

Supersessionism

A few years ago a friend of mine went into the hospital. She could not keep food on her stomach and had many symptoms that indicated a problem with her digestive system. In the hospital, she would improve and try to eat just a little toast so she could go home. Each time, her symptoms would reoccur and she would be back at square one. They kept running tests, but they could not identify the problem. Finally, they ran a test and identified that she has Celiac disease or a gluten sensitivity that causes damage to her body. Once the problem was identified and defined, the solution was simple. She simply had to change her lifestyle and be disciplined to not eat anything with gluten, wheat, rye, barley or any product that had any extract of these in them.

In the history of the Church, there have been symptoms of something not being right.

Until the late 19th century, any Jew who “converted” or became a believer in Jesus was expected to leave all aspects of his Jewish past and identity behind. To dare to keep any of the Jewish Feast or tradition was a sign of heresy and of being, “under the Law”. For the church, one could not be a “Christian” and still be Jewish.

The basic view was the Church now replaces Israel and all promises that were for Israel now belong to the Church. This view seems to have been historically valid in both Catholic and Protestant camps. This view is what we now call, Supersessionism or sometimes referred to as Replacement Theology. In its sinister light, it can be described as the underlying world view that has allowed anti-Semitism to smolder in the Church and burst into flame when just a little fuel is added to the fire. Though not know by this title, the views of Supersessionism can be traced to very early in church history.

The problem with Supersessionism is that this disease did not have a name and a definition. As with physical illness or any other problem, identifying the problem is the first step toward finding a solution. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church and many other theological publications do not mention either Supersessionism or Replacement Theology. In order to address what has been identified as a problem, one must both name and define the problem.

Within the Messianic movement, Supersessionism (Replacement Theology) and Dual Covenant Theology) have been seen as the bookends of error that condemn the Jewish people to a future without a gospel witness. They are opposing views but the resulting belief is that either the Jews do not need the gospel, or the Jews do not deserve the gospel.

A quick search of the internet reveals that there are almost as many definitions of Supersessionism as there are articles. The “scholarly and trusted” Wikipedia defines the term as follows:

Supersessionism, fulfillment theology, and replacement theology are terms for the [biblical interpretation](#) that the [New Covenant](#) supersedes or replaces the [Mosaic](#)

[Covenant](#), the latter thus also referred to as the [Old Covenant](#). The terms do not appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, however, the view they cover is considered part of most traditional [Christian views of the Old Covenant](#), viewing the [Christian Church](#) as the inheritor of the [promises](#) made with the [children of Israel](#).

While this definition simplifies the discussion to the relationship of the New Covenant and the Mosaic covenant, it is too narrow to include the range of discussion around this theology. There is no discussion of the Church's identity versus Israel's National Identity as well as God's future plan for the Jewish people. Therefore, this definition is woefully inadequate to convey the necessary discussion on this subject

Craig Blasing, Ph.D., in his article, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question", broadly defines Supersessionism in answer to the question, Are there theological reasons to believe that Israel has a future?

"The traditional answer through the history of the Christian Church has been, no. If you mean by Israel the actual descendants of Jacob and if you are asking about their ethnic, cultural, and political future, then, no, they do not have a future except to linger on earth like refugees until the end of time as a witness to divine judgment. Why? Because God has disinherited them as a punishment for their rejection of Jesus, and he has replaced them with a new Israel, the Gentile Church. This traditional answer to the question of Israel's future is what is known as Supersessionism. Israel has been replaced or superseded by the Gentile Church."

This definition seems to be the normal view of those who reject Supersessionism and Replacement Theology.

However, Blasing goes farther in his depiction of Supersessionism by referring to the three types of Supersessionism explained by R. Kendall Soulen in his book, "The God of Israel and Christian Theology"

First, there is punitive supersessionism, which says that God has rejected the Jews because of their rejection of Christ. The catastrophes of AD 70 and AD 135 were the political expressions of a fundamental divine abandonment of Israel in punishment for her rejection of Christ. As a result, God has turned his back on the Jews and has embraced the Gentile Church in their place.

More potent and far-reaching than punitive supersessionism, however, is economic supersessionism, which argues that the entire economy (or dispensation) of Israel from Sinai to Christ was designed by God as a transitory symbol or type of an eternal, spiritual religion revealed by Christ and embodied in Christianity. The nationalist, ethnic, physical defining features of Judaism are all, like the entire story of OT Israel, a carnal symbol divinely intended to pass away when God brought the eternal spiritual antitype, the Church, into being.

Finally, Soulen notes, we pass on to the most deeply embedded form of supersessionism—structural supersessionism—in which Scripture is habitually read with

the distinctly Jewish or Israelite elements of Scripture as a mere background to the Biblical story, which moves primarily from universal creation to universal consummation by way of universal sin and universal redemption. Israel *per se* is not really even in the main story of the Bible.

This approach may be helpful in understanding degrees and expressions of Supersessionism as well as recognizing latent supersessionism tendencies that some may hold without being aware. However, a simple definition of these terms is necessary that captures what these people believe. Simply stated,

Supersessionism or Replacement Theology is the idea that the church has superseded or replaced national Israel in regard to being God's chosen people and as being the recipient of the promises made to national Israel.

In the past, some have rejected the use of the terms Supersessionism and Replacement Theology, referring to them as derogatory terms invented by those who hold dispensationalist views. However, this does not seem to be an adequate reason for not using terms that have a wide acceptance and understanding. In his article, "An Analysis of Neo-Replacement Theology", Michael J. Vlach argues for the use of these terms explaining the history of the views as well as the views that are both against the use of the terms as well as those in favor. It is a short article for those who would like to explore this idea more fully. [<http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Vlach-AnAnalysisofNeoRepla.pdf>]

As with the illustration that began this paper, identifying and naming the problem is not enough. The debate on what Supersession is and what problems it has caused for Jews in general and Jewish believers specifically really should be over. Now is the time to make the change to applying a solution. The question should be changed from what we do not believe, i.e. Supersessionism/Dual Covenant, to what we do believe.

As part of Systematic Theology there must be Israelology. That is, understanding God's working with national Israel through the Tanach as well as in the New Testament.

In addition, our dialogue must include in-depth discussions about the interrelationship of the Covenants given in the Scriptures. How do they relate to national Israel, the gentile church, and Messianic believers. Are there differences between being grafted in versus the natural branches being reattached? Are there any substantial differences or do they deal with identity issues alone?

The validity of the arguments must not rest on the church nor on the Messianic movement, but on the Word of God itself. In having such discussions it must be clear from the outset where the boundaries of the dialogue lie. Initially affirming the basic faith that binds us together will allow a more robust dialogue. Those areas would be 1) salvation through Yeshua alone, 2) the Deity of the Messiah, 3) the physical resurrection of Yeshua as an undisputable fact.

There has been work in this area from within the ranks of the Messianic movement with books such as *The Case for Enlargement Theology* by Alex Jacob. I believe this is a good start and if we approach this subject with mutual respect and humility, we can move to stating clearly what we believe is truth.

In summary, though there is value in defining Supersessionism, the greater discussion on what we do believe would be a better use of our time. The old adage of not learning all the counterfeits, but knowing intimately the truth applies here.