerning the return of Jacob’s descendants to their ancient homeland after a lengthy exile, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants forever. And what do you say about the fact that when speaking of His witnesses, God contrasts the attempts of other nations to make predictions concerning the future with the certainty that what descendants of Jacob, God’s special witnesses, predict will in fact happen? Are not these people the true witnesses of YHWH (or of Jehovah, as the Watchtower literature prefers to pronounce the name of God)?”

The gentleman looked at me for a moment, deep in thought, then said, with an air of superiority: “Yes, yes, that is true, but you need to understand that we are *spiritual* Israel.” I answered, “But didn’t Isaiah the prophet speak of a faithful remnant *within* the nation of Israel?” Then I mentioned my meetings with messianic Jews belonging to some of the 120 Messianic Assemblies in Israel. I asked him how he would classify these descendants of Jacob, and all the other messianic congregations in the Jewish Diaspora. I asked: “Are they not *spiritual* Israel in our time?” This brought me to my last question: “And if these people are *spiritual* Israel, as I believe they are, what justification can you give for calling another group of people *‘spiritual* Israel?’”

The leader of the Watchtower movement remained silent for some seconds and then said, as much to himself as to me, “Nobody has ever asked me these questions before!” I answered, “That doesn’t surprise me, because for many centuries the Roman Catholic Church has also identified itself as the true Israel, in the place of God’s elect people. And so have other parts of Christendom. Even some Evangelical Christians make the error of considering themselves *spiritual* Israel!”

The phenomenon of religious groups, like the so-called “British Israelites” and the Mormons, who claim to be part of Israel or apply to themselves the prerogatives that properly belong to ethnic Israel, is widespread. The trend goes back to the second century A.D. when the Church tried to build its identity in the Roman world by posing as the rightful heir to all that belonged to ethnic Israel from the time of

Abraham until the time of Christ. Very soon this self-identification became a theological presupposition called “supercessionism,” now more commonly described as Replacement Theology. According to Replacement Theology, *the Church has replaced Israel completely and permanently in the working out of God’s plan in history.*¹

There are three varieties of supercessionism: *the theology of fulfillment, retributive supercessionism, and structural supercessionism.*

THE THEOLOGY OF FULFILLMENT

Proponents of “the theology of fulfillment” are not hostile towards Israel. They simply believe that Israel’s role in the plan of God terminated with the first advent of the Messiah. They believe that all prophecies concerning the future of Israel should be interpreted as having their fulfillment in the Person and work of Christ, the Savior of the world. Proponents of this view do not consider themselves supporters of Replacement Theology as they believe Israel completed her role, as God had envisaged it from eternity. However there are a number of Biblical statements which give pause to those holding this view, such as these words spoken by Peter to his fellow Jews: “Jesus...must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21). According to Peter, not all OT prophecies were fulfilled in the Person and work of Christ *during his first advent*. Peter understood all prophecies having to do with the “restoration” of Israel as awaiting fulfillment in the context of Christ’s second advent.

RETRIBUTIVE SUPERCESSIONISM

According to the second variety of supercessionism, called “retributive supercessionism,” the Church has replaced Israel because Israel’s disobedience made her unworthy of God’s blessing and put her under God’s judgment. However, this position flies in the face of statements such as these words of God through the prophet Jeremiah: “Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done,’ declares the LORD” (Jer 31:37). At the time when Jeremiah spoke these words, God was about to send Judah into exile because of idolatry and because she had neglected to observe the sabbatical years required by the Mosaic law. But this punishment was to be followed by her return to the promised land (Jer 30:1-3). So far as such retributive judgment for disobedience is concerned, God affirmed through the prophet Amos that it is Israel’s status as the only elect people that makes retribution inevitable when they sin against their God. “You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins” (Amos 3:2). Amos is telling us that divine punishment confirms Israel’s position as an elect nation.

HERMENEUTICAL SUPERCESSIONISM

The third variety of supercessionism is the most radical, being structural and hermeneutical in nature. Hermeneutical supercessionism includes, but actually goes beyond, the concept of the Church replacing Israel. According to this approach, everything national and physical are mere symbols of spiritual reality. From the early second century A.D., this tendency can be seen in the allegorizing of the Old Testament. Origen, a 3rd century theologian, went so far as to identify all believers, from Genesis on, as members of the Church, of which the people of Israel were a mere type. However there are many passages in the Old Testament where such allegorizing will simply not work. Take for example this passage: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when people will no longer say, “As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,” but they will say, “As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.” Then they will live in their own land”” (Jer 23:5-8). Irenaeus applied this and other such prophecies to Gentile converts (*Against Heresies*, Book V, 34), but there is no way that Gentile converts to Christ can be said to have first experienced something like the Exodus from Egypt and, at a much later date, something like the return of the Jews to Israel from all the countries to which God had banished them. The content of Biblical revelation defies such attempts to allegorize away predictions concerning the future of Israel in relation to the future of the world.

CONCLUSION

Such are the varieties of Replacement Theology. In our next article, we will see that the idea of ethnic Israel's eclipse as God's elect people was not the fruit of careful Bible study but rather the product of a historical process in which the two monotheistic faiths, Judaism and Christianity, were rivals in seeking to retain or to gain acceptance in the Roman world, following the two Jewish wars of 66-70 and 132-135 A.D.

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¹For an independent survey of supercessionism in Christian Theology, see Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged* (Nashville, TN, Academic, 2007), especially pp. 3-8, 37-104.