

# Olive Press Quarterly

A NEW ISRAEL Supersessionism and Dispensationalism re-examined

by

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A publication which features articles covering a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

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The Editor

#### A NEW ISRAEL

What is at stake today in the political conflict over the land of the West Bank and Gaza is nothing less than the way we understand the nature of God.

Belief in the future conversion of Jews to their Messiah was commonplace among English Puritans, and as a result of the Evangelical Revival this confidence became the mission agenda of the LJS. Two centuries of world mission have changed the theological map and it is necessary to track those theological changes and their impact on the notion of Jewish mission for supporting churches of CMJ.

The great bone of contention is the church's theology of history. The two dominant streams of our time within Protestantism are *Dispensationalism* and *Reformed* or *Covenantal Theology*. Bjoraker has observed,

These systems have influenced all of our theological thinking to some degree whether or not we can articulate them, or are aware of their effect.

The Reformed tradition emphasises God's unity of purpose in history, seen in the mystical grace present in all God's covenants, and the unity of the people of God. Accordingly the ancient promises to Israel are transferred to the Church (which includes the true believers from ancient Israel) and thereby negates any continuance of role for a modern Jewish nation or state. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, sees a double purpose of God in history - one worked out through Israel and another through the Church. While there may remain some purpose yet to be fulfilled in Israel, the spiritual role of blessing the nations has nevertheless passed to the church. Thus both of these theological systems contain within them an understanding that God's purposes to bless the world through Israel have been superseded.iv

This chapter will review first the change in the church's stance toward Supersessionism, and then assess the impact of modern *Dispensationalism* on Jewish mission, both within the context of criticism of CMJ's ministry.

#### Supersessionism

Covenantal Theology is inherently Supersessionist. It sees the New Covenant as a replacement of the Old (Mosaic) Covenant with Israel. While both offer salvation by grace, the New Covenant's sacrifice is of a higher order and its scope goes beyond Israel to the whole world. As long as Israel rejects the New Covenant they are cut off from grace, but salvation is still on offer to them, as it is to all peoples without distinction. Consequently all previously unfulfilled promises to Israel will be fulfilled through the church which is the true 'spiritual' Israel.'

Of course there is a discontinuity between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. The latter was inaugurated to facilitate a spirituality and level of obedience previously unattained in the houses of Israel and Judah. It replaced an earthly sacrificial system with a permanent sacrifice acceptable in a tabernacle made without hands, ir replaced the blood of bulls and calves with the blood of the Messiah, and enabled the worshipper not only to be ceremonially clean but also to have a clear conscience before God. In this sense Jesus' ekklesia would be distinguished from Moses' kehilah.

Despite this discontinuity there is also an underlying continuity in the announcement of the New Covenant which enables the houses of Israel and Judah to enjoy the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant including those specifically relating to their election in perpetuity and their occupation of the Land. Ignoring the context of the quotation from Jeremiah in Hebrews 8,\* and assuming the obsolescence of the entirety of the entire Hebrew people along with their Mosaic cult is a theological step too far, as will be explained below.

Furthermore, the incongruity of the Supersessionist position to the Jewish mind is not without significance for anyone involved in Jewish evangelism. To a people-group that has prayed every Passover "Next year in Jerusalem", longing for a national return to Erez Israel, an evangelistic strategy that negates even the possibility of restoration to their historic homeland is doomed, indeed

the coming of the Messiah and the coming of the Messianic Age are inseparable.xi

For Stephen Sizer, an high-profile critic of CMJ, Supersessionism is foundational not only to his theology of the church and mission but also to the way he sees Middle Eastern politics and matters of social justice, and therefore needs some examination. Sizer, building what he finds in the New Testament, observes

The post-Apostolic Church Fathers believed that the Jews ceased to be God's 'chosen people' when they rejected Jesus Christ. Instead they understood the church to be the new Israel.xii

