

The Church Has Not Replaced Israel



During a meeting many years ago, an elder of a church was encouraged to stop criticizing a man in the church. He responded by stating the man disagreed with him. Someone then encouraged him to just allow the man to have a different opinion. He was not trying to be personal. Then the elder responded that when someone disagrees with him, it is always personal. People should always agree with him. This true-life event illustrates a common problem that occurs even among some Christians. Some people have a difficult time allowing others to disagree with them. Just watch social media and Christian websites. So, I pray that those who read this article will read with the goal of discovering another viewpoint about future prophecy.

Amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists believe that God has permanently rejected the nation of Israel because the nation of Israel had been historically rebellious and rejected Christ as their Messiah in A.D. 33. They believe the church is now spiritual Israel, and has replaced ethnic Israel.¹ The term ethnic Israel refers to the descendants of Jacob. This has occurred due to a faulty inconsistent hermeneutic. They interpret allegorical statements in the New Testament

literally, concluding the church is the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). Then they interpret God's literal promises to Israel of an eternal kingdom ruled by the Messiah, allegorically in order to make them align with their allegorical interpretations of New Testament passages. So, they flip their hermeneutic in the Old Testament because a literal interpretation creates a contradiction with their view. Consequently, they teach that Israel has no future, and the church began at the creation and not at Pentecost.

All three eschatological views claim the church is fulfilling all of the prophecies given to Israel in the Old Testament. They believe the Abrahamic Covenant was conditional and when Israel sinned God canceled the covenant that He made with Israel. Thus the nation of Israel has no future in God's future plan. In addition, they teach all of the Old Testament prophecies are about the church. The effect is far reaching for this means the prophecies in almost every book of the Bible including the major and minor prophets and Revelation are history books, because they are interpreted allegorically.

Unfortunately, when an interpreter claims that literal statements should be treated allegorically, the meaning is left to the creativity of the interpreter. That has occurred in these

¹ Michael J Vlach. *Has the Church Replaced Israel*. B&H Publishing, 2010. p. 125.

eschatological systems. They are using an inconsistent hermeneutic. What follows provides some responses to the error of replacement theology.

BACKGROUND. First, Genesis 15:6 tells us that Abram or Abraham was declared righteous because he believed God. God had made a promise to Abraham, which is explained in Genesis 15:1-5. Then in verse 6 we are told,

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 (NASB)

We should note the event in Genesis 15:6 occurred before the event in Genesis 17:10-11 where Abraham was circumcised. The time sequence of events is important because it reveals that Abraham, a Gentile, was declared righteous before he was circumcised. That is, circumcision was not a requirement for righteousness. Thus a Gentile was declared righteous and then circumcised thirteen years later (Genesis 16:16; 17:1). Other than circumcision being a "seal of the righteousness of the faith" (Romans 4:11), they are independent of one another.

In addition, Scripture teaches that Abraham had two sons named Ishmael and Isaac (1 Chronicles 1:28). Both sons were Gentiles. We are told that Isaac had two sons named Esau and Jacob (Joshua 24:3-4). Esau was also a Gentile, but Jacob was the father of the Jews, for Jacob was renamed Israel by God (Genesis 32:28). His oldest son was named Judah. The word Jew is an abbreviation of the word Judah. This means that Abraham and Isaac were Gentiles but not Jews. Therefore, Abraham was declared righteous even though he was a Gentile and uncircumcised. Imagine a righteous uncircumcised Gentile existed, before any circumcised Jew was declared righteous. No Jews existed when the Gentile Abraham was declared righteous. Abraham is our example. He is the pattern. *This means a Gentile does not become a spiritual Jew when he or she is declared righteous. This is an important starting point.*

GENTILE ABRAHAM, FATHER OF ALL WHO BELIEVE. Now we will consider Romans 4:9-13, which asks an important question and also provides the answer.

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised

also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. Romans 4:9-10 (NASB)

The question asked in verse 9 is, "When Abraham was declared righteous, was he circumcised or uncircumcised?" The answer is while he was uncircumcised. The Holy Spirit literally reveals that circumcision is not required to be declared righteous.

This leads us to the next point in verses 11-12,

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. Romans 4:11-12 (NASB)

Since Abraham was declared to be righteous while uncircumcised, God gave him the sign of circumcision so that he would be *the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, or Gentile or Jew, if they believe as Abraham believed.* Now if we interpret this literally, that would mean Abraham is the flesh and blood forefather of *every* ethnic Gentile and *every* ethnic Jew. But it is not true that Abraham is the physical forefather of *every* ethnic Gentile since the vast majority of ethnic Gentiles do not have Abraham as a forefather. So, Romans 4:11-12 is making an allegorical statement.

