

Confessions of a Supersessionist

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Once upon a time I was a supersessionist. Actually, I held to this way of thinking about Jewish Israel for much of my self-consciously theological life.

What do I mean by this? Let me explain the faith of a supersessionist. It means believing that the gentile church has *superseded* Jewish Israel in God's affections. A corollary to this is the conception that the Old Testament is all about the particular and the New Testament all about the universal. The Old Testament God cares only about a little people called the Jews and a little land called Israel. But the New Testament God in Jesus cares about the whole world, not only its people but also its lands. After Jesus God stopped worrying, as it were, about the Jews and their little land the size of New Jersey. Now he has the whole world in his hands, and all the gentiles. To think that he has a special care for Jews is to attribute favoritism to God. Yet Peter says that God repudiated such favoritism when the apostle declared that "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:35 ESV [used here and throughout]).

Supersessionists believe that God did indeed covenant with Israel, way back at the beginning with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). But they also believe that when most of Jewish Israel failed to embrace their messiah in Jesus, that God transferred the covenant to the gentile church, which then became the New Israel. They find support for this transfer of the covenant in Jesus' parable of the wicked tenants (Matt 21:33-44). Jesus suggested, it is said, that the tenants who beat, stoned and killed the servants—and then the son—of the vineyard owner were the Jews who killed the prophets and were about to kill him (Jesus). When he said the owner would "let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons," he meant the gentiles. God, it is said, was through with the Jews and was starting over with the gentiles who accepted Jesus. These gentiles, who in succeeding generations came to populate the church in great numbers, were the new owners of the covenant.

Therefore, the supersessionist story goes, the true Israel is no longer Jewish Israel but the church which has accepted Jesus, made up of gentiles and Jews alike. But although Jews are a small minority within this church, they do not follow Jesus in a particularly Jewish way. Jesus and Paul abolished distinctions between Jews and gentiles; Jewish law has been transcended by the new "law of Christ" (1 Cor 9:21). Jews outside of this church are of no particular interest to God anymore, and the land of Israel is of no more significance than that of Greece.

I believed all of this for the first two and a half decades of my adult Christian years. But then I heard a wake-up call. It came in the form of gentle questions from a tour guide in Israel who was helping me lead a group of church people on a pilgrimage there. When I taught the group at biblical sites, I larded my comments with the supersessionist narrative I just described. My guide Baruch Kvasnica posed polite questions to me after most of my lectures, and in private.

He made me want to learn why he was asking these questions. So I hunted down the books and articles which he suggested. They pointed me to many more.

After several years following up these leads, I began to realize that I had missed much of the Jewish reality of both Testaments because I had been *trained* to miss it. I thought of the book that I had read as an undergrad at the University of Chicago that had made such a deep impression on me: Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1961). Kuhn showed that established scientists repeatedly refused to accept clear evidence for what we now call scientific breakthroughs because they could not see the evidence right before their eyes. Their training in the existing scientific paradigm had blinded them to data that contradicted their training. They had eyes but could not see, as Jesus might put it.

One day it dawned on me that the same thing had happened to me. I had read the Bible carefully (I thought) for twenty-five years but missed what was right in front of my eyes. I missed it because I had been told in my training that it was not there.

The passage that suddenly jumped off the page was Romans 11:28-29. Paul said that Jews who had not accepted Jesus were still "beloved" to God "for the sake of their forefathers." Their "calling of God" (11:29), which was to be "light to the nations" (Is 42:6; 49:6) and a "blessing" to "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:2-3), was "irrevocable." In other words, Jewish Israel's calling by God to be the apple of his eye (Zech 2:8) in a way that no other people was, would never be revoked. It was still in place, even if the majority of Jewish Israel was still failing to recognize its messiah. It is significant that Paul was writing this toward the end of his career, in the epistle that was his most mature reflection on the meaning of Jewish Israel.

Later I came to see that the church is never called the New Israel in the New Testament. The word "Israel" is used eighty times in the New Testament. In every instance it refers to the Jewish people or Jewish polity in the land--or the land itself.

But what about Galatians 6:16? *And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.* This verse is commonly interpreted as a clear reference to a gentile or mixed gentile-Jewish church that is called by Paul the "Israel of God." Does this not suggest that here is a church with gentiles that is called Israel?

There are problems with this interpretation. It misses the contrast that Paul draws within the verse between two types of people. The first type is "all who walk by this rule." What is the rule? Paul tells us in the preceding verse: "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal 5:15). Those who walk by this rule are all those who embrace the new creation in Jesus the messiah—the Christ. Paul blesses them: "[P]eace and mercy be upon them" (6:16b).