This trend of thinking was increasingly explicit in the centuries following the Apostolic era. The Jewish revolt of A.D. 66-70 led to the forced exile of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem. At the same time Christianity was becoming increasingly gentile as churches grew in the Greco-Roman world. By the second century the balance of power in the church had altered considerably and the Bar Kokhba revolt within Judaism A.D. 132-135, wherein Rabbi Akiba hailed Bar Kokhba as messiah

and made this designation a matter of Jewish loyalty, xiii led to the alienation of Messianic Jews from Judaism. xiv

While Judaism fought for survival, the church grew a negative stance towards its Jewish roots which consolidated into an *Adversus Judaeos* tradition.\*\* The work of Origen (c.185 – c.254) rendering Jewish history as an allegory of the church in the Old Testament, and making the use of allegory and spiritualising history an acceptable hermeneutic, laid the foundation for the church to rethink its relationship to Judaism completely. By the Council of Nicea, the first general church council to which no Jewish bishops were invited, both theologically and ecclesiologically the church was separated from its Jewish roots.

There is no other foundation [for modern anti-Semitism] than the theological conceptions built up in the first three centuries. But upon these foundations an awful superstructure has been reared, and first stones of this superstructure were laid, the very moment the church had the power to do so, in the legislation of Constantine and his successors.xvi

Though Supersessionism has been dominant throughout church history, there is considerable difference of opinion as to its theological validity and the motivations which underlie those who support it. Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok's treatment of the same period is quite different from Sizer. He reads the development of replacement-theology less as a trend in exegesis and more as the growth of anti-Judaism in the early Church Fathers and the root of later anti-Semitism in the church.xvii Starting with New Testament teaching, Cohn-Sherbok notes that Jesus and his disciples were not inherently anti-Semitic. Though there were clear differences between the followers of Jesus and the religious authorities of their day, Cohn-Sherbok acknowledges that it was to Israel that Jesus followers' took the Good News.xviii Nevertheless, the New Testament, when read outside of the context of the intention of the authors to address the issues of their day, is open to alternative interpretations thus,

Regardless of whether the Gospels and Paul's epistles are inherently anti-Jewish, there is no doubt that the Church

has used Scripture as a framework for its teaching of contempt.xix

In reviewing the use made by the Church Fathers, Cohn-Sherbok refers widely to John Chrysostom and Eusebius in Asia; Ephrem, Aphrahat in Syria; Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine in North Africa; John Damascene in Greece; Latin contributions from Prudentius and Hippolytus, and others to illustrate the general theological onslaught of the Church on Judaism.\*\*

In his account of the *Adversos Judaeos* \*xi covering five centuries he includes the following accusations made against the Jews:

- The Jews rejected and killed their Christ.
- The Jews suffer universally from moral depravity at every level, from idol worship to sexual licentiousness.
- The Jews are guilty of infanticide, sacrificing their children to demons and eating them.

Drawing on allegorical interpretations of the scriptures partly derived from Hellenistic Jewish sources that pre-date Jesus, xxiii the church concluded that the Jews

- live under God's wrath for their sins,
- are incapable of properly understanding the Bible,
- are abandoned by God in favour of the Church as the vehicle for blessing the world,
- refused to accept Christ thus losing both Jerusalem and the Temple cult in God's deserved judgement on them.

Consequently it was logical to conclude that the covenantal blessings and promises of scripture have been stripped from the Jews and handed wholesale to the church, while the curses contained in the law for apostasy all still apply to the Jews as a whole.

# Supersessionism superseded

Supersessionism's significance in shaping world history has not been lost on Jewish scholars. As Moshe Aumann has observed, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi cohorts were not Christians; in fact, they were avowed and unabashed opponents of Christianity. However, in conceiving, planning, directing and executing their satanic and unprecedented campaign of genocide against the Jewish people, they were able to exploit to the fullest the anti-Jewish doctrines of the Christian Church,\*xxiii

But as Aumann himself makes clear, in the decades since the Holocaust the church's posture towards the Jewish people and Judaism has begun to change, and this accelerating trend is reflected in a great number of official church statements which he quotes in whole or in part.\*\*

Most significant of these is Nostra Aetate from Vatican II in 1965. The central themes addressed by paragraph four in relation to the Jewish people are that,

