

An Evaluative Review of the Major Theological and Exegetical Problems Inherent in Supersessionism

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KEY WORDS

| Supersessionism | Covenant Theology |
| Fulfilment | Covenants | Land of Israel | Hermeneutics |

ABSTRACT

Despite renewed interest in the theological relationship between the Church and Israel in recent times, supersessionism remains the default and entrenched position within much of the contemporary Western Church. This article identifies and traces the historical roots of three strains of supersessionism before it presents and critically engages with key supersessionist beliefs. It is argued that one's position on the Church-Israel relationship is not a matter of soteriological importance but nonetheless has significant hermeneutical and theological implications. Providing an evaluative review of supersessionism's key dogmas, this paper concludes that inherent theological, hermeneutical, and exegetical weaknesses severely undermine the doctrine's biblical credentials.

INTRODUCTION

The role of Israel¹ – past, present and future – is a contentious issue within much of Evangelicalism, not least because every Christian automatically adopts a theological position on the matter (Soulen, 1996, 1). As such, it is unsurprising that polarised views and heated rhetoric should come to characterise the debate on whether Israel has been replaced by the Church.

This article begins by establishing the importance of Israel as a biblical theme before defining supersessionism and tracing its historical development within the Church. It

then evaluates [New] Covenant Theology and New Testament interpretive priority, before exploring Christ's unifying work, hermeneutical approaches to Old Testament passages pertaining to the Land, the relevance of Israel in the New Testament and, as an excursus, the Atonement in God's plan of redemption.

Despite the burgeoning body of Christian literature critically analysing supersessionism's central tenets and hermeneutics, supersessionism remains the default and entrenched position within much of the Church.² As this article seeks to demonstrate, one's theological stance on Israel is not and never was a test of orthodoxy, but neither is it a peripheral issue. Weighty hermeneutical and

1 The name given to Jacob after he "contended with God" (Gen. 32:28). Thereafter, Jacob's sons are known as 'the sons of Israel' (Gen. 46:5) and the term 'Israelites' came to denote Jacob's descendants. 'Israel' also refers to the northern Jewish kingdom as opposed to the southern kingdom (Judah). In this article, 'Israel' refers to either the Land (biblical or contemporary), its people (Israelites / ethnic Jews) or both.

2 What Soulen terms "the standard canonical narrative". See Soulen, R.K. (1996). *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 16.

theological repercussions ensue from one's approach to understanding the relationship between the Church and Israel.

It is concluded that supersessionism is exegetically and theologically flawed for several reasons. Firstly, it fails to adequately explain the irresolvable tension between God's faithfulness to the Church and His apparent abrogation of unconditional Old Testament promises to Israel. Secondly, it lacks Scriptural evidence in support of the contention that Gentile believers become 'spiritual Jews.' Thirdly, it fails to adduce sufficient biblical proof that the Church inherits/spiritually appropriates Old Testament Israel's blessings by assuming her unique covenantal role and status.

WHAT IS SUPERSESSIONISM?

Walter Kaiser Jr. defines supersessionism as "the church, Abraham's spiritual seed, [having] replaced national Israel in that it ha[s] transcended and fulfilled the terms of the covenant given to Israel, which covenant Israel has lost because of disobedience."³ According to Diprose, supersessionism teaches that "Israel has been repudiated by God and has been replaced by the Church in the working out of his plan" (2004, 29). At its core is the dual belief that the nation of Israel has permanently forfeited its covenantal status as the people of God and its unique role as distinct from the Church, and that the Church – having replaced Israel as the people of God – is now the "sole inheritor of God's covenant blessings originally promised to national Israel in the OT" (Vlach, 2010, 12).

3 Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (1994). 'An assessment of Replacement Theology: The Relationship between the Israel of the Abrahamic covenant and the Christian Church', *Mishkan*, 21, 9.

Reformed⁴ supersessionist, Loraine Boettner, 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)."⁵

⁶ Sizer⁷ echoes Boettner in affirming that "the Old Testament promises, according to the apostles, are fulfilled in Christ and in his new international community. The New Testament writers apply to Christ both the promise of the seed and the promise of the land" (2004, 171).

The term 'supersessionism' is derived from two Latin words: *super* (on or upon) and *sedere* (to sit), thus connoting the concept of a former entity, ethnic Israel, being displaced by a newer institution – the Church (Vlach, 2007, 2). Those who adopt a supersessionist hermeneutic often affirm that the Church is now the new 'spiritual Israel', having become the sole recipient of God's covenantal blessings to the Jews. For this reason, supersessionist scholars prefer the term 'fulfilment theology' (or 'enlargement'/ 'transferral'/ 'expansion theology') as it is considered less antagonistic towards Jewish claims of covenantal privilege. These terms

4 Reformed Theology is essentially Covenant Theology.

5 Boettner, L. (1957). *The Millennium*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 89-90.

6 All Scripture is taken from the NASB (1995) unless otherwise stated.

7 Stephen Sizer, Gary Burge and Colin Chapman are exponents of what may be termed 'New Supersessionism'. Whereas historical supersessionism can trace its roots to the early church period, 'new supersessionism' blends deep criticism of modern Israel with a conscious portrayal of those who reject supersessionism as somehow fanatical, extreme or even heretical (Smith, C.L. ed. (2009). *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*, Lampeter: King's Divinity Press, 2). Sizer is a leading proponent of 'new supersessionism', and many Reformed evangelicals, such as RC Sproul, would distance themselves from this relatively modern, politically aggressive iteration of supersessionism.

are synonymous, however, as they essentially encapsulate the same beliefs (Vlach, 2010, 10).

Flannery observes how supersessionist thought flourished during the Church’s “apologetical offensive” at the turn of the second century (Flannery, 2004, 35). Here Christianity and Judaism grew increasingly hostile towards one another as each group vied to affirm their own identity. Justin Martyr’s “Dialogue with Trypho” (ca. AD 150) records a discussion between Justin Martyr (103-165 AD) and ‘Trypho’ the Rabbi, whom some have identified as Rabbi Tarphon (Flannery, 2004, 39). During the discussion, Martyr accuses the Jews of having “slain the Just One, and His prophets before Him; ... reject[ing] those who hope in Him, and in Him who sent Him – God the Almighty and Maker of all things – cursing in [their] synagogues those that believe on Christ”⁸ The remainder of the tract documents Martyr’s attempts at proving the Messiahship of Christ by referring to numerous Old Testament texts (Flannery, 2004, 39).

Factors that precipitated the rise of supersessionism are numerous and interlaced, though key linchpins may be identified. These include the growing Gentile composition of the early church, and Christian attitudes towards the AD 70 sacking of Jerusalem & the AD 135 Bar Kochba revolt (ibid., 28). Fuelling the flames of supersessionism were Martyr and Origen’s (c. 184-254) writings that advanced the notion that God has dispensed with the Jewish nation on behalf of her impropriety. As such teachings took root, Christian attacks against the Jews became increasingly vociferous, as illustrated by Martyr’s remark to Trypho: “Are you acquainted with them, Trypho? [*the promises to Israel*] They

are contained in your Scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours. For we believe them; but you, though you read them, do not catch the spirit that is in them”⁹

Before specific variants are outlined, it is important to note supersessionism’s theological tenets. These precepts, to be discussed later in the article, include: the belief that Israel has been permanently rejected (Matt. 21:43)¹⁰, the transferral of Old Testament language to the Church to show that the Church is the ‘new Israel’ (Gal. 6:16; Rom. 9:6; 2:28-29; 1 Pet. 2:9-10;¹¹ Gal. 3:7, 9), a resolute commitment to the ‘one new man’ that dissolves the corporate role and function of ethnic Israel (Eph. 2:11-22; Rom. 11:17-24), an abrogation of Old Testament covenants and promises pertaining to Israel, the transferral of Old Testament Israel’s spiritual blessings to the Church (Heb. 8:8-13)¹² and the assertion that Israel will not

9 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 29, ANF, 1:209 [https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01/anf01.viii.iv.xxix.html].

10 Interpretations of Matt. 21:43 hinge on three questions: (1) Who is the audience Jesus addresses? (Israel or its leaders) (2) Who is the ‘people’ the kingdom of God will be given to? (Israel or the Church) (3) Is the removal permanent or temporary? It would appear that Jesus is referring to the generation of His day who, under the leadership of Israel, were responsible for rejecting the Messiah. This generation from which the kingdom will be taken will go on to suffer the AD 70 judgement. A future generation of Jewish believers, “a people” (Gk. *ethnos*, often translated ‘nation’ [therefore not to be conflated with the Church]), will later cry out to the Lord (Matt. 23:39). This generation / “people” will gladly receive the Messiah and the Kingdom at that time (Fretwell, 2021, 99-100).

11 As a Messianic Jewish epistle (along with Hebrews, James, 2 Peter and Jude), 1 Peter – specifically 2:9-10 – is addressing Jewish believers living outside the Land (1 Pet. 1:1). Whilst the “priesthood” of all believers is biblically affirmed (Rev. 1:5-6), the priestly context of 1 Pet. 2:4-8 cf. Exod. 19, alongside the epistle’s Jewish audience, makes it likely that Peter is referring “to the believing [Jewish] remnant to make the point that they have not failed in their calling and are offering up spiritual sacrifices to God...” (Ibid., 94).

12 Heb. 8:13 is speaking exclusively of the obsolete Mosaic Law (the ritual requirements of which have been fulfilled in Christ), and not the Abrahamic, Davidic, Land covenants etc. Gal. 3:17-18 invalidates attempts to include God’s promises to Israel in the ‘obsolete’ old covenant inferred in Heb. 8:13 (Ibid., 96).

8 Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 16, *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (ANF), 1:202 [https://ccel.org/ccel/justin_martyr/dialog_with_trypho/anf01.viii.iv.xvi.html].

experience future restoration due to the New Testament's perceived silence on the future of the Land (Vlach, 2010, 123).

WHY A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF ISRAEL MATTERS

One's position on Israel is important for the following reasons:

1. Every exegete adopts a stance on Israel, whether consciously or passively. It is incumbent upon every believer to be aware of theological biases and presuppositions so that, if found to be erroneous, they may be modified and brought into conformity with the weight of scriptural evidence.

