

# An Analysis of Neo-Replacement Theology

By Michael J. Vlach, Ph.D.

I have spent the better part of the last ten years studying and examining the doctrine of Replacement Theology which is the view that the New Testament church replaces or supersedes the nation Israel as the people of God. This topic was the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation along with two books I have written.<sup>1</sup> As I made known in these works, most literature that examines the view that the church is the new or true Israel have used two designations—Replacement Theology or Supersessionism. Supersessionism appears to have the edge in scholarly literature although “Replacement Theology” is used often as well. I, along with others, have been comfortable with both designations and have used them interchangeably.<sup>2</sup> In the past few years, though, there has been a backlash by some against the title “Replacement Theology.” Some who hold that the church is the new or true Israel and that national Israel will not experience a restoration have been adamant that they are not really replacement theologians and would rather identify their position as something else. For example, Hank Hanegraaff declared:

Finally, I have never argued for Replacement Theology. As demonstrated in *The Apocalypse Code*, far from having two people divided by race, God has only ever had one chosen people who form one covenant community, beautifully symbolized in Scripture by one cultivated olive tree. Indeed, the precise terminology used to describe the children of Israel in the Old Testament is ascribed to the church in the New Testament.<sup>3</sup>

According to Hanegraaff, the designation “Replacement Theology” has been invented by dispensationalists to mute serious discussion of the main issues: “Rather than reason together in collegial debate, dispensationalists have coined the phrase ‘Replacement theologian’ as the ultimate silencer.”<sup>4</sup> So for Hanegraaff, not only does the title “Replacement Theology” not

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<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Vlach, “The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism,” Ph.D. diss., (Wake Forest, NC: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004); *The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009); *Has the Church Replaced Israel: A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Diprose views the titles “replacement theology” and “supersessionism” as being synonymous. Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 31, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Hank Hanegraaff, “Response to *National Liberty Journal* article on *The Apocalypse Code*,” <http://www.equipsresources.org/atf/cf/%7B9C4EE03A-F988-4091-84BD-F8E70A3B0215%7D/PSN001.PDF>. accessed November 19, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. It should be noted that Hanegraaff’s critique of Dispensationalism in his book, *The Apocalypse Code*, links Dispensationalism with Darwinian evolution, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Joseph Smith, Bill Clinton, ethnic cleansing, and racism. He also brings up Hitler and views dispensational views on the antichrist as a potential threat to the deity of Christ. See Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code: Find out what the Bible says about the end times and why it matters today* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007). Some may conclude that Hanegraaff himself has hindered “collegial discussion” himself with the use of such terminology and association. I point this out in my review of Hanegraaff’s book in, “My Thoughts on Hank Hanegraaff’s Book, *The Apocalypse Code*,” <http://www.theologicalstudies.org/page/page/5869905.htm>; accessed Nov. 25, 2010. Kim, Riddlebarger, an amillennialist, in his critique of Hanegraaff’s book states, “The result is, in my opinion, Hanegraaff’s book has a ‘snotty,’ condescending and sensationalist tone to it.” Kim Riddlebarger, “Hanegraaff’s ‘The Apocalypse Code’

represent his beliefs, this designation was invented by dispensationalists to hinder “collegial debate.”

Steve Lehrer, one of the key leaders of New Covenant Theology, also does not like the title “Replacement Theology” since he does not see the church replacing the nation Israel. He says, “Instead I would rather use the term ‘fulfillment theology.’ Israel was simply a picture of the true people of God, which the church fulfills.”<sup>5</sup> R. Scott Clark, a covenant theologian, with his article, “Covenant Theology is Not Replacement Theology,” rejects the concept of Replacement Theology: “. . . despite the abrogation of the national covenant by the obedience, death, and resurrection of Christ (Col. 2:14), the NT church has not ‘replaced’ the Jews. Paul says that God ‘grafted’ the Gentiles into the people of God. Grafting is not replacement, it is addition.”<sup>6</sup>

