

Israel and the Church: The Origin and Effects of Replacement Theology

by Ronald E. Diprose

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This volume contains parts of a dissertation for which the author was awarded the Ph.D. In Theology.

The topic is extremely important, both for a better understanding of Jewish-Christian relations throughout history, and for an accurate assessment of the role of Israel today, especially in relation to the promises of Scripture and the need to evangelize the Jews.

The foreword, written by Donald Tinder, Ph. D., summarizes the problem (xi-xii):

The triumphant professing church of the Middle Ages assumed (without bothering to prove) that it had taken over the promises and blessings (but not the curses) that God had promised Israel. Our own time has seen the culmination of centuries of Christian Anti-Semitism in the German Holocaust and the subsequent debate as to whether Jewish people are considered to be saved—as Christians would understand it—by virtue of God's covenant with Israel. Dr. Diprose demonstrates that major areas of Christian doctrine have been shaped by the Church's attitudes towards Israel. But tragically for the Jewish people and for the Christian theological tradition, this crucial role of Israel has not been systematically, publicly, and generally reflected upon.

Replacement Theology--the view that the Church has replaced Israel as the recipient of God's promises-- has caused much confusion and contributed to the sad reality that many Christians undervalue or misunderstand the Jewish roots of their faith. At the same time, Christian attitudes toward the Jews and their Scriptures (Rom. 3:2; 9:4) have dissuaded the Jews from considering the New Testament to be a Jewish book.

An especially valuable contribution of this book is the author's discussion of the development of Replacement Theology in post-apostolic times. Replacement Theology was spawned in the fertile ground of a developing rivalry between Judaism and Christianity concerning the interpretation of the Old Testament:

A particular area of rivalry between Christianity and Judaism concerned the Old Testament Scriptures. For their part, the Rabbis rejected the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures when these were used to demonstrate that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. On the other hand, Christians freely appropriated to themselves much in the Hebrew Scriptures that was originally addressed to Israel. This was facilitated by the practice of allegorical interpretation.

As the animosity grew between Judaism and Christianity, the tendency to follow the literal interpretation of the text—wherever it led—was suppressed and the Scriptures were twisted to serve the needs of either party in this polemic confrontation. The result was a denial of Israel's identity and significance within Scripture. The author provides a

helpful survey of early Church Fathers tracing the development of the idea that Israel was replaced by the “New Israel,” the Church.

Another valuable chapter considers the effect of Replacement Theology upon ecclesiology (the doctrine of the Church). If one has ever wondered how the governmental structure of the historic Christian Church came to differ so greatly from that found in the New Testament, part of the answer is found in the development of Replacement Theology. Once the Church appropriated to itself Old Testament passages concerning the nation of Israel, it was inevitable that the liturgical understanding of the Church would borrow increasingly from the Law of Moses and the levitical priesthood. This failure to apprehend the distinction between Israel and the Church underwrote the development of a *New Testament* priestly sect—clearly portrayed within Roman Catholicism, but also present among branches of Protestantism. Predictably, the New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of all believers suffered as a result.

More familiar to those who have studied eschatology (the doctrine of the last things) is the effect of Replacement Theology upon an understanding of the sequence of events related to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the “thousand years” of Revelation 20. The premillennialism of the early Church eventually toppled as the Church was motivated to deny a *future* literal kingdom on earth in favor of a purely spiritual kingdom consisting of the Church *here and now*. Predictably, this resulted in a denial of a key element of the millennial kingdom as set forth in both Testaments: the future spiritual restoration of the nation Israel.

The author is to be commended for avoiding the excesses which lie on both sides of this topic: those who deny the uniqueness and continued relevance of Israel to God's plan and those who deny the need for the Jews to exercise faith in Jesus as the sole means of salvation. As the eccumenical inter-faith movement continues to develop, voices within Christianity are increasingly being heard to the effect that Judaism can find salvation by virtue of a different covenant than Christianity: the Mosaic rather than the New. The author identifies the unbiblical nature of this view (Jer. 31:31-34; Acts 13:38; Rom. 3:20; 11:26-27; Gal. 3:21).

A minor disappointment is the author's apparent disdain for dispensationalism (xiii). Having initially been taught Replacement Theology, this reviewer is indebted to dispensationalism, and its literal grammatico-historical interpretation, for revealing the unbiblical premise that the Church is the “New Israel.” The author's dislike for dispensationalism is difficult to understand given its contribution to the topic at hand. Consider the remark from the foreword: “But tragically for the Jewish people and for the Christian theological tradition, this crucial role of Israel has not been systematically, publicly, and generally reflected upon.” Yet a comprehensive treatment of this topic *has been* systematically, if not publicly, reflected upon--by no less a dispensationalist than Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum ([Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology](#)). Indeed the modern reemergence of a Biblical understanding of the prophetic significance of Israel owes a tremendous debt to dispensationalism and its premillennial understanding of Scripture, complete with a literal 1,000-year reign of Jesus from a restored Jerusalem. This disdain for dispensationalism is particularly puzzling considering that the very

distinction between Israel and the Church which the author supports has been identified as an essential attribute (*sine qua non*) of dispensationalism (Ryrie, [Dispensationalism](#), 39).

This is a minor disappointment in a text which is a breath of fresh air amid the growing confusion in theological circles concerning the continued relevance of Israel in light of Biblical revelation. Diprose's treatment of the topic contains a wealth of important data, is balanced on the whole, and stands as a much needed antidote to the errors of Replacement Theology, and especially its more virulent manifestation: Preterism.

Review by [Tony Garland](#) of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.