2. The exegete's position on Israel has profound hermeneutical ramifications that affect understanding of God's immutability, His covenants and Scripture's canonical narrative. Supersessionism, for example, commonly eschews plain sense interpretations of passages pertaining to ethnic Israel in favour of typological meanings that are then applied to the Church. The matter of understanding and interpreting God's Word is of no trivial concern for evangelicals who confess devotion to the Bible and who strive for responsible biblical interpretation (2 Tim. 2:15).

3. One's position on Israel affects understanding of biblical prophecy and eschatology. By embracing either an amillennial or post-millennial outlook, not a premillennial one,¹³

13 Amillennialism is widely regarded as the brainchild of Augustine of Hippo (AD 345-425). It teaches that there will be no millennial reign and is an eschatological framework that requires Old Testament promises pertaining to Israel to be spiritually fulfilled by the NT Church. On premillennialism, Fretwell writes, "following the appearance of the Antichrist, seven years of severe tribulation, and the catching away (rapture) of the saints, Christ's second coming (along with his saints) would usher in a *literal* golden-age of universal peace – which most understood to be 1,000 years. Esteemed Church Fathers like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Polycarp and Justin Martyr were of this persuasion" (Ibid., 31). Postmillennialism teaches that Christ will return after the millennium, and affirms that the

supersessionists either interpret allegorically or spiritualise passages that concern ethnic Israel.¹⁴

4. Critics of supersessionism argue that the very character of God is impugned, for if God can abandon the Jews because of their sin and failings (Jer. 3:8-10),¹⁵ He can renege on His promises to the Church. Scripture reminds us that Gentile believers, being wild branches, are grafted into the olive tree (Rom. 11:11-24). Pursuing a supersessionist hermeneutic undermines God's faithfulness to Israel and by default His constancy to Gentile believers.

Soulen identifies three basic strands of supersessionism, known as economic, punitive, and structural (1996, 30-34). Though all three strands deprive ethnic Israel of her unique covenantal status, they vary in their justification for doing so.

ECONOMIC SUPERSESSIONISM

Economic supersessionism states that biblical Israel has been subsumed by the Church, thus forfeiting her eschatological significance. Soulen writes, "carnal Israel's history is providentially ordered from the outset to be taken up into the

current age is the kingdom, with the millennium either (a) a present reality or (b) a future reality once the world has been Christianised.

14 With the rise of Alexandrian allegorical approaches to biblical interpretation, supersessionist thought took root; specifically, the distinction between carnal and spiritual Israel. Origen (184-254 AD) argued that physical Israel was never spiritually worthy to claim the Old Testament promises and therefore functioned as a type for 'spiritual Israel', vis-à-vis the Church (Vlach, 2010, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation*. B&H Academic, 32, 38).

15 This passage refers to the Assyrian invasion (2 Kings 17:5-7) and like all exilic warnings concerning Old Testament Israel, is tempered by God's mercy and His plea for them to return to Him and receive forgiveness (Jer. 3:12-25). God's faithfulness is powerfully borne out in the example of Hosea who was told to marry a prostitute (Hos. 1:2) and show grace towards her despite her immorality (Hos. 3:1). Here is a picture of God's enduring love for Israel despite her sin and idolatry.

spiritual church" (ibid., 181). Thus, biblical Israel is considered a type of proto-church, an entity that becomes obsolete following the advent of Christ. In this sense, Israel can no longer be understood as an "empirical historical identity", but as a present spiritual community of believers (Vlach, 2007, 7). According to Soulen, economic supersessionism entails "the ontological, historical, and moral obsolescence of Israel's existence after Christ" (Soulen, 1996, 30). Such replacementism therefore requires Gentile believers to appropriate the promises given to Israel in the Old Testament.

Economic supersessionism has been espoused throughout much of Church history. Melito of Sardis (d. ca. 180 AD) writes, "The people [Israel] was precious before the church arose, and the law was marvellous 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; and the model was abolished when the Lord was revealed".¹⁶ A more recent exponent of economic supersessionism was Karl Barth (1886-1968) who wrote: "The first Israel, constituted on the basis of physical descent from Abraham, has fulfilled its mission now that the Saviour of the world has sprung from it and its Messiah has appeared. Its members can only accept this fact with gratitude... Its mission as a natural community has now run its course and cannot be continued or repeated".¹⁷

PUNITIVE SUPERSESSIONISM

Punitive supersessionism states that biblical Israel has forfeited her covenant status with God due to rebellion, disobedience, and

resultant punishment. Because the nation refused to acknowledge Christ, sentencing Him to death on a cross, Israel can no longer be termed the people of God. According to Soulen, "God abrogates His covenant with Israel (which is already in principle outmoded) on account of Israel's rejection of Christ and the gospel... Because the Jews obstinately reject God's action in Christ, God in turn angrily rejects and punishes the Jews" (Soulen, 1996, 30). Whereas punitive supersessionism blames Israel's rejection of Christ for her downfall; economic supersessionism argues that she was providentially ordered to be subsumed by the Church.

Punitive supersessionists were commonplace in the Patristic era. Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170-235) writes: "Furthermore, hear this yet more serious word: "And their back do thou bend always;" that means, in order that they may be slaves to the nations, not four hundred and thirty years as in Egypt, nor seventy as in Babylon, but bend them to servitude, he says, 'always.'"¹⁸ In a similar vein, Origen asserts: "... they [the Jews] will never be restored to their former condition. For they committed a crime of the most unhallowed kind, in conspiring against the Saviour of the human race..."¹⁹ Later, Lactantius (ca. 250-325) would write, "... for unless they [the Jews] did this [repent], and laying aside their vanities, return to their God, it would come to pass that He would change His covenant, that is, bestow the inheritance of eternal life upon foreign nations, and collect to Himself a more faithful people out of those who were aliens by birth. But they, when rebuked by the prophets, not only rejected their words; but

16 Melito of Sardis. *On Pascha and Fragments*, trans. S.G. Hall, (1979) Oxford: Clarendon, 41-43 [available for download: <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web.html>].

17 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 584.

18 Hippolytus, 'Expository Treatise Against the Jews,' in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 5, *Fathers of the Third Century* [<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf05.iii.iv.ii.ii.html>].

19 Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.22 [<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04164.htm>].

being offended because they were upbraided for their sins, they slew the prophets themselves with studied tortures... On account of these impieties of theirs He cast them off forever”.²⁰ Sadly, over a thousand years later, Martin Luther (1483-1546) would also espouse anti-Semitic views that both echoed and amplified the sentiments of his punitive supersessionist forebears.²¹

STRUCTURAL SUPERSESSIONISM

Structural supersessionism differs from its ‘economic’ and ‘punitive’ counterparts in that it influences the reader’s understanding of the theological unity of the Scriptures (Vlach, 2007, 9). Whereas the former are “explicit doctrinal perspectives” (Soulén, 1996, 31, 181), structural supersessionism causes the reader to adopt a “standard model” of interpretation (ibid., 31).

20 Lactantius, *Divine Institutes: Of True Wisdom and Religion*, 4.11, ANF 7.109 [<https://ccel.org/ccel/lactantius/institutes/anf07.iii.ii.iv.xi.html>].

21 Luther writes: “First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God... Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb... Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. Let them stay at home... Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping... Seventh, I commend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam...” (Martin Luther (1543). *On the Jews and Their Lies*, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 47) [<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/martin-luther-quot-the-jews-and-their-lies-quot>].

Here, the Hebrew Scriptures and God’s specific dealings with biblical Israel are downplayed (ibid., 31-32). Soulén writes “...the standard model effectively renders God’s history with Israel mute for the purposes of theological reflection” (ibid., 32). He further observes how the standard model focuses exclusively on God’s ‘cosmic’ and ‘universal’ engagement with mankind by neglecting the Old Testament, with the notable exception of Genesis chapters 1 – 3 (ibid., 31). Once the standard model draws attention to the Fall of Man and the *proto-evangelion* of Genesis 3, it then immediately skips over the wealth of ancient Israelite history by focusing on the New Testament Church (ibid., 32). Thus, according to this framework, “God’s purposes as Consummator and Redeemer engage human creation in a manner that simply outflank the greater part of the Hebrew Scriptures and, above all, their witness to God’s history with the people Israel” (ibid.). Israel therefore becomes an afterthought in the discipline of Christian theology (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16f).²²

Whilst the majority of supersessionists deny a future restoration of Israel, some hold to a future salvation. Consequently, there may be termed a ‘strong supersessionism’ that asserts Israel will not experience national salvation, and a ‘moderate supersessionism’ that affirms a future salvation – though not restoration – of Israel (Vlach, 2007, 11). Erickson typifies the ‘moderate supersessionist’ view, writing, “those who were part of Israel prior to Pentecost have been incorporated into the church... Israel was not, then, simply succeeded by the church; Israel was included within the church” (Erickson, 1998, 1058-9). He concludes, “the church is the new Israel. It occupies the place

22 Soulén terms this ‘Israel-forgetfulness’ (Soulén, 1996, 49).

in the new covenant that Israel occupied in the old. Whereas in the Old Testament the kingdom of God was peopled by national Israel, in the New Testament it is peopled by the church" (ibid., 1053). Erickson does concede, "They [the Jews] are still the special people of God... There is a special future coming for national Israel, however, through large-scale conversion to Christ and entry into the church" (ibid.). Whilst some supersessionists affirm that a future salvation of Israel will take place within the Church, no supersessionist espouses a future restoration of Israel (Vlach, 2010, 19, 22).²³ By stark contrast, non-supersessionists affirm both Israel's restoration and salvation.

1. COVENANT THEOLOGY

Covenant Theology views the Old Testament as a 'shadow/type' of the New Testament. Simply put, it teaches that biblical Israel has been superseded by a superior reality in the Church that now comprises believing Jew and Gentile. Its beliefs are encapsulated in Knox Theological Seminary's *Open Letter to Evangelical and Other Interested Parties*,²⁴ which states: "The inheritance promises that God gave to Abraham were made effective through Christ... do not apply to any particular ethnic group, but to the church of Jesus Christ, the true Israel" (VI, 1-2, 2002). Elsewhere it asserts: "a day should not be anticipated in which Christ's kingdom will manifest Jewish distinctives, whether by its location in "the land," by its constituency,

23 A future salvation refers to a wholesale conversion of Jews in the last days, though not necessarily all. A future restoration entails the salvation and replanting of Jews in their homeland and their being given "a unique role and mission to the nations" (Vlach, 2010, 19).