Sam Waldron has also expressed disagreement with the designations “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism.” In his chapter called, “Supersessionism and Replacement Theology” from his book, *MacArthur’s Millennial Manifesto*, Waldron stated, “let me assert that this terminology is largely pejorative in nature.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Waldron goes beyond others who have expressed dissatisfaction with the title “Replacement Theology,” by also expressing displeasure with the term “Supersessionism.” He states: “To begin with, my research revealed that supersessionism, as it is commonly used, conveys the theologically extreme and hermeneutically insensitive view that the Church has simply and willy-nilly replaced Israel in God’s promises and purposes.”<sup>8</sup> Waldron also goes on to say, “To be identified as a supersessionist, then, carries negative connotations similar to other labels such as ‘sabbatarian’ and ‘puritanical.’”<sup>9</sup> Waldron then calls on amillennialists “to reject the terminology of supersessionism and replacement theology.”<sup>10</sup>

In the attempt to escape the “replacement” label, some have offered what they consider to be more appropriate terms. As mentioned, Lehrer prefers “fulfillment.” The Reverend Matthew Winzer of Australian Free Church, said, “When speaking with dispensationalists I generally exchange the word ‘replacement’ with ‘transference.’”<sup>11</sup> I have also heard some argue for “expansion” and “enlargement.” Waldron prefers the term “continuation” to describe the church’s relationship to Israel.<sup>12</sup>

So what are we to make of all this? For the remainder of this article I will make some observations concerning the controversy of Replacement Theology and whether Replacement Theology is an appropriate designation. Some of these observations are related to historical issues since some today are claiming that there really has been no such thing as Replacement

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<http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/the-latest-post/2007/8/15/hanegraaffs-the-apocalypse-code.html>; accessed Nov 27, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questions Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006), 203.

<sup>6</sup> R. Scott Clark, “Covenant Theology Is Not Replacement Theology,” Sept 14, 2008

<http://heidelblog.wordpress.com/2008/09/14/covenant-theology-is-not-replacement-theology/>; accessed Nov 19, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel E. Waldron, *MacArthur’s Millennial Manifesto: A Friendly Response* (Reformed Baptist Academic Press: Owensboro, KY, 2008), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.puritanboard.com/f31/replacement-theology-covenant-theology-33086/> accessed Nov 19, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Waldron, 7.

Theology and that dispensationalists are the ones pushing the title “Replacement Theology” in a pejorative manner. It should also be noted that the challenge to the titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism” is very recent (perhaps 2005 and later) so there is not much specific discussion in print by those who do not like these titles. Nevertheless, here are some observations:

**Observation 1: The view that the church replaces or supersedes the nation Israel as the people of God goes back to the middle of the second century A.D.**

Around A.D. 150 Justin Martyr became the first person to explicitly identify the church as “Israel.”<sup>13</sup> The latter half of the Patristic Era in particular found a growing acceptance of the replacement view. Factors such as the church’s perception of the two destructions of Jerusalem (A.D. 70 and 135), the growing Gentile composition of the church, and the trend toward allegorical interpretation in the church were also factors in the growth of Replacement Theology.<sup>14</sup>

There is little doubt that many theologians of the early church promoted Replacement Theology. Irenaeus (130–200) wrote, “For inasmuch as the former [the Jews] have rejected the Son of God, and cast Him out of the vineyard when they slew Him, God has justly rejected them, and given to the Gentiles outside the vineyard the fruits of its cultivation.”<sup>15</sup> Melito of Sardis took a replacement position when he declared:

The people [Israel] was precious before the church arose, and the law was marvelous before the gospel was elucidated. But when the church arose and the gospel took precedence the model was made void, conceding its power to the reality . . . . The people was made void when the church arose.<sup>16</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (c. 195) claimed that Israel “denied the Lord” and thus “forfeited the place of the true Israel.”<sup>17</sup> Tertullian (c. 197) declared, “Israel has been divorced.”<sup>18</sup> Cyprian (c. 250), too, promoted a supersessionist approach when he wrote:

I have endeavoured to show that the Jews, according to what had before been foretold, had departed from God, and had lost God’s favour, which had been given them in past time, and had been promised them for the future; while the Christians had succeeded to their place, deserving well of the Lord by faith, and coming out of all nations and from the whole world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 11, *ANF* 1:200.

<sup>14</sup> For a helpful discussion on how these factors contributed to the acceptance of Replacement Theology see H. Wayne House, “The Church’s Appropriation of Israel’s Blessings,” in *Israel, the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 36.2, *ANF* 1:515.

<sup>16</sup> Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. S. G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Clement, *The Instructor* 2.8, *ANF* 2:256.

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews* 1, *ANF* 3:152.