- the roots of the church are in the people of the Ancient Covenant;
- the covenant of God with the Jewish people is irrevocable;

- the church repudiates the teaching that the Jews are in any way rejected by God, or are a cursed people due to their non-acceptance of Jesus as their Messiah;
- the denunciation of all forms of anti-Semitism.\*\*xv

While Aumann notes the discomfort in the church due to Hitler's use of anti-Jewish polemic, and their repudiation of it, Kendall Soulen goes on to analyse Supersessionism's shaping of Christian theology in more profound ways, particularly in the church's understanding of her salvation narrative. He observes that since so many Christian denominations have now repudiated Supersessionism, it is incumbent on the church to rebuild a coherent Christian theology in a way that is both free of Supersessionism and yet true to the evangelical centre of Christian faith, namely that the

God of Hebrew Scriptures has acted in Jesus of Nazareth for all the world.xxvi

Supersessionism, according to Soulen, developed both historically and theologically. He traces its origins and

development in church history through the teaching of key figures and further examines the impact of these contributions for the creation of an Israel-less salvation narrative and destiny. Though there were profound additions and implications to come in later centuries, two seminal themes emerged in the patristic period culminating in the Council of Nicea. First, in an endeavour to combat heresy, the church adopted creedal statements, notably the Nicene Creed, which have not only defined theological terms, but also articulated the narrative of salvation without mentioning Israel's past or future. Second, the Council of Nicea specifically divorced the church's liturgical calendar from its previous connection, especially at Passover, with the Jewish liturgical year. \*\*xxviii\*

Soulen's criticism of Supersessionism is fundamental as, in his view, it renders the entire history of Israel in the scriptures as parenthetical to the overarching narrative of salvation.\*\*

Squeezed between the story of Creation and Fall, on the one hand, and the Redemption of mankind and ultimate Consummation of God's purposes, on the other, the history of

Israel merely provides background to the final parts of the plot.

As Soulen expounds the Supersessionist view

Israel's story contributes little or nothing to understanding how God's consummating and redemptive purposes engage human creation in universal and enduring ways. Indeed, the background can be completely omitted from an account of Christian faith without thereby disturbing the overarching logic of salvation history. This omission is reflected in virtually every historic confession of faith from the Creeds of Nicea and Constantinople to the Augsburg Confession and beyond.xxx

So the God of Israel, in sending Israel's Messiah to bring to fulfilment his redemptive plan for the world, has at the same time displaced Israel in the economy of salvation and caused the very people of God, to whom he was bound in covenantal relationship, to be obsolete. Christians therefore teach devotion to a Messiah of Israel who has no further interest in the existence of the nation from whom he came!xxxi In spiritualising the Old Testament prophecies, the church found

a device to render carnal Israel as irrelevant. Soulen summarises the problem of Supersessionism's theological incoherence thus:

If Christians claim to worship the God of Israel while teaching God's indifference toward the people of Israel, they are engaging in a massive contradiction... If the God of Israel is ultimately indifferent to the existence of the Jewish people, how seriously can one take God's engagement with the rest of creation?...If the God of Israel ordains a salvation in the midst of history that renders the existence of the Jewish people irrelevant, what can be the power of this salvation to mend the wounds of human history as a whole?xxxiii

The logic of Supersessionist theology disembodied faith from history. The New Covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah \*\*xxiii\* and inaugurated by Jesus,\*\*xxiv\* was explicitly linked to the Old Covenant people as a physical nation. It was a salvation in time and place with implications for, and an application to, the rest of human history. Thus Tom Wright tackles those who would separate faith from history, dismissing as "incomprehensible" a Jesus who is merely

a teacher of abstract and interior truths to a people hungry for God to act within history.xxxv

Clearly the New Covenant kept Israel at the centre of their God's consciousness, as Jeremiah puts it,

"Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me."