24 "An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel"; Knox Theological Seminary, 2002 [available at: <https://www.newhopefairfax.org/images/Open-Letter-To-Evangelicals-2002.pdf>].

or by its ceremonial institutions and practices" (X, 3, 2002). Reformed/Covenant Theology therefore regards the Church as the 'true Israel' and sole recipient of Old Testament prophecies, including the Land.

Covenant theologians or 'covenantists', many of whom have become leading conservative scholars,²⁵ affirm the existence of three overarching covenants²⁶: works (an Edenic promise of either life or death depending on obedience in the Garden), grace (the promise of eternal life for all those who have exercised faith in Christ) and redemption (the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and the atonement's salvific implications). It maintains that the biblical covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic,²⁷ Davidic and the New Covenant) are simply facets of the eternal covenant of grace²⁸ which runs uninterrupted from Adam through to the present day (Horton, 2006, 73). The enfolded biblical covenants may be unilateral in terms of their divine promise or conditional by being "dependent on personal obedience to all that God commands" (ibid, 20).

By insisting that the covenant of grace is "unfolded in the history of salvation in a series of covenants that make God's promises to His people clearer and point to the coming of the

25 An observation that is not incompatible with the view that Covenant Theology is essentially an 'extra biblical invention' (Pickering, 1960, 'The Nature of Covenant Theology', *Central Bible Quarterly*, 3:4, 7).

26 Outlined in the Westminster Confession of Faith, 1646, chapter VII, 'Of God's Covenant with Man'. Available at: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/westminster-confession-faith>.

27 See W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, 363 for an explanation of how covenantists regard the Mosaic Law as a part of the covenant of grace (Pickering, 1960, 5). This, however, is contradicted by Scripture's sharp distinction between law and grace (ibid., 5) and is an error that is "condemned strongly in the New Testament" (ibid., 8). Pickering notes, "the legalism prominent in many Reformed circles" (e.g., Christian Sabbath) stems from the enfolding of all the biblical covenants – including the Mosaic – into the one eternal covenant of grace (ibid.).

28 <https://www.ligonier.org/guides/covenant-theology>.

Savior”²⁹ covenantists discern a thread of continuity between the old and new covenants (ibid). In so doing, they reduce/distil the distinctive details of the biblical covenants into the one eternal ‘covenant of grace’. Consequently, the salvific, prophetic, and eschatological implications of Israel’s covenants are subsumed and appropriated by the Church. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in covenantists’ understanding of the Abrahamic Covenant, the participants of which are deemed to be the spiritual (not physical) seed of Abraham; specifically, the church which now assumes the role of the “continuing covenanted community” (Pickering, 1960, 5).

Maintaining the existence of only one people of God throughout redemptive history, covenantists draw a key distinction between national Israel and true Israel in both the Old and New Testament. The believing ‘remnant’ of Old Testament Israel constitutes the historical people of God or the Church³⁰. Horton notes, “Israel was not first of all a nation, but a church, a community called out of darkness, sin, oppression, and evil to form the nucleus of God’s worldwide empire” (2006, 28). Building on this precept, covenant theologians conflate Old Testament Israel’s blessings and promises with those of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31) to assert that Israel is a type/shadow/precursor of the people of God; a foreshadowing of the New Testament Church. As Old Testament Israel has been providentially ordered to be subsumed by the Church, supersessionists conclude that biblical Israel is now obsolete as a distinct

‘people of God’. When Christ’s sacrifice is given, all shadows/types of God’s people are replaced by the new spiritual reality i.e. the Church.

Whilst moderate supersessionists affirm a future salvation of Israel (cf. strong supersessionism that denies both a future restoration and salvation of Israel), this salvation occurs only through entry into the Church, upon which the distinction between Jew and Gentile, and therefore the Church and Israel, is eradicated. Horton notes, “Recalling the fig tree that withered at Jesus’s curse, symbolizing the pronouncement of woes and the parable of the kingdom, the picture is of an Israel that, despite its *national* judgement as a covenant-breaker, is nevertheless kept alive by extensive pruning and grafting at the level of *individual* salvation through Christ” [his emphasis] (2006, 130). By equating the advent of the New Testament Church with “Israel’s fruition” (ibid.), Horton is given license to: (a) interpret Old Testament Israel as a type of Church (b) spiritually appropriate promises originally given to ethnic Jews and (c) infer the obsolescence of biblical Israel’s salvific, ontological, and prophetic relevance in the New Testament age.

New Covenant Theology

New Covenant Theology is predicated on the interpretive priority of the New Testament over the Old, much akin to Soulen’s ‘standard canonical narrative’. According to Wells, New Covenant Theology is united in “the logical priority of the New Testament over the Old, the logical priority of the Lord Jesus over His godly predecessors, and the logical priority of the theology of the text over our own theologies and those of others” (Wells, 2002, 22).³¹ Like

29 Ibid.

30 Hodge states, “The covenant of grace, or plan of salvation, being the same in all its elements from the beginning, it follows, first, in opposition to the Anabaptists, that the people of God before Christ constituted a Church, and that the Church has been one and the same under all dispensations” (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, II, 373).

31 Wells, T. (2002). “The Christian Appeal of a New Covenant Theology” in *New Covenant Theology, New Covenant Media*, 22 in Swanson, 2007. ‘Introduction to New Covenant Theology’, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 18:1, 149-163.

The Biblical Covenants			
Covenant	Nature	Participants	Status
Edenic (Gen. 1:28-30)	<i>Conditional</i>	<i>God and Adam/man</i>	<i>No longer in effect</i>
Adamic (Gen. 3:14-19)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and Adam</i>	<i>In effect – universal</i>
Noahic (Gen. 8:20-9:17)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and Noah</i>	<i>In effect – universal</i>
Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 22:15-24)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and Abraham</i>	<i>In effect – though largely awaiting fulfilment during the Millennial reign of Christ. (See § 2. Israel, Christ’s Unifying Work, and ‘Inward Jews’)</i>
Mosaic (Ex. 20:1-Deut. 28:68 cf. Ex. 19:3-8)	<i>Conditional</i>	<i>God and Israel</i>	<i>No longer in effect</i>
Land (Deut. 30:1-10)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and Israel</i>	<i>In effect – though largely awaiting fulfilment during the Messianic Kingdom.</i>
Davidic (2 Sam. 7:11b-17; 1 Chron. 17:10b-15)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and David</i>	<i>In effect</i>
New (Jer. 31:31-34 cf. Lk 22:20) (See also vv. 35-37)	<i>Unconditional</i>	<i>God and Israel</i>	<i>In effect</i>

Table 1 The Biblical Covenants

Covenant Theology, this view regards the Church as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies pertaining to Israel. However, unlike Covenant Theology, New Covenant Theology asserts that biblical Israel was not the Church of the Old Testament but was rather a picture of God’s unbelieving people (Vlach #2, 2007, 215). Both engage in a form of revelatory revisionism that projects a typologised hermeneutic onto Old Testament Israel. Horton (2006) prefers to liken this hermeneutic to a hidden architectural framework that evades easy dogmatisation. Working in the background, it is predisposed to reading ‘the Church’ (Covenant Theology) or ‘God’s unbelieving people’ (New Covenant Theology) in place of OT biblical/ethnic Israel.

In addition to [New] Covenant Theology’s predilection for semantic subterfuge, whereby the terms ‘biblical Israel’ (i.e., believing Jews) and the ‘Church’ become largely synonymous in Heilsgeschichte, New Covenant Theology’s regard for the ‘logical priority of the New Testament over the Old’ must also confront prophetic passages such as Matt. 19:28 and

Lk. 22:30 which depict the clear existence of “the twelve tribes of Israel” and the continued existence of Israel in overtly Jewish terms. Adherence to Wells’ NT ‘logical priority’ results in a glossing-over of the details and specifics contained within the Abrahamic, Mosaic and New Covenants, but especially the Davidic Covenant – the covenant that has the strongest ties to God’s future programme for national Israel (Barrick, 2007, 180). In so doing, New Covenant theologians run the risk of negating Old Testament writers’ authorial intent by imbuing passages with an alien New Testament perspective.

The Biblical Covenants

Five out of the eight biblical covenants are made with Israel: the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Land, Davidic and New Covenant. The Edenic, Adamic and Noahic Covenants are universal in scope and concern the whole of mankind in general. No biblical covenant is originally made with the Church,³² not even the New Covenant

32 Covenants are distinct from the sacraments of baptism

first expressed in Jer. 31:31-34. Though the Church is a co-recipient of this covenant's blessings by virtue of being grafted into the olive tree, the New Covenant is originally and specifically made with Israel.

The eight biblical covenants are listed in Table 1 The Biblical Covenants:³³

Unlike Dispensationalists, Horton refrains from systematising the biblical covenants. He writes, "the covenant with Israel as a national entity in league with God was conditional and that the nation had so thoroughly violated that covenant that its theocratic status was revoked" (2006, 46). Regarding Israel's exile as direct proof of her disobedience to the conditional terms of the Sinai pact (ibid.), he states, "the New Testament treats the old covenant (largely identified with the Sinaitic pact) as obsolete, having fulfilled its temporary function of providing the scaffolding for the building of the true and everlasting temple" (ibid.). It is unclear which biblical covenants Horton is alluding to when he refers to the old covenant, for this could encompass the obsolete stipulations detailed in the defunct Mosaic Law alongside the *unconditional* promises of the Abrahamic, Land and Davidic covenants that remain in effect.

In citing Heb. 8:13; 9:11-23, Horton correctly notes the obsolescence of the Mosaic Law but remarks "all attention shifts from Israel, the oath-taking party at Sinai, to Christ, the seed of Abraham and Son of David. The sacrificial system of the old covenant never did take away sins but only reminded worshipers of their transgressions, while the sacrifice of Christ is perfect and takes away sin forever,

and the Lord's supper.

33 See 'The Eight Covenants of the Bible' by Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum (Ariel Ministries, San Antonio: Texas). Available at: <http://www.arielcontent.org/dcs/pdf/mbs021m.pdf>, 1-41.

ushering all worshipers into the Holy of Holies behind the veil that separated the glory of God from the people" (ibid, 59). Whilst this is an apt observation of how the Mosaic Law is no longer in effect having been superseded by the New Covenant, it must not be conflated with the Abrahamic, Land and Davidic covenants which remain theologically 'live'.