<sup>19</sup> Cyprian, *Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews*, *ANF* 5:507.

He also declared, “We Christians, when we pray, say Our Father; because He has begun to be ours, and has ceased to be the Father of the Jews, who have forsaken Him.”<sup>20</sup> Lactantius (c. fourth cent.) expressed his supersessionist views when he stated, “But it is plain that the house of Judah does not signify the Jews, whom He casts off, but us, who have been called by Him out of the Gentiles, and have by adoption succeeded to their place, and are called sons of the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, while some members of the early church may not have identified their view explicitly as “Replacement Theology,” it is a fact that many viewed the church as taking the place of national Israel as the people of God.

**Observation 2: Replacement Theology has been the dominant view of the church from the third century until the middle of the nineteenth century.**

While the church of the Patristic Era mixed statements of Replacement Theology with hope for national Israel in the future,<sup>22</sup> the end of the Patristic Era ended with Augustine’s amillennialism and the belief that the church was the replacement of Israel. James Carroll points out that Augustine’s attitude toward the Jews was rooted in “assumptions of supersessionism.”<sup>23</sup> According to Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, Augustine (354–430) introduced a “negative element into judgment on the Jews.”<sup>24</sup> He did so by advancing the “theory of substitution” whereby the New Israel of the church became a substitute of ancient Israel.<sup>25</sup> The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages was supersessionist. While varying on certain points, the first generation Reformers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin also were supersessionists. The second generation of Reformers and the Puritans were more open to future blessings for Jews and the nation Israel but the replacement view remained strong into the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

**Observation 3: Since the mid-nineteenth century Replacement Theology has received serious criticism and widespread rejection.**

The last 150 years has seen a significant backlash to Replacement Theology. The rise of Dispensationalism in the mid-nineteenth century brought with it a more literal understanding of the Old Testament including its physical and land promises to the nation Israel. One foundational belief of dispensational theology is the distinction between Israel and the church which does not see the church as taking over national Israel’s blessings. The challenge to Replacement Theology will not come solely from Dispensationalism but there is little doubt that Dispensationalism brought a serious rebuttal to Replacement Theology.

Perspectives concerning Replacement Theology have been seriously affected by two twentieth-century developments—the Holocaust and the establishment of the modern state of

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<sup>20</sup> Cyprian, *On the Lord’s Prayer*, ANF 5:450. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts was the house of Israel; but Christ, when teaching and showing that the people of the Gentiles should succeed them, and that by the merit of faith we should subsequently attain to the place which the Jews had lost.” ANF 5:361.

<sup>21</sup> Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* 4.20, ANF 7:123.

<sup>22</sup> See Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 35–50.

<sup>23</sup> James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 219.

<sup>24</sup> Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, “Christianity and Judaism, a Historical and Theological Overview,” in *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> For more on this see Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 51–62.

Israel. These events pushed questions and issues concerning Israel and the church to the forefront of Christian theology.<sup>27</sup> More than any other event, the Holocaust has been the most significant factor in the church's reevaluation of supersessionism. According to Irvin J. Borowsky, "Within Christendom since the time of Hitler, there has existed a widespread reaction of shock and soul-searching concerning the Holocaust."<sup>28</sup> Ochs asserts that Christian reflections on the Jews and Judaism after the Holocaust "have generated theological questions of fundamental significance."<sup>29</sup> These questions include: (1) "What are Christians to make of the persistence of the Jewish people?"; (2) "Is the Church the new Israel?"; (3) "What of Israel's sins?"; and (4) "What of Israel's land and state?"<sup>30</sup> The answers to these questions in recent years indicate a reaction against supersessionism. Williamson states, "Post-Shoah [Destruction] theology" among contemporary theologians "criticizes the church's supersessionist ideology toward Jews and Judaism."<sup>31</sup>

The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 has also raised questions concerning Israel and the doctrine of supersessionism. Ridderbos lists some of them:

The existence of Israel once again becomes a bone of contention, this time in a theoretical and theological sense. Do the misery and suffering of Israel in the past and in the present prove that God's doom has rested and will rest upon her, as has been alleged time and again in so-called Christian theology? Or is Israel's lasting existence and, in a way, her invincibility, God's finger in history, that Israel is the object of His special providence (*providential specialissima*) and the proof of her glorious future, the future that has been beheld and foretold by Israel's own seers and prophets?<sup>32</sup>