Therefore, it is best to conclude the correct interpretation is that Abraham is the spiritual father of Gentiles and Jews who believed in Christ. It is an error to assume he is the literal forefather for every Gentile and Jew. This is a critical point in verses 10-12. Abraham is allegorically the father of anyone who believes in God, any Gentile and any Jew. He does not become the literal physical forefather when someone believes in God. It is clear from the New Testament that Timothy was not a son of Paul but a spiritual son since he called Timothy "my true child in the faith" (Acts 16:1; Philippians 3:2-6; 1 Timothy 1:2). That is also an allegorical statement.

GENTILE ABRAHAM BECAME A SPIRITUAL GENTILE.

Second, another important passage is Romans 2:28-29.

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God. Romans 2:28-29 (NASB)

In order to understand this passage, we must notice the context is about ethnic Jews or people of Jewish descent (Romans 2:17-3:20). In verses 28-29, the Holy Spirit tells ethnic Jews that a true Jew is not one who is merely externally circumcised (v. 28), but one who is inwardly circumcised of the heart by the Spirit (v. 29). The Holy Spirit is speaking allegorically when He says circumcision of the heart by the Spirit and not of the flesh (Jere. 4:4; 9:25; 31:33). The physical hearts of believers are not literally circumcised. The Holy Spirit does not mean that unbelieving Jews cease to be ethnic Jews. The Holy Spirit is making an allegorical statement that believing ethnic Jews are the true remnant.

We should remember that in Deuteronomy 7, Yahweh told the nation of Israel that they were His chosen people (Deut. 7:6-8; 14:2). But the books of history and the major and minor prophets repeatedly declared they were a rebellious people. Even though the Jews were His chosen people, they never behaved as His people. That is an important illustration of an unspiritual Jew. A spiritual Jew believes in God and is still an ethnic Jew, but his or her heart is circumcised by the Holy Spirit. There are two types of Jews: ethnic Jews and believing ethnic Jews. Many Christian ethnic Jews often say they are completed Jews. They did not lose their ethnicity in the process of becoming a Christian.

Gentiles who believe in Christ are spiritual, ethnic Gentiles. Abraham, the Gentile, did not cease to be an ethnic Gentile either when he believed in God (Romans 4:11-13). He did not switch from being an ethnic Gentile to being a believing Jew or a spiritual Jew. For no Jew had been born yet. So Abraham was a spiritual Gentile. Romans 2:28-29 is an allegorical and not a literal statement.

ALLEGORICALLY, BELIEVERS ARE ABRAHAM'S SONS.

Third, Galatians 3:7, 29 tell us that if a person is a believer in Jesus Christ, then that individual is a spiritual son of Abraham, but not an actual, physical son. Galatians 3:7 says,

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. Galatians 3:7 (NASB)

If we interpret this literally, that would mean every believing Gentile loses their ethnic identity at the moment of saving faith. Why would believing Gentiles lose their ethnic identity when Abraham was a believing Gentile himself before any Jew existed? Those who claim that Gentile believers literally become Jews have missed the obvious. Galatians 3:7 could just as easily mean every ethnic Jew who believes in Christ becomes a literal Gentile.

The more logical conclusion is that the Holy Spirit is speaking allegorically. He is calling every believer a spiritual son of Abraham just as I would be a spiritual father of anyone who believed in Christ as the result of God using me to lead them to faith in Christ.

In addition, Galatians 3:28 teaches that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile for we are all one in Christ as the result of having faith like Abraham. Every believer is simply a spiritual son of Abraham because they believed in God just as he did. They followed in the steps of Abraham. Just as Abraham believed and was declared righteous, so are those who believe in Christ without any reference to ethnicity.

BELIEVING ISRAEL EXISTS WITHIN ETHNIC ISRAEL.

Fourth, Romans 9:6-8 teaches that there is a believing Israel within ethnic Israel.

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. Romans 9:6-8 (NASB)

In Romans 9:3, the apostle Paul spoke of "my brethren," his fellow Jews. He was not speaking about Gentiles. Paul explained that to Israel in verses 1-5,

... belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises. Romans 9:4 (NASB)

But Israel rebelled and worshiped false gods. That was an evil tragedy. Yet, the Old Testament teaches that there was a believing remnant (Jeremiah 31:7; Joel 2:32; Malachi 3:16-18). The same was true in Paul's time, as well as today.