By spiritualising the provisions, participants, and statuses of these eight biblical covenants (especially the Abrahamic, Davidic, Land and New Covenant), Covenant theologians/supersessionists downplay God's dealings with and *unconditional* promises to Israel. In the process of 'typologising' the covenants, the Hebrew Scriptures – comprising two thirds of the biblical witness – are reinterpreted and with them God's special relationship with Israel. These unconditional promises cannot be cancelled by progressive revelation, for this would risk fracturing the integrity of the Old Testament (Vlach, 2010, 114). Steamrolling the specifics and particulars of the Old Testament covenants into one 'Sinai pact' is, it is concluded, overly reductionistic.

New Testament Priority: Discontinuity or Continuity?

The hermeneutical framework of [New] Covenant Theology is undergirded by 'structural supersessionism'. Once attention has been drawn to the Fall of Man and the protoevangelion of 3:14f, ancient Israelite history – including the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and Land covenants – is skipped over before focus is restored by reengaging with the New Testament Church and her future consummation. Consequently, structural supersessionism removes the Law, Prophets, and Writings (essentially the Old Testament) from the canonical narrative and constructs a Marcion-esque 'de-Judaised' schema,

resembling: Creation (Gen. 1) → Fall (Gen. 3) → Redemption (Gospels and Epistles) → Consummation (Rev. 22).

Supersessionists of all stripes and persuasion regard the New Testament to be the starting point for understanding the Old Testament (ibid., 2010, 80). Support for New Testament priority is sometimes presented as a spiritual expansion or climactic realisation of Old Testament promises to Israel, and not as a disjunctive abrogation of divinely struck covenants. Strimple exemplifies this point by way of illustration.³⁴ He cites an example of “a young man looking forward to entering a local college in the fall. In appreciation of his good work in high school, his father promises that he will give him “wheels” for his upcoming birthday... The son is overjoyed, thinking that Dad is going to buy him a motorbike! Birthday morning arrives, and Dad asks him whether he has been out in [sic] the driveway yet. The son hurries outside, but there is no motorbike there! Now, there *is* a \$200,000 Ferrari sports car parked in [sic] the driveway, but there is no motorbike” (Strimple, 1999, 99-100). Strimple notes that the student’s response is not one of disappointment or anger at having been ‘duped’, but one of intense happiness because his expectation has been wildly surpassed. According to Strimple, the “reality of our spiritual blessings in Christ, the fulfilment of God’s grace (both now and in the day of consummation) far transcends the terms in which the promises have been revealed” (ibid., 100). Strimple’s analogy is engaging but nonetheless flawed.

The student received a Ferrari instead of a motorbike, but it is the *same student* who received the gift (Vlach, 2010, 98). For supersessionists, however, the promises originally given to the

nation Israel are *transferred* to the Church – an entity that is *not* ethnic Israel (ibid.). This is akin to the father in the analogy giving the Ferrari to a recently adopted son – not his birth son – contrary to what he originally promised. Transferring blessings to the newly adopted son i.e., the Church, means that the father has in fact broken his promise (ibid.). This theology of transferral disregards the revelatory integrity of the Old Testament, for although the New Testament has the right to “expand, revoke or add referents to Old Testament promises *in ways unforeseen* by the Old Testament authors” (ibid., 95-96), it must simultaneously respect the authorial intent of the original writers. Requiring Old Testament passages to be exclusively read and understood through a New Testament lens, at the expense of authorial intent, risks introducing “alien presuppositions” (Turner, 1985, 280).³⁵ For if authorial intent is impugned or the “NT reinterpretation reverses, cancels or seriously modifies OT promises to Israel” (without hermeneutical, exegetical, and theological warrant), it is questionable whether such an approach could fairly be termed “progressive” (ibid., 281).

Supersessionists acknowledge that God allows a process whereby original revelation is added to, clarified, and expanded at subsequent times. For example, Jesus’ teaching on Heaven and Hell does not contradict, but supplements previous revelation (Vlach, 2010, 93). In a similar vein, New Testament teaching on Israel nowhere contradicts or annuls what was previously revealed in the Old Testament. As Paul Feinberg notes, where expansion occurs or a teaching is amplified, this “does not preclude the original addressees as a part of the referent

34 R.B. Strimple (1999). “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. D. L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 99-100.

35 D.L. Turner (1985). ‘The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues,’ *Grace Theological Journal*, 6, 281.

(fulfilment) of that promise.”³⁶ For progressive revelation to exclude a promise, it must be clearly stated in the New Testament otherwise it may be assumed that the original promises are still in effect (ibid., 79). Such examples of the New Testament cancelling temporary commands, covenants or institutions in the Old Testament include the Levitical food laws and the Mosaic Law. The latter are fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 10:4; Heb. 9), whereas the change in “priesthood priority” (ibid., 93) is made abundantly clear without need of inference (Heb. 4:15). John Feinberg comments, “No New Testament writer claims his new understanding of the OT passage cancels the meaning of the OT passage in its own context or that the new application is the only meaning of the Old Testament passage. The New Testament writer merely offers a different application of an Old Testament passage than that the OT might have foreseen; he is not claiming the Old Testament understanding is now irrelevant” (Feinberg, 1988, 77).³⁷

It must be noted that covenantists, like Horton, claim ‘continuity’ (not discontinuity) when it comes to interpreting the relationship between the Old and New Testament. He writes, “Scripture itself moves from promise to fulfilment, not from one distinct program to another and then back again” (2006, 19). This ‘continuity’, however, is predicated on the premise that the New Testament Church constitutes the fulfilment i.e., prophetic and spiritual replacement, of Israel. Non-supersessionists disagree with this assertion and note that supersessionism demands

that the promises given to Israel in the Old Testament be discontinued and replaced by the Church that now represents God’s people in non-ethnic terms. Covenantists can only reach a ‘continuous’ reading of the relationship between Israel and the Church by engaging in hermeneutical subterfuge that requires ‘replacement’ (discontinuity) to be read as ‘fulfilment’ (continuity).

Further, by insisting on the logical priority of one covenant over another, interpreters come close to establishing a ‘canon within a canon’. It is unclear why the relevance and pertinence of Old Testament passages should not remain salient and effectual in New Testament times unless the stipulations and details contained therein are explicitly repealed. Conversely, if the Church is the ‘new’ or ‘spiritual Israel’, it must be noted that there is no mention by the apostles of the application of Israel’s material blessings to the Church. Whereas Hebrews 8 teaches the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old, it does not “address the relationship between the Church and Israel and makes no mention of Old Testament material blessings or promises being applied to the Church” (Vlach, 2010, 160).

2. ISRAEL, CHRIST’S UNIFYING WORK, AND ‘INWARD JEWS’

Supersessionism frequently draws support from the New Testament’s use of the term ‘Israel’ (Rom. 11:26). Such references are often interpreted as ‘spiritual Israel’ or ‘the Church’. Israel thus becomes an inclusive entity, one that encompasses believing Jew and Gentile alike (cf. Gal. 6:16; Rom. 2:28-29³⁸, 9:6, 11:26). A key

36 P. Feinberg (1988). “Hermeneutics of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.): *Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. J.S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway), 127-28, in Vlach, 2010, 119.

37 J. Feinberg (1988). “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 77 in Vlach, 2010, 95.

38 According to Fruchtenbaum, ethnic Jews, not Gentiles, are the subject of Rom. 2:25-29. Paul is making a distinction “between the remnant and the non-remnant – between the Jewish believer and the Jewish unbeliever” (Fruchtenbaum, “Israel and the Church,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. W. R. Willis and J. R. Masters (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 128

assumption with such interpretations is that believing Gentiles are Jews ‘inwardly’ because physical/practical distinctions are no longer important in the church age (Gal. 3:28f). To maintain ethnic distinctions between Jew and Gentile in the church age is therefore considered an affront to the unifying work of Christ (Eph. 2:14-16). Such attempts to distinguish God’s plans for corporate Israel from those of the Church are akin to re-erecting scaffolding after a building’s construction; tantamount to an anachronistic ‘turning back of the clock’ that injuriously disregards progressive revelation.

But does this ‘bringing near’ (Eph. 2:13) require Gentiles upon salvation and entry into the Body of Christ to assume the identity of Jewish believers? (Vlach, 2010, 211). In Eph. 2, Paul refrains from using the title ‘Israel’ (except negatively in v. 12) and emphasises Gentile believers’ ‘bringing near’ (v. 13), ‘reconciliation’ (v. 16) and ‘sharing’ (v. 19) in the blessings of the household of faith. Spiritual equality between believing Jew and Gentile is stressed throughout Eph. 2:11-22, whereas elsewhere in Paul’s epistles ethnic distinctions between Jew and Gentile are made plain (Rom. 1:16, 9:24; 1 Cor. 1:24, 12:13; Gal. 2:14, 15).

Scholars agree that most of the biblical references to ‘Israel’ describe her ethnic identity (Cheung, 2009, 9).³⁹ Doubts, however, are raised over such verses as Gal. 6:16 where Paul describes believers as “the Israel of God”,⁴⁰

in *ibid.*, 146).

39 A. Cheung, “Who is the “Israel” of Romans 11:26?”, 9, in Smith, C.L. ed. (2009). *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*, Lampeter: King’s Divinity Press.

40 Fretwell argues that it is more usual/common to translate *kai* as ‘and’ (not ‘even’) in Gal. 6:16, so that the text is referring to two groups (Jewish believers within the [Gentile] Church) and not one group as argued by supersessionists (Gentile Christians who are being referred to as “the Israel of God”). He notes that such “ground-breaking theological innovation” – addressing Gentile believers as “the Israel of God” – is not observed in any of Paul’s epistles and would have been an odd

Debate centres on whether Paul is broadening the term ‘Israel’ to include Gentile believers or restricting its definition to exclusively denote Jewish believers. The scholarly consensus is that Paul is referring to Jewish Christians (*ibid.*, 15) in keeping with his consistent use of ‘Israelite’ in the New Testament (*ibid.*, 17).