Commenting on the events of the Holocaust and the establishment of the Jewish state, Soulen states, "Under the new conditions created by these events, Christian churches have begun to consider anew their relation to the God of Israel and the Israel of God in the light of the Scriptures and the gospel about Jesus."<sup>33</sup> This includes a "revisiting [of] the teaching of supersessionism after nearly two thousand years."<sup>34</sup>

In recent years, some scholars have argued that the mission of the historical Jesus must be understood within the context of his vision for a restored Israel. As Blaising states, "Many Biblical scholars working in historical Jesus research share the view that the teaching and

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<sup>27</sup> "Since the tragic events of the *Shoah* and the birth of the modern State of Israel on May 14, 1948, the interest shown in God's ancient people has been widespread and sustained." Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Istituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Irvin J. Borowsky, "Foreward," in *Jews and Christians*, 11. According to Peter Ochs, "Christian theologies of Judaism have been stimulated, instructed, or chastened by the memory of the Holocaust – the Shoah ('Destruction, Desolation')." Ochs, "Judaism and Christian Theology," 607. Boesel says, "Overcoming the tradition of supersessionism constitutes the heart of what is commonly understood as responsible Christian response to the Holocaust." Christopher Jon Boesel, "Respecting Difference, Risking Proclamation: Faith, Responsibility and the Tragic Dimensions of Overcoming Supersessionism" (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2002), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Ochs, "Judaism and Christian Theology," 607.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Clark M. Williamson, *A Guest in the House of Israel: Post-Holocaust Church Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, "The Future of Israel," in *Prophecy in the Making: Messages Prepared for Jerusalem Conference on Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Carol Stream, IL: Creation, 1971), 316.

<sup>33</sup> Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), x.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

mission of Jesus can only be understood in terms of Jesus' vision for the restoration of Israel."<sup>35</sup> For example, E. P. Sanders says, "What we know with almost complete assurance . . . is that *Jesus is to be positively connected with the hope for Jewish restoration.*"<sup>36</sup> John P. Meier argues, "It is within this context of restoration eschatology that Jesus' prophetic proclamation and the institution of the Twelve must be understood. . . . He addresses himself squarely to the people of Israel."<sup>37</sup> Scot McKnight argues that older conceptions of Jesus as just a spiritual teacher must be replaced with "an approach to Jesus that anchors his religious genius in a national vision for Israel."<sup>38</sup> According to McKnight, "Jesus' hope was not so much the 'Church' as the restoration of the twelve tribes (cf. Matt. 8:11–12; 10:23; and 19:28), the fulfillment of the promises of Moses to national Israel, and the hope of God's kingdom (focused on and through Israel) on earth."<sup>39</sup>

The recent consensus that Jesus' mission was directly related to the restoration of national Israel has significant implications for the doctrine of supersessionism. In fact, Blaising believes it threatens the very existence of the supersessionist view: "As Biblical scholarship makes ever more clear that Jesus and Paul taught a future for national Israel in the eschatological plan of God, the legitimacy of a supersessionist reading of Scripture grows ever more dim to the point of vanishing altogether."<sup>40</sup>

The trend away from Replacement Theology and Supersessionism has been significant. As Ochs points out, "Over the last two decades, denominational assemblies have mostly done away with the traditional doctrine that Israel's election has been transferred to the church."<sup>41</sup> The 1967 Belgian Protestant Council on Relations Between Christians and Jews stated, "The church's claim to be the sole, new Israel of God can in no way be based on the Bible."<sup>42</sup> The Joint Catholic Protestant Statement to Our Fellow Christians of 1973 declared, "The singular grace of Jesus Christ does not abrogate the covenantal relationship of God with Israel (Rom. 11:1–2). In Christ the church shares in Israel's election without superseding it."<sup>43</sup> In 1977, the Central Board of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation asserted, "Although the church, already

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<sup>35</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:3 (2001): 438. McKnight adds, "Contemporary scholarship is nearly united in the view that Jesus' vision concerned Israel as a nation and not a new religion. He wanted to consummate God's promises to Israel, and he saw this taking place in the land of Israel." Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 6.