So Paul states in verse 6, "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel." The Holy Spirit is telling us that believing Jews are a subset of the descendants of Israel. Jesus gave us the parable of the narrow gate and wide gate (Matthew 7:13-14). He told us that few find the narrow gate to eternal life. That has always been true. The point the Holy Spirit is making is that just because a person is a descendant of Jacob, Israel, that does not make them a believer in God. A person does not become a believer in Christ just because they are born to parents who believe in Christ. A physical descendant is not synonymous with a spiritual child of God or a son of God (John 1:12; Romans 8:14; Galatians 3:26; 4:6; 1 John 3:1). As we have already stated, it is common today for ethnic believing Jews to call themselves "completed Jews." That is the Holy Spirit's point. They are ethnic Jews who believe in Christ as their Savior and Messiah. Believing Gentiles are Gentiles who believe.

This passage does not teach that believing Gentiles somehow become "true Israelites." It teaches that believing Israel exists within ethnic Israel, just as there are believing Gentiles that exist among the Gentiles. Abraham was still a Gentile when he believed in God (Genesis 15:6) for his distant grandson Jacob was the first Jew. Abraham is the ultimate example of a believer in the book of Romans who is the ultimate example of faith.

CHURCH IS NOT PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL ISRAEL. Galatians 6:15-16 is the last passage that is to be considered. It is an important passage used by amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists to claim that the *church is the true Israel*.² The passage states,

For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. Galatians 6:15-16 (NASB)

Hoekema gives two reasons for concluding the church is the true Israel.

First, he says the Greek conjunction $\kappa\alpha\iota$ should be translated as "even" and not "and." He says "the Israel of God refers to believing Jews", and adds the phrase "all who are new creatures in Christ, for neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision"³ includes believing Jews. So, he has already defined the "Israel of God." Israel of God and that justifies his changing the translation of $\kappa\alpha\iota$. He says $\kappa\alpha\iota$ should be translated as "even". So, he translates the verse as,

And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, even upon the Israel of God.

He ignores the Greek grammar and selects the translation that supports his interpretation of the text.

He ignored the fact that $\kappa\alpha\iota$ occurs 9,009 times in the New Testament. The vast majority of the time $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is translated as "and." Of those 9,009 times, $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is translated as "even" only 561 times in the NASB, 600 times in the KJV, 414 times in the ESV, and 490 times in the NIV. That is, $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is translated as "even" only 4.5% to 6.65% percent of the time. Michael J. Vlach, in his book *Has the Church Replaced Israel* states that the Greek word $\kappa\alpha\iota$ should not be translated as "even" in the passage.⁴ Vicent states, "The explicative $\kappa\alpha\iota$ is at best doubtful here, and is rather forced . . ."⁵ The issue is that Hoekema assumed the conclusion and then translated $\kappa\alpha\iota$ so that it supported his conclusion that the *church is the new Israel*. The church has replaced Israel.

Second, the context of Galatians is the exposure of the false teaching of the Judaizers. We learn that salvation is by faith

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vlach. Ibid. pp. 143-144.

⁵ Vicent. Word Studies in the New Testament, MacDonald Publishing Company. p. 180.

² Anthony A. Hoekema. The Bible and the Future. Eerdmans Publishing. 1994. p. 197.

plus nothing else. Then in the closing verses the context is a warning about the Judaizers. Verse 16 is a call to them to believe in Christ. It announces peace and mercy upon those who adhere to Paul's teaching, as well as to the nation of Israel of God. Since Paul was a Jew, why not wish ethnic Israel grace and mercy?

Third, why would Paul introduce the new concept that *the church is the new Israel* in the final three verses of the book and not develop the thought earlier in the book? If that was Paul's point, then it is greatly unexpected at the end of the book.

A notable contribution to this issue is provided by Donald Campbell when he states,

While some believe that "Israel of God" is the church, the evidence does not support such a conclusion. First, the repetition of the preposition ("upon" or "to") indicates two groups are in view. Second, all the 65 other occurrences of the term "Israel" in the New Testament refer to Jews. It would thus be strange for Paul to use "Israel" here to mean Gentile Christians. Third, Paul elsewhere referred to two kinds of Israelites-believing (sic) Jews and unbelieving Jews (cf. Rom. 9:6). Lest it be thought that Paul is anti-Semitic, he demonstrated by means of this benediction his deep love and concern for true Israel, that is, Jews who had come to Christ.⁶

Therefore, it appears the amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists translation of verse 16 is a choice. It is not driven by grammar. It is difficult to accept in light of the many Old Testament prophecies which literally promise an eternal future for Israel. Those to whom the prophecies were given would surely have understood that the prophecies were literal and would be fulfilled. It is an error to change the translation to make it support one's theological view.