But the traditional (supersessionist) interpretation misses the import of the words Paul uses to close this verse: "*and upon the Israel of God*" (6:16c, my emph.). Paul is blessing not only those who accept the new creation but also those who do not. And these who do not he calls "the Israel of God." Who might these be? It seems clear: that part of Jewish Israel that refuses to accept Jesus as messiah. They do not believe that a new creation has come in Jesus. It is still the

majority of Paul's Jewish brethren, the same ones whom Paul says--years later in Romans--are still "beloved of God" (Rom 11:28).

There is another possible interpretation, that Paul uses a traditional Jewish blessing for the purpose of blessing both the church and also Israel outside the church. That is, Galatians 6:16 may be a shortened form of the end of the Amidah, a Jewish prayer which Jews prayed three times a day. Rabbis often shortened it in a manner similar to the way Paul does in this verse. The longer form of the ending is as follows: "Grant *peace*, goodness and blessing, grace and kindness and *mercy*, upon us *and* upon all *Israel your people*" (my emph.). I italicized the words in the Amidah closing blessing that are repeated almost verbatim in Paul's blessing at the end of Gal. 6:16. If Paul is indeed using a shortened form of the Amidah blessing, which seems likely, it is all the more clear that Paul's "Israel of God" refers to the same people the Amidah calls "Israel your people"—the Jews. Thus by both of these readings—one using the literary context and the other considering the Amidah—Gal. 6:16 refers not to a mixed gentile-Jewish church called Israel but to Jewish Israel.

At about this same time, more than twenty years ago, a familiar passage in the Sermon on the Mount took on new clarity. Jesus admonished his disciples *not* to "think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets" (Matt 5:17a). I remember thinking at about this time that the traditional interpretation of Jesus vis-à-vis Israel was that he had come to do precisely that—abolish the Law and the Prophets—because he had come to start a new religion called Christianity that was a radical break from the Law and the Prophets of Judaism.

But Jesus insisted, "I have *not* come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (5:17b). He went on to say that "until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota [the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet], not a dot [the Greek word here refers to the smallest stroke of the pen in Hebrew] will pass away until all is accomplished."

When I realized that Jesus' Bible was the Old Testament, it became clear that Jesus was referring to Torah most certainly, and possibly to the rest of the Old Testament as well. I had always thought that only the moral part of Old Testament law had any significance for Christians. But now it seemed that Jesus was speaking of every part of Torah (the Pentateuch), and not just its moral commandments. I wasn't sure how those other parts could apply to the Christian life, but it now seemed clear that Jesus was far more closely connected to the Judaism of his day than I had previously imagined.

Before this wake-up call I had taken Jesus' vitriolic denunciations of the Pharisees in Matthew 23 as a sign of Jesus' break with Judaism. But then I began to read more widely, and to see that a rising number of scholars were distinguishing between different schools of Pharisees. Not all Pharisees were alike. Some like Joseph of Arimathea were attracted to Jesus and sought to protect him (Luke 13:31), while others supported the corrupt temple leadership. Long after he had started following Jesus, Paul said "I *am* a Pharisee" (Acts 23:6). He did not distance himself from Pharisaic beliefs.

I was shocked to see that Jesus didn't, either. At the beginning of his diatribe against Pharisees in Matthew 23, he (startlingly) used not one but two verbs to urge his followers to follow

Pharisaic teachings! As we all know, he warned them not to do “what they do. For they preach but do not practice” (23:3b). But just before this he exhorted them to “practice and observe whatever they tell you” (23:3a).

I was standing on the remains of the third-century synagogue at Capernaum, near the beautiful shore of the Sea of Galilee, when Baruch first showed this to me. I couldn’t believe my eyes. Or, more truthfully, I wondered how I could have missed this for decades.

After this discovery, the wicked tenants parable looked very different. I began to see that the messengers whom the wicked tenants beat and killed were *Jewish* prophets. And the new tenants who would replace the wicked tenants were not gentiles but the (Jewish) apostles whom Jesus was raising up to reconstitute the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28).

So God, I started to realize, was not done with Jewish Israel. Even though most of them had not come on board the new messianic project, God’s covenant with them was still in place. He still loves them in a special way. God’s hand is still on them. And we gentile Christians would do well to realize that, and stop claiming that we are the new Israel for a God who has rejected non-messianic Israel.

There is one last piece of this which I will mention. God’s original covenant with Abraham contained two promises. He would give Abraham two gifts—sons and a land (Gen 12:1-10; 13:15; 15:1-21; 17:1-8). The promise of these two gifts—progeny and a land—is repeated hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the promise of the land is repeated explicitly or implicitly one thousand times in those scriptures. The gift of the land also shows up in the New Testament, despite claims to the contrary by countless Christian scholars. I don’t have the time or space to discuss this here, but would refer the reader to the books *The New Christian Zionism* and *Israel Matters*.

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