<sup>36</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 118. Emphasis in original. Sanders categorizes how certain it is that Jesus believed various things. In the category of "certain or virtually certain," Sanders declares that "Jesus shared the world-view that I have called 'Jewish restoration eschatology'" (326). The category of "certain or virtually certain" was the highest category of certainty in Sanders' work (326–27). McKnight says Jesus' vision "centered on the restoration of the Jewish nation and on the fulfillment of the covenants that God had made with the nation." McKnight, 10.

<sup>37</sup> John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 152.

<sup>38</sup> McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel*, 9–10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–11.

<sup>40</sup> Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," 439.

<sup>41</sup> Ochs, "Judaism and Christian Theology," 618. As for individuals, Ochs observes that Roy Eckardt has been "one of the most prolific contributors to the Jewish-Christian dialogue, maintaining that Christianity has not replaced Israel in the drama of human salvation" (616).

<sup>42</sup> Helga Croner, ed. "1967 Belgian Protestant Council on Relations Between Christians and Jews," in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 194.

<sup>43</sup> Helga Croner, ed. "Joint Catholic Protestant Statement to our Fellow Christians, 1973" in *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist, 1977), 152.

in the New Testament, applied to herself several promises made to the Jewish people, she does not supersede the covenant people, Israel.”<sup>44</sup>

Also in 1977, the Mennonite European Regional Conference stated, “Jesus came not to destroy the Covenant of God with the Jews, but only to affirm it in a manner that would bring the blessing of God’s people to non-Jews, also.”<sup>45</sup> In 1980, the Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland declared, “We deny that the people Israel has been rejected by God or that it has been superseded by the church.”<sup>46</sup> The Texas Conference of Churches of 1982 stated, “We reject the position that the covenant between the Jews and God was dissolved with the coming of Christ. Our conviction is grounded in the teaching of Paul in Romans, chapters 9–11, that God’s gift and call are irrevocable.”<sup>47</sup> In 1984, the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops declared, “St. Paul bears witness that the Jews have a zeal for God (Rom. 10:2); that God has not rejected His people (Rom. 11:1ff). . . . Israel continues to play an important role in the history of salvation, a role which will end only in the fulfillment of the plan of God (Rom. 11:11, 15, 23).”<sup>48</sup> In 1987, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stated, “We affirm that the church, elected in Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews.”<sup>49</sup>

Commenting on the various declarations from the Christian denominations, Mordecai Waxman observes, “The assertion that God repudiated the Jews and elected a new Israel in their place is put aside. Paul’s statement in Romans that God has not repudiated His covenant with the Jewish people is emphasized.”<sup>50</sup> As a result, supersessionism’s grip on the Christian church as a whole has been lessened significantly. In fact, it is doubtful whether the supersessionist approach is anymore the dominant view. As Holwerda points out:

The traditional view that the Christian Church has superseded Jewish Israel, which no longer has a role in God’s plan of redemption, is no longer dominant. Even though no consensus has developed on how to evaluate the present position and future role of Jewish Israel, the negative tones prominent in the Church’s traditional view have been greatly muted.<sup>51</sup>

The above statements and declarations refute the claim of those who claim that Replacement Theology has never existed. A broad range of declarations from various denominations and groups shows that the traditional understanding has been that the church has

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Brockway, Paul van Buren, Rolf Rendtorff, and Simon Schoon, eds., “1977 Central Board of the Swiss Protestant Church Federation,” in *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: Statements by the World Council of Churches and Its Member Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1988), 84–85.

<sup>45</sup> Croner, “1977 Mennonite European Regional Conference,” in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations*, 205.

<sup>46</sup> Brockway, et al., “Synod of the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland, 1980,” in *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> Croner, “1982 Texas Conference of Churches,” in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations*, 186.

<sup>48</sup> Croner, “1984 National Conference of Brazilian Bishops,” in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations*, 152.

<sup>49</sup> Brockway, et al., “Statement of the 1987 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” in *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People*, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Mordecai Waxman, “The Dialogue, Touching New Bases?” in *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 11.

replaced or superseded national Israel as the people of God. Many are now running away from the traditional view, but the traditional view has been that the church replaced Israel. These statements only make sense if the church as a whole has had a history of viewing itself as the replacement of Israel. The above quotations also show that the use of terms like “supersede” and “replace” are not the sole possession of dispensationalists who are intentionally trying to invent a pejorative title to place around the necks of their theological foes. Replacement terminology has been part of a broader discussion that goes beyond Dispensationalism.