Jewishness, for example, is used in a restrictive sense in Romans 9:6-13 (*ibid.*, 18). Here Paul explains who the true spiritual descendants of Israel are, focusing on the patriarchal generations of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Far from broadening the definition of a true Israelite, Paul adopts a winnowing motif (cf. v. 6) to demonstrate how a spiritual remnant of Messianic Jews coexists within a larger body of ethnic Jews (*ibid.*). Given this, it is puzzling why Paul would then adopt an inclusive meaning of Israel in Rom. 11:26. According to Cheung, it is “linguistically naive” to suggest that Paul suddenly changes the meaning of Israel, from ethnic to spiritual, in the space of one verse, as the preceding v. 25 can only refer to ethnic Israel because the two entities – Jew and Gentile – feature in the same verse. Cheung writes, “it seems more likely that in a letter dominated by Gentile and Jewish relations, and especially in the section of the epistle that focuses on these themes, the apostle would not modify his normal usage⁴¹ of the term Israel” (*ibid.*, 19). Thus, rather than Gentile believers becoming ‘spiritual Jews’, Paul appears to be restricting the definition of an ethnic Israelite to a Messianic Jew.⁴²

inclusion. Further, the term “Israel of God” enables Paul to distinguish between the Judaizers (who were espousing legalism) and Jewish believers who understood grace; it is a complimentary term referring to Jewish believers in Yeshua (Fretwell, 2021, 84-86).

41 The word ‘Jew’ appears eleven times in the epistle to the Romans, each time referring to an ethnic Israelite (Cheung, 19 in Smith, 2009).

42 In keeping with Paul’s wider use of Israel.

Granted, who is Paul referring to when he writes 'all Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11:26)? (ibid., 21). Cheung cites three possibilities: every Jewish Christian (a tautology), every individual Israelite, or ethnic Israel as a whole (ibid.). He demonstrates that the Greek is not strong enough to warrant belief in the second view, settling for the third position – a future mass conversion (ibid.). However, is one justified in interpreting "all" as "a majority"? The LXX provides examples where the term 'all Israel' represents a group of Israelites acting on Israel's behalf (Num. 16:34; Josh. 7:25; 2 Sam. 16:22) (ibid., 22), and therefore a belief in a national, future salvation of Israel is exegetically valid and scripturally precedented.

The argument that ethnicity no longer features in the New Covenant (cf. Eph. 2:14-16; Gal. 2:14-16; Col. 3:11) is not new. Whilst ethnicity has no bearing on salvation (contra Dual Covenantalism)⁴³, functional distinctives, such as gender, remain intact after Christ (Eph. 5:21-33) (Vantassel, 2009, 72).⁴⁴ Though Scripture speaks of Gentiles as adopted (non-biological) children of Abraham, the New Testament is replete with references to the Jews as an ethnically identifiable race (ibid.). Consider, for example, the circumcision of Timothy (Acts 16:3), Paul's Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18), the existence of apostles to both the Jews and the Gentiles (Gal. 2:8), Paul's declaration that the Gospel is to the Jew first (Rom. 1:16)

43 Dual Covenant Theology is antithetical to supersessionism. Here, the Jews are elected to salvation purely based on their ethnicity. Dual Covenantalists propose that there are two ways of salvation, one for the Jew and one for Gentile, but that both are saved by grace alone (Torrance, 1989, 'Two Covenant Theology', 31, 34). Diprose identifies Dual Covenant Theology as "a threat to Christology, soteriology, and missiology; a threat that is no less substantial than that posed by replacement theology upon ecclesiology and eschatology" (Diprose, 2004, *Israel and the Church*, 172).

44 Stephen M. Vantassel, "A Calvinist Considers Israel's Right to the Land," 72, in Smith, C.L. ed. (2009). *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*.

and his outpouring of love for his Jewish kinsman (Rom. 9:1-3) (ibid.).

Galatians 3:26-29

On face value, however, Gal. 3:26-29 seems to state that God does not distinguish between believing Jew and believing Gentile, for both are "one in Christ Jesus". To have faith in Jesus Christ is to be a son of Abraham (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4). Gentile believers are therefore "Abraham's seed" (v. 29), ergo 'spiritual Jews' (see Gal. 3:6-9 where Paul deploys the same logic). Consequently, Gentile believers, as "Abraham's descendants", are the recipients of the promises God made to Abraham and Israel in the Old Testament. Under the New Covenant, the promises God specifically made to Israel in the Old Testament are transferred to the Church – the one new man in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22).

Evidently, male Jewish believers are physically distinguishable from Gentile believers by the mark of circumcision.⁴⁵ For this reason, a Jewish male who comes to faith in the Messiah retains his ethnic identity. Consider how in Eph. 6:5-9; Tit. 2:9f and Philemon, Christian slaves are exhorted to be submissive and attentive to their earthly masters. Though both slave and master share the same faith, the slave is required to submit to earthly authority. This constitutes a practical distinction based on social standing within the body of Christ. Further, it is apparent that male and female believers, despite their equal standing before the Lord, have different but complementary roles based on gender and spiritual gifting. The body of Christ does not comprise a genderless mass but rather a diverse

45 Circumcision is part of the Abrahamic Covenant (first mentioned in Gen. 17:10-14) as an outward physical sign of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people. Though male circumcision is commonly practised in the US, it is often carried out for health and hygiene reasons. Circumcision is also an established religious practice amongst Muslims.

corpus distinguishable by age, background and nationality yet unified by a common faith. Spiritual equality in the age of grace does not eradicate nor invalidate functional distinctions between elders and non-elders, parents and children, and masters and slaves (see Eph. 6:1-9; Vlach, 2010, 154). Even the Trinity displays “equality of essence yet different roles between the Father, Son, and Spirit” (ibid.).

Though ethnic/physical/practical distinctions exist in the Church, all believers, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and gender, are of equal standing before the Lord. The context of Gal. 3:26-29 is justification by faith (see vv. 24-26) and the passage culminates in the statement that the only way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles is through faith in Christ (v. 28) (Fretwell, 2021, 91). Christ died for all, and all are therefore justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8f). What then is the purpose of distinguishing between believing Jew and Gentile if both are of the same spiritual worth? To define and delineate the role(s) of God’s children in the outworking of salvation history. God has rooted His commitment to Israel in a series of covenants struck with the Jewish race. Though Jewish and Gentile believers have different corporate roles within God’s plan of salvation, both are of equal spiritual worth.

Elsewhere in Galatians, Paul refutes the Judaizers who were teaching Torah observance as necessary for salvation (Gal. 5:12). Such false teachers do not represent ‘Abraham’s seed’; rather it is those who are justified by faith that are Abraham’s descendants. Thus, Gentile believers are “Abraham’s descendants” (Gal. 3:29) but not in the sense of becoming physical Jews or inheriting the Land promises given to Israel by becoming ‘spiritual Jews’ (this is to take Paul’s illustration too far).

Scripture speaks of different ‘seeds’⁴⁶ and not all biological descendants of Abraham are Jews (the Arabs trace their lineage through Ishmael, a descendant of Abraham). Rather, Gentile believers receive the spiritual blessings afforded them through the New Covenant by virtue of being grafted into the rich root of the olive tree (Rom. 11:17). They are ‘Abraham’s seed’ in the sole sense of being adopted into God’s family and justified by grace through faith.

For Gentile believers, whom Paul was addressing in Galatia, to be an ‘heir according to promise’ (Gal. 3:29b) is to be made a partaker of the promises of God in Christ (along with Abraham’s descendants); to be adopted into God’s family and endowed with divine spiritual blessings. Though Gentile believers share the blessings of being ‘heirs’, this does not alter God’s promises to ethnic Israel via the Abrahamic Covenant as spiritual blessings in Christ are *universally shared* by believing Jew and Gentile. The nature of Jewish covenants/promises/blessings are non-transferrable to the church under the conventions of the historical grammatical interpretive method.

3. SPIRITUALISATION OF LAND TEXTS

Physical vs. Spiritual

A key approach employed by supersessionists is the spiritualisation of Old Testament promises pertaining to Israel. Gary Burge writes, “Jesus’ emphasis on the kingdom of God gave him every opportunity to talk about land and inheritance, but he refused. *The kingdom of Israel did not capture his interest* [Burge’s emphasis]. He preferred to talk about “the kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven ... [His disciples]”

⁴⁶ Other types of ‘seed’ include the physical descendants of Abraham, Christ the Messiah, and the righteous remnant of Israel (Gal. 3:29, 16).

minds were on political restoration, but for Jesus, God's kingdom was fundamentally God's reign over the lives of men and women – not an empire, not a political kingdom with borders and armies. The kingdom was fundamentally a spiritual idea, a spiritual experience that transcended any particular place or time or land. People who took pride in their possession of land or city as the trophy of their spirituality would find themselves in opposition to Jesus' message" (2003, 172-3). Again, he writes, "Christ is the reality behind all earthbound promises ... Jesus is the new place of God's dwelling" (ibid., 176-177), concluding, "The land was a metaphor, a symbol of a greater place beyond the soil of Canaan" (Heb. 11:9-10) (ibid., 179). A similar sentiment is echoed by Horton: "Only earthly, temporal blessings can be attained by means of an earthly, temporal covenant, and Israel has demonstrated that they are no better able than the rest of the human race even to remain in that typological land by their own fidelity" (2006, 38).

Burge and Horton's spiritualisation of the Land promises is reminiscent of the Alexandrian school of interpretation where literal promises pertaining to the Jewish nation were applied to the Church (Prasch, 2009, 48).⁴⁷ Their reluctance to interpret Old Testament prophecies at face value, particularly those in relation to Land, is out of kilter with numerous prophecies that have already been literally fulfilled (Micah. 5:2 cf. Matt. 2:1; Zech. 9:9 cf. Lk. 19:30). This poses the key question of how one can determine which prophecies are to be fulfilled literally and which typologically. Would a spiritualised interpretation of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7) have been a source of comfort to King David? Indeed, would it even have been understood?

47 J. Prasch, "Apostolic Jewish Christian Hermeneutics and Supersessionism", 48, in Smith, C.L. ed. (2009). *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*.