This is what the LORD says: "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.\*\*xxvi

The impact of Supersessionist teaching has had a profound effect on the gospel preached by the church, and on the church's ministry in the Middle East, as we shall see below. At this stage, however, it is merely noted that the church's ability to sideline Jewish existence after Christ, rendered the gospel not as rooted in Israel according to the flesh, witnessed by the gospel's references to Jesus genealogy, but rooted rather in another 'Israel' – a greater Israel, a new Israel, the church –

according to the Spirit. If Israel, according to the flesh, can be kept sidelined then there is no theological relevance to the return to the Land of Jewish people and the re-forming, or regathering, of a Jewish nation.

### Dispensationalism

Sizer's second disagreement is with the dispensationalist hermeneutic, which he identifies as the theological basis for Christian Zionism. Identifying CMJ/ITAC with all the excesses of Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism, he has critiqued their ministry accordingly. While he may well be correct in assessing Dispensationalism to be the theological undercurrent of much North American evangelicalism, his ability to trace almost any phrase back to an "unrecognised" or "subliminal" xxxviii dispensationalist root leaves CMJ vulnerable to his attacks.

Sizer's tactic of confining CMJ to a tightly defined theological box of his making also hinders openness and cooperation in much on which he and CMJ would agree. However, much as CMJ might wish to express agreement with him where 16

possible, to do so would place them under suspicion of being "subtle", "enigmatic" or "discrete", charges he uses when those who are deemed to be 'Zionist' do not make statements that are explicit enough for their 'brand'. xxxviii

Modern Dispensationalism emerged from the Brethren movement of early nineteenth century Britain, \*\*xxix\* though exponents and critics trace its roots to the early Church Fathers and the New Testament itself.\*\*I Craig Blaising outlines Dispensationalism's understanding of God's relationship to the world under the following five emphases:\*\*Ii

- 1. The sovereignty of God over human affairs.
- 2. The *purpose and overall planning* of each particular dispensation.
- 3. An ordered set of relationships forming a distinctive structure characteristic of that particular dispensation.
- 4. Each dispensation containing *responsibilities and* requirements in order for the purpose of that dispensation to be accomplished.

5. The concept of progress to a conclusion, therefore in each dispensation there is the prospect of *dispensational* change until God's final conclusion for human salvation-history is reached.

A dispensationalist reading of the scriptures divides human history into a scheme of salvation history, in which God is active in human affairs progressing both revelation and His purposes until a final culmination is reached in the reign of Christ. While different schemes are put forward, underlying them is this assertion,

Dispensational terminology is central to the New Testament understanding of the church. And it is particularly used in explaining the church's relationship to the Old Testament, to the pivotal events of Jesus' ministry, and to the overall plan and purpose of God yet to be accomplished at the return of Christ.xlii

Thus each dispensational scheme will at least include what to the dispensationalists appear the three most obvious dispensations namely the Mosaic law, the church, and the Millennial age culminating in the Kingdom of Christ.

In the Mosaic dispensation, the 'old' covenants of the Law and the Davidic kingdom are linked together. The former was conditional on obedience xliii while the latter was God's unilateral gift to David, leading to the Messiah. In this dispensation, the calling of national Israel and the promise of the Land are ultimately linked in God's warning to Solomon to keep the commandments lest idolatry results in expulsion from the Land xliv.

Jesus' inauguration of the New Covenant heralds the dispensation of the church. Having in himself fulfilled the law xlv and eternally established the Davidic kingdom, xlvi the outpouring of the Spirit fulfilled the prophetic promise to grant forgiveness of sins xlvii and give a new spirit. Xlviii This is the age of the church in which some of the blessings of the New Covenant are inaugurated. The restoration of the physical kingdom of Zion ultimately under Christ must wait until the millennial age and Christ's return when all of the remaining

promises are fulfilled in all believers ultimately in the final resurrection. Preserving the strict distinction between Israel and the church, and also between dispensations of law and grace they are able to make tidy distinctions between Israel according to the flesh, for whom God has earthly objectives, and a spiritual Israel born of the Spirit, whose destiny is related to heaven.