**Observation 4: Those who hold a replacement/supersessionist view have often used “replacement” terminology.**

We find it somewhat hollow for some to argue against the title “Replacement Theology” when replacement terminology has often been used by those who believe the church is the new or true Israel. Marten Woudstra, who taught Old Testament at Calvin Seminary observed, “The question whether it is more proper to speak of a *replacement* of the Jews by the Christian church or of an extension (continuation) of the OT people of God into that of the NT church is variously answered.”<sup>52</sup> As Woudstra points out there are various ways that the relationship between Israel and the church has been viewed, and one of these ways is replacement. According to Herman Ridderbos, “the church springs from, is born out of Israel; on the other hand, the church *takes the place of Israel* as the historical people of God.”<sup>53</sup> For Bruce K. Waltke: The New Testament teaches the “hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently *replaced* by the church and the New Covenant.”<sup>54</sup> Waltke also states, “The Jewish *nation* no longer has a place as the special people of God; that place *has been taken by the Christian community* which fulfills God’s purpose for Israel.”<sup>55</sup>

Hans K. LaRondelle claims the New Testament affirms that “Israel would no longer be the people of God and would be *replaced* by a people that would accept the Messiah and His message of the kingdom of God.”<sup>56</sup> LaRondelle believes this “people” is the church who replaces “the Christ-rejecting nation.”<sup>57</sup> Loraine Boettner, too, writes, “It may seem harsh to say that ‘God is done with the Jews.’ But the fact of the matter is that He is through with them as a unified national group having anything more to do with the evangelization of the world. That mission has been *taken from them* and given to the Christian Church (Matt. 21:43).”<sup>58</sup> R. T. France declares that Matt 21:43 is “the most explicit statement in Matthew of the view that there is to be a new people of God *in place of* Old Testament Israel.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Marten H. Woudstra, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 237. Emphases mine. Woudstra believes that the terms, “replacement,” and “continuation” are both acceptable and consistent with biblical teaching.

<sup>53</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 333–34. Emphases mine.

<sup>54</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 274. Emphases mine.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>56</sup> Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983), 101. Emphasis in original.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* Emphases mine.

<sup>58</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1957), 89–90. Emphases mine.

<sup>59</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 310. Emphases mine.



These uses of replacement terminology are just a sampling of statements from those who hold that the church is now Israel. Based on statements like these it appears that the designation “Replacement Theology” has merit. For those who do not like the title, “Replacement Theology,” at least some of their displeasure should be directed to those within their camp who use this type of terminology.

**Observation 5: Those who argue for “fulfillment,” “enlargement,” “expansion,” and/or “transference” language do not use different arguments than those who argue for “replacement.”**

As I examine the arguments of those who argue that the church is the new or true Israel I do not see any difference in argument between those who emphasize “replacement” terminology and those who don’t. It is not the case that replacement theologians use a certain set of arguments and texts while those who are “fulfillment theologians” utilize another set of arguments and texts. The same passages often are appealed to—Matt. 21:43; Acts 15:13-18; Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Pet. 2:9-10. When I surveyed Waldron’s book he emphasizes the same passages as those who use “replacement language” including Gal. 6:16; Rom. 9:6 and Eph 2:11–22. I would be interested in hearing how “fulfillment” or “enlargement” proponents differ from traditional theologians who use “replacement” terminology. It does not appear to me that there is any significant difference.

**Observation 6: Replacement Theology is a legitimate title for the view that the church replaces, fulfills, or supersedes Israel.**

Unfortunately for those who desire a different label, the titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism” are more well established and do not appear to be going away any time soon. These are the dominant titles in both scholarly and popular literature. Plus, as we noted, many theologians who espouse a supersessionist view have used the terms “replace” and “replacement” in regard to Israel and the church. It is not simply the case that dispensationalists have imposed the title “replacement theology” against the will of supersessionists. Those who espouse the supersessionist view are partly to credit (or blame) for this title since they often have used “replacement” or similar terminology themselves.