(Smith, 35).⁴⁸

Vantassel identifies an inherent flaw in the process of spiritualising texts. He observes how supersessionists often portray a literal bestowal of land to the Jews as incompatible with Christ's bestowal of spiritual blessings upon the Gentiles in the New Covenant (Vantassel, 78).⁴⁹ He notes, however, that the physical and spiritual are not mutually exclusive. In 1 Cor. 15, Paul counters prevalent Greek dualist thought which regarded the spiritual (soul) and material (body) as two distinct entities. Whereas the Corinthians believed that the body was no longer important in the 'age of the Spirit', Paul shows that godly living is essential for orthopraxy, an act of worship that anticipates the future bodily resurrection of believers. Furthermore, in the wider context of the chapter, it is because of Christ's *physical* death and resurrection that believers may know forgiveness of sins, the root of all Christian hope (1 Cor. 15:17). Christ's literal/physical death and resurrection therefore constitutes the bedrock of the Christian faith.⁵⁰

According to Burge, however, Old Testament prophecies pertaining to Israel and the Land have been spiritually dissolved by Christ's insuperable, all-encompassing work of redemption (2003, 179). This accordingly accounts for the paucity of New Testament references to the Land and reflects the true nature of God's kingdom – spiritual and divine, not earthly/material (ibid., 168). By insisting that Jesus refused to discuss the kingdom of God in unspiritual, earthly terms (ibid., 173), Burge dichotomises the physical and the spiritual and further bifurcates the two realms

48 C. Smith, "Biblical Theology and the Modern State of Israel", 35, in ibid.

49 Vantassel, "A Calvinist Considers Israel's Right to the Land," 78, in ibid.

50 In a similar vein, Vantassel demonstrates how the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10) unites the theme of fellowship and land, and thus the spiritual and the material (76 in ibid.).

by elevating the latter above the former in true Platonic fashion. Whilst types exist in the Bible, *typological* interpretation is unmerited in its spiritual dissolution of Old Testament realities and promises concerning physical Israel.

In response to Burge’s comment that the New Testament is largely quiet on the Land promises, it is noted that God has made known His intentions and promises in the Old Testament; so why, asks Vlach, must He repeat them in the New Testament for the original stipulations to stand? (2010, 111). He states, “It is not an argument from silence to claim OT promises to Israel are still in force” (ibid.) before citing Feinberg’s explanation: “because God has already in the OT broken the silence and given us his thinking.”⁵¹ It must also be noted that the New Testament writers – dwelling in the Land during the time of Christ’s ministry – would have been steeped in Old Testament prophecies and may therefore not have felt the need to elaborate on the future return of Israel to the Land. The risk of riling the Romans by triggering insubordination would likely have further deterred any in-depth discussion of such a politically sensitive matter. Moreover, when the question of the timing of the kingdom’s restoration to Israel was raised (Acts 1:6), its central premise was affirmed by Christ despite it not being directly answered (vv. 7-8).⁵²

Literal Interpretation of the Land Promises

Nowhere does Scripture regard the physical and spiritual as mutually exclusive or oppositional. On what basis may we then decide which

51 J. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. J.S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 76 in Vlach, 2010, 112.

52 “The fact that these disciples had immediately experienced 40 days of kingdom instruction from the risen Jesus (Acts 1:3) makes it unlikely they could be so wrong about the nature of the kingdom and national Israel’s relationship to it” (Vlach, 2010, 192).

prophecies are to be fulfilled literally and which typologically? A reluctance to interpret Old Testament prophecies literally, particularly those in relation to the Land, is out of kilter with a plethora of literally fulfilled prophecies, for example: Mic. 5:2 // Matt. 2:1, Lk. 2:4-6; Isa. 7:14 // Matt. 1:22f; Lk. 1:26-31, 2 Sam. 7:12f // Lk. 1:32f; Isa. 7:14 // Matt. 1:23; Ps. 2:7 // Matt. 3:16-17; Isa. 11:1 // Matt. 2:23; Isa. 61:1f // Lk. 4:18f; Isa. 53:12 // Matt. 27:38; Ps. 69:21 // Matt. 27:34; Ps. 22:16 // Jn. 20:25-27; Ps. 34:20 // Jn. 19:33-36; Zech. 9:9 // Lk. 19:30 and Matt. 21:5. Other examples of literal prophetic fulfilment include 1 Kings 13:2 (the altar at Bethel) and the fulfilment (2 Kings 23:15-17); Isaiah 7:14 and Matt. 1:23; Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53:8-10.⁵³ If these and many other prophecies have demonstrably been fulfilled literally, it is problematic to insist that promises pertaining to Israel and the Land have been (or must be) spiritually/typologically fulfilled in Christ.⁵⁴

The land of Israel is a physical entity, for as Jesus walked *eretz* Israel during His first coming, His feet will once again stand on the Mount of Olives at His second coming (Zech. 14:4). Jesus returns corporeally, not ethereally (Acts 1:10f).⁵⁵ The Millennium, a period of a thousand years during which Christ reigns

53 Noted by Parker, K. (2012). *Is the Church the New Israel: An In-depth Look into Replacement Theology. Prayer for Israel.*

54 J.C. Ryle, bishop of Liverpool (1880-1900), writes, “It is high time for Christians to interpret unfulfilled prophecy by the light of prophecies already fulfilled. The curses of the Jews were brought to pass literally; so also will be the blessings. The scattering was literal; so also will be the gathering. The pulling down of Zion was literal; so also will be the building up. The rejection of Israel was literal; so also will be the restoration” (J. C. Ryle, *Are You Ready For The End Of Time?* Christian Focus, 2001, 49).

55 The author of Hebrews associates entry into the Promised Land with rest, however this spiritual application is rooted in - and does not dissolve - the concrete referent of the land of Canaan (Heb. 3-4). Just because Abraham was looking “for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10) does not mean that the ‘earthly’ promises are dissolved.

from Jerusalem in the physical land of Israel (Rev. 20), will witness a series of pronounced geographical changes. These include Mount Zion becoming the highest mountain in the world (Isa. 2:1-3) and the removal of many, but not all, of the physical effects of the Adamic curse (Isa. 11:6-9; 65:17-25; Mic. 4:1-5).⁵⁶ For those who hold to a spiritualised/typological hermeneutic, it is difficult to envisage how such passages may be interpreted non-literally whilst honouring the texts' perspicuity.

Similarly, Ezekiel chapters 40-48 prophesy the details of the Millennial Temple with breath-taking specificity, including the division of the Land and the river flowing from beneath the Temple which desalinises the Red Sea (Ezek. 47:8-10). It is a stretch to conceive how such chapters may be interpreted allegorically or typologically whilst honouring the text. Attempts to spiritually dissolve unfulfilled prophecies that demand literal fulfilments are injurious to sound biblical exegesis and the pursuit of responsible hermeneutical inquiry.

Typological?

That said, do prophecies always require a literal fulfilment? What guidelines may be adopted to help interpreters handle Scripture responsibly, especially prophetic portions? When considering the Church-Israel relationship, the exegete must wrestle with such issues as: how the New Testament uses the Old Testament; whether *sensus plenior* applications stray beyond the confines of legitimate grammatical-historical interpretation; the validity or otherwise of typological interpretation in the New Testament; whether New Testament authors embraced a Second Temple Jewish interpretive approach; and whether modern-

day readers of Scripture should use Midrashic interpretive principles when studying the Old Testament (Vlach, 2010, 91-2). As a starting point, Cooper's 'Golden Rule' is instructive. It states, "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise".⁵⁷ Cooper is not propounding a wooden literalism but rather a "plain sense" hermeneutic that takes Scripture, unless clearly ridiculous to do so, at face value.

Scripture does contain types and antitypes. For example, the requirements of the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system have been spiritually fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 4:14, 6:20). The Levites were a type that prefigured the antitype of Christ's death and resurrection (Vlach, 2010, 93). Similarly, Jonah and his three days in the belly of the fish is a type of Christ's death, burial and resurrection (Matt. 12:40). In both these instances, the New Testament explicitly links the two referents. For the NT antitype to cancel the meaning of the OT type, it must explicitly make this connection, and New Testament 'silence' must not be equated with a discontinuation of the original provision/promise (ibid., 117). It is presumptuous, therefore, for Strimple to assert that "the land of Canaan, the city of Jerusalem, the temple, the throne of David, the nation Israel itself" are all types "pointing forward to the work of Christ"⁵⁸ as there is no corroborating New Testament evidence to support this claim. Such typology disregards the conventions of grammatical-historical interpretation and

56 Fruchtenbaum, A. G. (2003). *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, Ariel Ministries, 387.

57 D.L. Cooper, 1970, 11 [see <http://www.messianicassociation.org/ezone19-dc.hermeneutics.html>].

58 R. B. Strimple (1999). "Amillennialism," in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 86.

ignores the fact that several New Testament passages rely on “eschatological details found in the Old Testament” (ibid., 106). Key examples include, but are not limited to, the abomination of desolation (Matt. 24:15 cf. Dan. 9:24-27) and Peter’s vision of the ‘new heavens and new earth’ (2 Pet. 3:10, 13 cf. Isa. 65:17, 66:22) (ibid.). Such Old Testament promises are not spiritually dissolved/‘typologised’ by the New Testament writers, but are rather affirmed as having a literal/plain-sense fulfilment (ibid., 101). Whilst it is true that New Testament writers sometimes quote Old Testament passages in ‘less than literal’ ways i.e., *sensus plenior* applications (Hos. 11:1 cf. Matt. 2:15),⁵⁹ the vast majority of the New Testament quotes the Old Testament in a literal manner (ibid.).

The Land of Israel is a legitimate biblical theme that remains the historical and prophetic domain of the Jews. Attempts to dissolve or abrogate the Land promises, alongside other prophecies awaiting a literal fulfilment, derive from a Platonic-Alexandrian hermeneutic. This emphasis on spiritually/Christologically dissolving Old Testament expectations concerning the Temple, Land and Day of the Lord in turn derives from a Scotist⁶⁰ hermeneutic that risks caricaturing physical matters as carnal, mundane, and unspiritual (ibid., 119). If taken to its logical limit, supersessionist attitudes to the Land would require believers to typologise large swathes of Scripture once they become exclusively ‘absorbed’ in Jesus. Christ is indeed the centre of biblical prophecy (2 Cor. 1:20), but not at the expense of prophetic detail

59 Here and elsewhere, the original meaning is neither discarded nor adulterated but rather supplemented with additional application that does not violate the integrity of the original revelation.

60 A Scotist approach helps “remove Israelite elements from the Christian faith” (Vlach, 2010, 65), effectively viewing all earthbound promises in light of Christ’s redemption. This approach was heavily used by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1835) (ibid.).