The distinctive feature of Dispensationalism that is most alarming to those with any social or political sympathy towards the plight of Palestinians in general, and the Palestinian church in particular, lies in their treatment of The Land.xlix Classical Dispensationalism interpreted the New Covenant as being spiritually fulfilled in the church in the present dispensation, but in the future there would yet be a fulfilment for the Jews that related nationally and politically to the physical Land. This has led dispensationalists, in the view of Sizer, to believe that not only is the re-emergence of a political State of Israel the will of God and the fulfilment of both prophecy and covenants, the position of Christian Zionism, but also that Israel can do no wrong. As Sizer puts it

Christian Zionism appears, at least in the eyes of its critics, to offer an uncritical endorsement of the Israeli political right, and at the same time shows an inexcusable lack of compassion for the Palestinian tragedy. In doing so it has apparently legitimised their oppression in the name of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Sizer's misgivings about Dispensationalism's effects on Christian attitudes towards the present situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories are not without foundation, and in many cases these are echoed by the leadership of CMJ. Nevertheless Sizer draws from Palestinian writers such as Sharif, and popular American writers of Christian paperbacks, notably Hal Lindsay, both of whom have their own political agendas, in order to construct a diatribe against all mission agencies which may be tarred with the brush of Zionism or Dispensationalism.

#### Dispensationalism's systemic flaw

The problem with dispensational teaching goes beyond the use made of it by the American Christian Right. It is fundamentally flawed because it too rests on a modified form of Supersessionism. Far from seeing Israel's history as significant in shaping Christian theology it sees physical Israel as significant solely due to the future coming of Christ, and the eschatological future of the church.

Yet the Hebrew Scriptures speak of incarnation: of God's revelation seen and experienced in people, land, kingdom and the marriage of God to his people. Ultimately that incarnation is revealed in Messiah, a Messiah that is rooted in an historic people, and with the objective of making permanent in them that which the older covenants had intended but been unable to achieve. St Paul clearly understood this as he applied the gospel to the Jewish people in the first place wherever he went, and especially so as he wrote to the Romans. The Dispensationalists ignore both the historical and positional priority of the Jews in the evangelism of the New Testament.

More significant for the Dispensationalists is the problem caused to a theological system when facts on the ground appear to contradict it. It was easier to keep the tidy distinctions

between the church and Israel while the church was universally dominated by gentiles and evangelism among Jews resulted in their assimilation to a gentile church and way of life and loss to world Jewry. With the resurgence of an authentic Messianic Jewish community within Israel, and a burgeoning one in the Diaspora, not only is there now a manifestation of carnal Israel among the nations of the world, but also there is also a Hebraic manifestation of church. Within Israel this challenge is of acute importance, for it is no longer possible for gentile (or Palestinian Arab) congregations alone to claim to be the Christian presence within the Land.

# Implications for Jewish mission

To a society such as CMJ this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Engaged in Jewish ministry in The Land for over 150 years places the society with unique trust and respect among Messianic believers. Though young, the Messianic movement is already beginning to see beyond itself to the pain of Arab brothers in Christ with whom there is minimal contact. Likewise being part of the Anglican Communion and

formative in establishing the Diocese of Jerusalem, CMJ's link into the Palestinian Christian-Arab community is well established. This small indigenous Christian community suffers much from the pressure of politics and occupation, not inclining them towards much sharing with believers from the community of their oppressors. Yet despite being the best placed for a ministry of reconciliation in this context, leadership in this field has been neglected by CMJ and taken instead by *Musalaha*. liii

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vi Jeremiah 31:31-34

vii Hebrews 8:13, 9:11,

viii Hebrews 9:11-14

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xxxii Soulen (2002) 4
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 xl ibid 120
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 xlii Blaising & Bock (1993) 111
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 xliv 1 Kings 9:6-9
 xlv Matthew 5:17
  xlvi Acts 2:24-35
  xlvii Jeremiah 31:34 & Acts 2:38
  xlviii Ezekiel 36:26 & Acts 2:39
  xlix Abbreviated form of "The Promised Land".
  <sup>1</sup> Sizer, S., "The Historical Origins of Christian Zionism"
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li Hosea 2:14-23

lii Romans 1:16

liii Arabic, meaning 'reconciliation' – an organisation founded by an Israeli Christian Arab.

See http://www.musalaha.org/articles/Musalaha.html

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