Personally, I have no trouble with the designation “Replacement Theology” because with this view there is a taking away or transferring of what was promised to national Israel. One can use “fulfillment” terminology as some prefer to argue that the church fulfills Israel, but in the end the result is the same—something that was promised to the nation Israel is no longer the possession of national Israel. Israel’s promises and covenants now allegedly belong to another that is not national Israel. This other group may be called the “new” or “true” Israel by some but this does not change the fact that what was promised to one people group—national Israel—is now the possession of another group. But Jeremiah 31:35–37 promises the perpetuity of Israel as a nation:

This is what the LORD says:

The One who gives the sun for light by day,  
the fixed order of moon and stars for light by night,  
who stirs up the sea and makes its waves roar —  
the LORD of Hosts is His name:

If this fixed order departs from My presence—  
[this is] the LORD's declaration—

then also Israel's descendants will cease  
to be a nation before Me forever.  
This is what the LORD says:  
If the heavens above can be measured  
and the foundations of the earth below explored,  
I will reject all of Israel's descendants  
because of all they have done—  
[this is] the LORD's declaration.

In this poem made up of two sayings (vv. 35–36 and 37), the Lord declares, what Ernest W. Nicholson has called, “the impossibility of Israel being forsaken forever by God.”<sup>60</sup> Notice that Israel’s everlasting existence as a “nation” is linked to the continued existence of the sun, moon, and stars. If a person looks into the sky and sees these cosmic bodies, he or she can have assurance that Israel’s existence before God is assured. Claims that this passage has been reinterpreted so that the church is the true Israel that fulfills this passage are not satisfactory. It is the *nation* Israel that is promised a perpetual place in the plan of God and it is the nation that will always endure as a special object of God’s love.

Thus, the title “replacement theology” appears appropriate. Those who say, “I’m not a replacement theologian I’m a fulfillment theologian” are not making the criticisms of replacement theology moot. Nor does it make the whole discussion of replacement theology irrelevant. Those who approach this issue should not be sidetracked by claims that “replacement theology” does not exist, only “fulfillment theology.”

So how should we handle this issue of terminology? First, I think we should focus more on the concept than the title. While I often use the titles “Supersessionism” and “Replacement theology” I am addressing an idea more so than trying to further the acceptance of a title. Second, we should respect those who prefer “fulfillment” terminology over “replacement.” If I am talking to a person who feels this way I do not say, “You are not a fulfillment theologian, you are a replacement theologian! Too bad!” That approach is not helpful. Yet the titles “replacement theology” and “supersessionism” are well established. And it is these two designations that I will continue to use.

**Observation 7: Those who do not like the title “Replacement Theology” have not offered an adequate substitute that is agreed upon.**

Yes, some who believe the church is the new or true Israel have expressed displeasure with the title “Replacement Theology.” And yes, several have offered terms or titles they prefer. But as I read books or websites that address this issue there is no consensus on what is a better term or title. Some say “continuation.” Some say “transference.” Others say “expansion.” Others offer “enlargement.” And the list goes on. But it is not enough to merely criticize a title, the critics need to offer a better substitute that they can agree upon but so far none has been offered. In the meantime, the titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism” appear to be the best titles used in scholarly discussions.

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<sup>60</sup> Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26—52* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 72.

**Observation 8: Nations and promises to nations are not unspiritual nor are they things that need to be transcended.**

Replacement Theology/ Fulfillment Theology makes a foundational error on this point. There is a lot of talk about Israel being redefined and physical and land promises being transcended by greater spiritual realities, but where does the Bible ever indicate that nations are unspiritual or lesser types that must give way to greater spiritual realities? Or where does the Bible indicate that physical and land promises are lesser realities that give way to better spiritual truths? My question to those who believe this is, “What’s wrong with nations?” “What’s wrong with physical blessings?” The New Testament reaffirms the future relevance of the nation Israel (see Matt 19:28; Acts 1:6; Rom. 11:26). It reaffirms the future significance of Jerusalem (Luke 21:24). It reaffirms the future significance of a temple in Jerusalem (see Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4). It reaffirms the future of nations and kings of nations (Rev. 21:24, 26). Thus, I do not accept the premise that the nation Israel is an entity that God ever intended to be transcended. That is partly why I am not impressed with alleged “Fulfillment Theology.” I do not believe that God transcends eternal and unconditional promises.