(ibid., 120). If Christ Himself taught a future restoration of Israel (Lk. 22:30), it is wrong to insist that Jesus’ claims are not Christocentric enough. In the words of Horner, we need “a right Christocentric method of interpretation that is relevant to all of Scripture” (Horner, 2007, 195) and not a misguided “Christocentric hermeneutic against the Hebrew Scriptures” (ibid., 192, 186).⁶¹

Advancing beyond the innocuous assertion that “Scripture is centrally a witness to Christ” (Horton, 2006, 12) (a truism that belies supersessionism’s spiritual appropriation of Old Testament prophecies to Israel), Horton cites Christ’s pronouncement of covenant curses (woes) on the Pharisees as proof that He was “redrawing the true Israel around himself rather than Temple and Torah” (2006, 59). Whilst he is right to note the defunct role of the Temple in New Testament Christianity, the abrogation of the Mosaic commands that have been fulfilled in Christ, and the soteriological pre-eminence of the Son, he is wrong to invoke Jesus’s teaching as a pretext to argue for the annulment – or spiritual appropriation by the Church – of the stipulations laid out in the Abrahamic, Land and Davidic covenants. Though Jesus railed against the Pharisaic legalism of His day that embondaged the devout instead of leading them to Christ, He – along with Paul – affirmed a future role for the Jewish nation distinct from the Church (see section 5). Jesus was a Jew who exhibited no antagonism towards the Law (Matt. 1:22; 5:17ff; 13:35; Jn. 19:36; Lk. 24:44; Rom. 10:4) and regarded faith in His Messianic claims to be in no way incompatible with God’s continuing plans for the Jewish nation and people.

In the above discussion, it is clear that

61 B.E. Horner (2007). *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged*, NACSBT (Nashville: B&H Academic).

hermeneutical approaches to the Church-Israel relationship are influenced by two competing visions/models: the *Spiritual Vision Model* and the *New Creation Model* (Blaising, 1999, 161-2).⁶² The former draws a basic contrast between spirit and matter (and is therefore linked to the Platonic tradition), and views eternal life “primarily as cognitive, meditative, or contemplative” (ibid., 167). By contrast, the *New Creation Model* “draws on biblical texts that speak of a future everlasting kingdom, of a new earth and the renewal of life on it, of bodily resurrection..., of social and even political concourse among the redeemed” (ibid.). Unlike the former model, “it does not reject physicality of materiality, but affirms them as essential to both a holistic anthropology and to the biblical ideas of a redeemed creation” (ibid.) According to Vlach, a regenerated earth involves matters like “nations, kings, economics, culture, and other matters linked to a physical planet” (2007, 167).

Proponents of this non-supersessionist model note God’s interest in bringing about physical, social, political, and economic transformation as well as spiritual renewal (Matt. 19:28; Acts 3:19-21; Rev. 21-22 cf. Gen. 3) (ibid., 168). It rejects the Platonic dualism between spirit and matter that underpins the *Spiritual Vision Model* and asserts that God has an enduring plan and purpose for all nations, but foremostly Israel. Key tenets of the *New Creation Model* include: (1) a future restoration and salvation of Israel (Ezek. 37:21-29; Jer. 30:1-3; Zeph. 3:20; Rom. 11:26; Matt. 19:28; Lk. 22:30; Matt. 23:37-39; Lk. 21:24; Acts 1:6; Rom. 11) (2) affirmation of Israel’s ‘indestructibility’ and perpetual existence (Jer. 31:35-37) (3) God’s covenant fidelity towards Israel (Rom.

9:3-5) and (4) a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers (Rev. 7:4-8 cf. 7:9) (ibid., 177, 177-192).

4. MODERN ISRAEL AND THE LAND

The Land Promises Universalised

At first glance, Rom. 11:17-24 appears to be an open rebuke against the prideful assertion that Israel has been rejected by God in favour of Gentile believers. Only strong supersessionists would deny a future salvation of Israel, however all supersessionists regard this salvation to take place exclusively within the context of entry into the Church. Upon this ‘ingrafting’ (vv. 23-24), it is maintained that the ethnic distinctives (and by association the OT Land promises) are sublimated into the spiritual reality of the New Testament Church. This belief does justice to the clear teaching of Rom. 11, namely that God has planned a future salvation of Israel and honours the conviction that the New Testament does not distinguish between the Church and Israel.

Sizer states, “It is not that the church has replaced Israel. Rather, in the new covenant church, God has fulfilled the promises originally made to the old covenant church” (2004, 17). Here, Sizer uses the concept of ‘fulfilment’ to dissolve Israel’s covenantal blessings. Similarly, Burge pronounces, “According to the New Testament, Christians are children of Abraham because this heritage is acquired by faith, not by lineage. In Christ, the promises of God are theirs” (2003, 189). Chapman summarises: “the coming of the kingdom of God through Jesus the Messiah has transformed and reinterpreted all the promises and prophecies in the Old Testament ... Jesus the Messiah, who lived, died and was raised from death in the land, has opened the kingdom of God to people of

62 C.A. Blaising (1999). “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 161-2.

all races, making all who follow him into ‘one new humanity’ (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV)” (2002, 285).

Chapman is correct to note that the Church partakes in Israel’s promises in the New Testament, *but equally the Church does not ‘take over’ such promises.*⁶³ The basis of Israel’s relationship with God, including her right to live in the Land, is the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 7, 13:14-17, 15:18-21), the validity of which does not depend on man’s obedience but on God’s faithfulness (see Ps. 105:5-11). It is therefore problematic to state, as do Burge, Chapman and Sizer, that Christians are recipients of God’s sovereign grace by virtue of being grafted into the olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24) *whilst simultaneously affirming Israel’s permanent rejection by God.* For if God has not kept His promises to ethnic Israel, or the promises have been ‘spiritually dissolved’, He is under no obligation to keep His promises to the Church. As Paul warns Gentile believers in Rom. 11:18, “do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you”.

Supersessionist approaches to the Land annul the promises originally given to ethnic Israel by sublimating practical distinctions between the Church and Israel in the New Testament. Though Gal. 3:29 designates Gentile believers as “Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise”, the existence of Gentile believers neither strips ethnic Israel of her covenantal blessings nor mandates a transferral of Jewish covenantal blessings to the Church. Rather, *all* believers share in the universal spiritual blessings of the New Covenant (Jer.

31:31-34). Though the New Covenant is written onto the hearts of *all* believers, ‘Israel’ must not be regarded as a byword for the people of God as this entails ethnic, spiritual, and prophetic misappropriation. The Church, it is noted, was not fully conceived at the time the New Covenant was pronounced (Jer. 31:31-34 cf. Acts 2).

Exile and Return

In dealing with the question of the Land, Burge selectively refers to passages that mention Israel’s exile and punishment yet omits those that speak of her re-gathering and subsequent blessing. For example, in his discussion on “promises with conditions” (2003, 72), he cites Deut. 4:25-27 yet omits vv. 28-31; Deut. 8:17-19 yet omits 30:1-14 (*ibid.*, 74). Elsewhere in his discussion of the Old Testament prophets’ warnings (*ibid.*, 99), he quotes texts from Isaiah (1:16-17, 5:1-7) that evince God’s decision “to forsake the vineyard together” (*ibid.*, 101-2) yet omits passages that speak of God’s enduring love for, protection of, and commitment to Israel (Isa. 2:2-4, 11:1-16, 27:2-13, 35:1-10, 41:8-16, 43:1-7, 49:14-26, 62:1-5).⁶⁴ Anyone reading Burge’s book who fails to study the context of his references might therefore come to the faulty conclusion that Israel has been permanently rejected by God. In fact, every prophecy concerning Israel’s judgement is tempered by a prophecy of consolation and restoration (Vantassel, 74, 2009)⁶⁵ (see Jer. 3:1-3 cf. vv. 12-25). In the litany of punishments in Deuteronomy 28, for example, there is no mention of Israel’s permanent castigation, only temporary exile. The sins of Israel bring severe

63 Concerning the Church, Bock writes “the inclusion of Gentiles does not mean the exclusion of Israel” (Darrell, Bock; Mitch Glaser (2018). *Israel, the Church and the Middle East: A Biblical Response to the Current Crisis*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 180).

64 These passages are quoted in Horner, 2007, *Future Israel*, 78.

65 Vantassel, “A Calvinist Considers Israel’s Right to the Land,” 74, in Smith, C.L. ed. (2009). *The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism*.

punishment, not “covenantal abandonment” (Horner, 2007, 79).

A similar approach is adopted by Horton who writes, “Put yourself in the place of the Israelites living under the terms of Sinai. What conclusions do you draw if you are living in exile in your own land under foreign oppression? Has God failed to keep his promises? Have we failed and has God consequently cut us off forever? Will God renew his patronage as our suzerain if we renew our vows and ratchet up our faithfulness to the Law? These questions can only be answered by going back to the Scriptures, which means, of course, the Old Testament (see, for example, Ps. 89:38–39; Jer. 13:12 ff.)” (Horton, 2006, 47). Whilst Ps. 89:38–39 speak of Israel’s ‘rejection’ and ‘repudiation’ of Yahweh’s covenant, the promises of the Davidic covenant are repeated throughout (vv. 3f, 19–37). Similarly, Horton cites Jeremiah 13:12ff, but omits Jer. 16:14–21 that speaks of restoration. Scriptures that are invoked in support of Israel’s permanent castigation must be read alongside passages that foretell Israel’s future restoration and consolation.

As the post-exilic Jews were exercising their biblical mandate to return to the Land after the Babylonian captivity, it appears a double-standard to insist that diasporic Jews today are no longer the rightful tenants of the Land (see Sizer, 2003, 96; Burge, 2003, 93). For if it was God’s purpose for the Jews to return from exile following the Babylonian captivity, why not today when many prophetic passages in the Old Testament foretell an *end-time* regathering (Isa. 11:11f; Jer. 16:15f; Ezek. 20:33–38; 36:24–26)? A key provision in the Abrahamic Covenant is God giving Abraham and his descendants, “The whole land of Canaan ... as an *everlasting* possession...” (Gen. 17:8 cf. Gen. 13:15, 17; 15:18–21). The Land Covenant of Deut. 30:1–10

teaches that the Jews, even if exiled, will return to the Land once they turn to the Lord (v. 2f). Though the provisions of this unconditional covenant await full realisation during the Millennial Kingdom, it appears inconsistent with both Scripture and historical precedent to deny exiled Jews, including Messianic Jews making aliyah, their homeland rights today (v. 4f).