Finally, why should Gentiles lose their ethnic identity and become spiritual Jews? Why would ethnic believing Israel lose the unilateral, unconditional, and eternal promises made by God to the Gentile Abraham? If that sounds confusing it is; for Scripture teaches that "completed" Jews were given a

promise of the Messiah who would establish their kingdom. Verse 16 confirms that promise. *The church is not the new Israel*. A better understanding is that Paul wished peace and mercy be upon all who rejected the "different gospel" taught by the Judaizers and believed that salvation was by faith and not works. He included peace and mercy be upon Jews who are the spiritual sons of Abraham, the Israel of God. If we take verse 16 together with verse 15, Gentiles were included and then specifically the Israel of God. Paul makes a sharp contrast to the Judaizers who thought they were the Israel of God. Gentile and Jewish believers will enjoy participating in Christ's reign over His millennial kingdom,

CONCLUSION. Now why would the Holy Spirit make a distinction between ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles who believe in Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:3, which was written five years after the book of Galatians in A.D. 55? Why would He do this if believing Gentiles are spiritual Jews, or the real Israel?

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God. 1 Corinthians 10:32 (NASB)

The point is the Holy Spirit still recognizes the existence of ethnicity amongst those who are believers in Christ.

It is important to notice that Galatians was one of the earliest books written (A.D. 49-50), but the book of 1 Corinthians was written about A.D. 55. So after Galatians 6:16 was written, the Holy Spirit wrote 1 Corinthians 10:3 which refers to ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles. That is, Scripture did not stop recognizing Israelites as physical or flesh and blood descendants of Jacob. Physical Gentiles and physical Jews still existed in God's view. In the eternal state, ethnicity still exists (Revelation 21:22-27).

In Acts 28:17 and 20, we are told that when the apostle Paul was speaking to Jewish leaders upon his arrival in Rome, he referred to the "hope of Israel." This hope cannot refer to salvation for a plain reading of Paul's introductory speech to the Jewish leaders in Rome is not about the gospel. The presentation of the gospel came later in verses 23-29. Paul's reference to the "hope of Israel" is consistent with the Old Testament prophecies about a future messianic kingdom for

6. Donald Campbell. Galatians. The Bible Knowledge Commentary. Chariot Victor Publishing, 1983. p. 611.

physical and immortal Jewish Christians, which also will include Gentiles. That is, the church has not replaced ethnic Israel. Believing ethnic Israel has Messianic prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

In Romans 11 there is a discussion about the natural branches and grafted branches. In verse 12 we are told there is a future fulfillment for Israel. Verses 25-26 reveal that someday all Israel will be saved and their hardening will cease. That is, they will believe in Christ and be grafted back into the tree described in Romans 11. This was also prophesied to occur in Zechariah 12:10-13:9. The church has not replaced Israel.

Unfortunately, amillennialists, postmillennialists, and preterists employ an inconsistent, allegorical interpretation to a vast number of biblical prophecies that actually promise Israel a literal future kingdom ruled by the Messiah. The result of their hermeneutical approach is that they allegorically interpret literal promises of a future kingdom to Israel, while literally interpreting allegorical statements about the church. Their inconsistent hermeneutic results in eisegesis concluding that the church has replaced Israel. They have forced Scripture to fit into a preconceived eschatological view of the future. A literal hermeneutic does not have that outcome. They believe in replacement theology.

The result is they believe ethnic Israel has no future which causes most Messianic prophecies to become history lessons. Consequently, the Abrahamic Covenant is reinterpreted as not being an unilateral, unconditional, and eternal promise, for Israel is viewed as not having a future. Since the church is now Israel, then the church had to start at the time of Adam and Eve. Pentecost is not when the church started. Numerous prophecies and parables are reinterpreted.

We must not forget that the Gentile Abraham was still a Gentile after he believed in God. He did not become a Jew. Jews are descendants of Abraham's grandson Jacob. A consistent and plain literal system of interpretation leads to the correct conclusion that every believer is a spiritual son of Abraham, just as Timothy was a spiritual son of Paul. Timothy was still a Gentile and Paul was still a Jew.

So, God is not finished with Israel. Romans 11:25-26 tells us that Israel has a future. For the prophecies state that Israel is currently partially hardened, but someday that will no

longer be true. That means God is not finished with ethnic Israel, His chosen people. The church has not replaced Israel. The church is neither ethnic nor spiritual Israel.

Today, every believer is a spiritual son of other faithful men who fulfilled the great commission given to us in Matthew 28:19-20 to "make disciples of all the nations." We are called to make spiritual sons and spiritual daughters for the body of Christ. Every believer will someday enjoy the blessings of living in the millennial kingdom while Christ reigns as king. At the end of His reign, He will give the kingdom to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). Then the present earth and heavens will be destroyed and new ones created (2 Peter 3: 3:10-13; Revelation 20:11; 21:1). Then every spiritual son of Abraham will live with our God forever.