**Observation 9: Titles sometimes stick whether we like them or not.**

One of the realities of life in the realm of theology is that titles for certain views often stick, even if we do not like those titles or would prefer another. I am a proud dispensationalist but I do not think the title, “Dispensationalism” is perfect. John Feinberg has correctly observed that believing in dispensations no more makes one a dispensationalist than believing in covenants makes one a Covenant Theologian.<sup>61</sup> Yet for various reasons this title has stuck and I accept it. I do not like the title “Covenant Theology” because Covenant Theology is based on covenants (Works, Grace, Redemption) that are not found in the Bible. In an ironic way dispensationalists are more deserving of the title “Covenant Theology” since dispensationalists base their theology on actual covenants found in the Bible (Abrahamic, Davidic, New). But these titles—Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology are the accepted titles and I go with them.

Jay Adams has expressed displeasure with the title “Amillennialism.” This term literally means “no millennium” but amillennialists do believe in a millennium. To say that amillennialists do not believe in a millennium would be an error. Amillennialists do believe in a millennium, they just believe (and incorrectly so) that the millennium is fulfilled spiritually between the two comings of Christ and not as a future kingdom after the second coming of Christ. That is why Adams has proposed the title “Realized Millennialism.”<sup>62</sup> Yet even so, there has not been a movement amongst amillennial theologians to change the title to Realized Millennialism or some other designation, and rightfully so. To do so would add needless confusion. In the realm of apologetics, those who are presuppositionalists have sometimes expressed displeasure with the title “Presuppositionalism,” but this is the title that has become accepted and there seems little reason to try to reinvent the title. My point here is that sometimes titles stick for better or for worse. In my study of the relevant literature, the titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism” are the accepted designations and it does not appear that will change anytime soon. The fact that a few theologians in the last five years or so are now saying “I don’t like the Replacement Theology or Supersessionism” is not enough reason for these titles to be rejected or for all literature that uses these terms to be considered irrelevant. Thomas Ice makes a good point regarding the appropriateness of the title, “Replacement Theology”:

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<sup>61</sup> John Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 69.

<sup>62</sup> Jay E. Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Timeless Texts, 2004).

We have a number of expressions within Americana that illustrate one who is not willing to exercise truth in labeling. For example we may say, “If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, and smells like a duck, then it must be a duck.” Or, Shakespeare said it more eloquently: “A rose by any other name is still a rose.” That dictum is true when it comes to some evangelicals who teach replacement theology but then will not own up to what they actually advocate.<sup>63</sup>

### **Some Personal Thoughts on the Titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism”**

I do want to make a personal statement about the claim that Replacement Theology is just a pejorative term invented by dispensationalists. It was in 1999 that I decided to do some formal study of the view that the church is the replacement, continuation, or fulfillment of Israel. As I embarked on this study I wanted to use the best terminology that was theologically accurate. Around this time, three authors were significant. In 1994, Walter Kaiser offered the following definition of Replacement Theology: “Replacement theology . . . declared that the Church, Abraham’s spiritual seed, had replaced national Israel in that it had transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant given to Israel, which covenant Israel had lost because of disobedience.”<sup>64</sup> Around 2000, Ronald Diprose defined replacement theology as the view that “the Church completely and permanently replaced ethnic Israel in the working out of God’s plan and as recipient of Old Testament promises to Israel.”<sup>65</sup> Soulen also addressed this issue opting for the term, “Supersessionism”: “According to this teaching [supersessionism], God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel.”<sup>66</sup> While Kaiser and Diprose have theological views akin to Dispensationalism at points, I do not think they are involved with pushing a dispensational agenda. Soulen, a professor at Wesley Theological Seminary, definitely was not a dispensationalist. Many other works also used these designations. I never felt at any point that “Replacement Theology” or “Supersessionism” was part of some alleged dispensational plot against non-dispensationalists. As part of the vetting process for my dissertation and two books (one by a European publisher and the other by an American) on this topic nothing was ever said about pejorative language or unfair terminology.

In my works I have tried to nuance my discussion by purposefully including a variety of terms including, “fulfill” and “continue,” along with “replace” and “supersede.” But I remain convinced that while a full range of terms should be used, the titles “Replacement Theology” and “Supersessionism” are still appropriate titles for the view that the church is the new or true Israel.

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas Ice, “Neo-Replacement Theology,” <http://www.pre-trib.org/data/pdf/Ice-NeoReplacementTheolo.pdf>. accessed November 25, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “An Assessment of ‘Replacement Theology’: The Relationship Between the Israel of the Abrahamic–Davidic Covenant and the Christian Church,” *Mishkan* 21 (1994): 9.

<sup>65</sup> Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, 1–2.