Deut. 7 states that blessing is dependent on obedience (Lev. 26:1–13; Deut. 28:1–2) and cites discipline – not rejection – as punishment for unrighteous practice in the Land (Lev. 26:14–46; Deut. 28:15–68).⁶⁶ Exile was foretold as the ultimate discipline but was tempered by the promise of regathering (Deut. 30).⁶⁷ The Land was given to Israel as an *everlasting* possession (Gen. 15:7–12, 17:8) but residence in the Land was conditional on faithfulness to the Law. God foreknew well in advance of Israel entering the Land that the people would be exiled due to idolatry (contra Sizer, 2004, 81; see Deut. 30:1–6). Exile passages must not be divorced from scriptures that speak of restoration to the Land because *exile always implies return*. As Deut. 30:1–6 makes clear, restoration entails a change of heart and a return to the Land. Herein lies a poignant picture of God’s grace, namely His willingness to restore and forgive *despite* Israel’s propensity to disobey.

5. THE RELEVANCE OF ISRAEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In Col. 3:11 (see also Gal. 3:28), a verse commonly cited in support of the contention that the Church is the new Israel, Paul is in fact emphasising the point that Jewish and Gentile believers experience spiritual maturity in the

⁶⁶ Parker, *Is the Church the New Israel*, 2012, 8.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

same way – via the process of sanctification. He writes, “a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all, and in all”. The immediate context is sanctification (vv. 5, 10), which culminates in the statement that spiritual maturity / growth does not discriminate based on ethnicity or social standing, but is essential to all people groups, including Jew and Gentile (Fretwell, 2021, 91). Though believing Jews are part of the Church, they do not relinquish ethnic identity upon conversion.

An unease regarding Israel’s election is further compounded by a tendency to typologise the stipulations and promises contained within the Jewish covenants, and to spiritually reinterpret the numerous references to Jews and Israel in the New Testament. This results in an intractable double standard: the inference that God keeps His promises to the Church, but not to the Jews (see Heb. 13:5b; Rom. 11:29; Jer. 31:31-37). The validity and efficacy of the New, Abrahamic, Davidic and Land Covenants do not depend on man’s obedience but on God’s faithfulness. As these covenants are unconditional in nature, they cannot be abrogated by means of unilateral disengagement, spiritual application to the Church, or typological absorption in Christ. God, in obedience to His Word, keeps His promises to whomever He makes them.

Consider the following non-exhaustive list of New Testament passages that distinguish Israel from the Church and present the Jews as an ethnically identifiable people. See Table 2 New Testament Passages (Overleaf).

As these passages show, Israel is not exclusively an Old Testament theme but appears many times in the New Testament. A distinction is always made between the Church

and Israel; the most detailed exploration of this relationship can be found in Rom. 9-11. Only by applying a supersessionist mindset to the study of the fourteen passages above (and several not cited herein) can one reach the conclusion that Israel is solely an Old Testament entity/theme. The weight of evidence in the New Testament rather demonstrates that biblical Israel is a theme that spans both testaments; one that runs alongside, but is not replaced by, God’s plans for the Church. The New Testament, whose authors were all ethnic Jews (except Luke) and whose apostles were all Jewish, therefore retains/upholds the significance of biblical Israel.

It is helpful at this juncture to consider what Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, taught concerning Israel:⁶⁸ (See Table 3 Paul - To Israel Belong, overleaf.)

As these verses show, Paul affirms a continuing special role for the Jewish nation and distinguishes between Jewish and Gentile believers in the Church age. He harbours no resentment towards his Jewish kinsman; rather, he earnestly prays for their salvation.

6. THE ATONEMENT – A RESPONSE TO PUNITIVE SUPERSESSIONISM

Has God really rejected Israel as punishment for rejecting Christ (Matt. 21:43)? Implicit in this question is the belief that it was the Jews, as a corporate race, who were responsible for Christ’s crucifixion.

All four Gospel accounts identify the chief priests, rulers and officials as instrumental in delivering Jesus over to be crucified (Matt. 27:20-27; Mk. 15:9-15; Lk. 23:13-20; Jn. 19:6). Matt. 27:20 states “... *the chief priests and the*

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6-7. The title ‘Israel’ is used 73 times in the New Testament but always refers to ethnic Jews (distinct from *ekklesia*).

Table 2 — New Testament Passages (i)	
NT Scripture	Implications for supersessionism
Matt. 19:28: “And Jesus said to them, “Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”	Shows that Israel has an eschatological future cf. Lk. 22:30. The only way to circumvent these passages is to read the ‘Church’ into ‘Israel’.
Matt. 21:43-45: “Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruit. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and on whomever it falls, it will crush him.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them.”	See Rom. 10:19f. The kingdom will eventually be restored to Israel during the Millennium (Ezek. 40-48). See also Rom. 11:25-26a.
Lk. 1:32f: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”	Jesus will reign over the house of Jacob/Israel (see Gen. 32:28) for ever.
Acts 16:3: “Paul wanted this man to leave with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”	Timothy had not been circumcised because he had a Greek father and a Jewish mother (the matrilineal principle is long established in Jewish law). To ensure ethnic acceptance amongst the Jews he would be evangelising, Paul circumcised Timothy and therefore upheld a key physical distinction between Jew and Gentile in the New Testament.
Acts 18:18: “Now Paul, when he had remained many days longer, took leave of the brothers and sisters and sailed away to Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. Paul first had his hair cut at Cenchrea, for he was keeping a vow.”	Paul pledges to observe this Jewish vow (Num. 6:1-21).
Acts 21:39: “But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.”	As a believer in Christ and a chief proponent of the Gospel, Paul in this situation identifies as a Jew.
Rom. 1:16: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”	Paul regards evangelism of the Jews to be of utmost importance, see Rom. 11:11-16.
Rom. 2:28f: “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 of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from people, but from God.”	Paul is not broadening the definition of a Jew to include Gentile believers, but rather restricting its definition to a Jew that is born of the Spirit. (ii)
Rom. 9-11: reader to consult	Acts 18:2 tells us that Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome ca. AD 49, and therefore the Christian population in Rome would likely have been predominantly Gentile in composition. Many believe that Paul is addressing the faulty Gentile assumption that God has rejected His people (see Rom. 11:1) in Rom. 9-11.
1 Cor. 10:32: “Do not offend Jews or Greeks, or the church of God”	Paul teaches that a Jewish or Gentile believer, upon coming to faith in Christ, transcends his/her racial background to become part of the ‘church of God’. As other scriptures show, however, believers’ ethnic identities are not erased in the church age. (iii)
Gal. 2:3: “But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.”	Paul circumcised Timothy because he was Jewish (Acts 16:3) but did not circumcise Titus because he was a Gentile (Gal. 2:3). (iv)
Gal. 2:8-9: “for He who was at work for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised was at work for me also to the Gentiles, and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.”	The existence of apostles to the Gentiles (Paul) and to the Jews (Peter) (Gal. 2:8) shows that practical/racial distinctions are not annulled in the church age.
Heb. 12:22a: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...”	The biblical themes of fellowship and land (cf. Rev. 21:10) come to the fore once again in the NT.
Jas. 1:1b: “To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.”	James is writing to diasporic Jewish believers, whom he likens to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”. Clearly, they retain their Jewish identity even in Christ. Their meeting is described as a ‘synagogue’ in Jas. 2:2.
i. Taken from Parker, 2012. ii. Parker, 2012, 5-6. iii. Ibid., 6. iv. Ibid	

- To Israel belong “the adoption as sons and daughters, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the temple service, and the promises” (Rom. 9:4). Note the continuation of the privileges.
- “The main body of Israel has forfeited salvation through rejecting the Messiah” (Rom. 9:30-33; 10:21).
- Paul’s heart’s desire and prayer to God is for the salvation of the Jews (Rom. 10:1-4). See also Rom. 9:1-3.
- Israel has not been permanently rejected by God (Rom. 11:1-2). Just as in Old Testament times, there is a remnant of Jewish believers in the Messiah (Rom. 11:2-6).
- A “judicious” blinding to the truth has occurred in the majority of Israel (Rom. 11:7-10).
- A temporary setting aside has happened to unbelieving Israel so that salvation may come to the Gentiles. This should provoke Israel to jealousy (Rom. 11:11).
- Israel’s rejection has resulted in “riches for the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:12). Israel’s restoration is certain and will be “life from the dead” (Rom. 11:15, 12-16).
- Unbelieving Jews are natural branches that have been cut off from the olive tree, whereas Gentile believers are wild branches that have been grafted into the olive tree. Paul teaches that Gentile believers, being wild branches, should not boast/arrogantly posture against the Jews for God is able to ingraft the native branches again. The olive root signifies the spiritual blessings flowing from God via Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob which both Jewish and Gentile believers (i.e., the Church) now enjoy (Rom. 11:17-24).
- There awaits a future national salvation of Israel (Rom. 11:25-27; Zech. 12:10).
- “Israel, even in its unbelief, is chosen and loved by God (Rom. 11:28).”
- “As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes” (Rom. 11:28). Gentile Christian attitudes towards the Jews should therefore be characterised by gratitude not animosity.
- “... the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).
- As an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul identifies as a Jew (Acts 21:39) as part of his defence. His faith in Christ does not annul/dissolve his ethnic identity.

Table 3 - Paul - To Israel Belong...

elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas, and to put Jesus to death”. Certainly, Jesus was confronted with spiritual blindness and unbelief amongst the general populace, and Peter blames the Jewish crowd in Acts 3:13-15 for Jesus’ crucifixion. However, it was the chief priests who exploited their official position by whipping the crowd into a state of emotional frenzy, turning the people against the One who had come to save them. Whilst leaders are influenced by the actions and attitudes of others (Lev. 4:3), Christ also encountered many Jewish

citizens who exercised faith in Him as Lord and Messiah (e.g., Bartimaeus in Mk 10:46-52) as well as those who responded with hardened hearts (e.g. the Pharisees in Mk. 3:1-6).

Christ plumbed the depths of sacrificial love to redeem sinful mankind. The unflinching testimony of Scripture is that it was God’s plan from the dawn of time for Jesus to die on the cross (see Gen. 3:15). Consequently, though the chief priests had an instrumental role in delivering Jesus over to be crucified, it was ultimately God’s permissive will for Christ to

be betrayed by and into the hands of sinful men.⁶⁹ Christ, in obedience to the Father, chose the cross when He issued the words, “Yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39b). Our attitude should therefore be one of deepest gratitude, for God in His inscrutable wisdom chose to use the malicious scheming of the chief priests and the Romans to achieve His perfect plan of redemption. Both the blindness of Israel and the corruption of Pilate were necessary to bring about God’s redemption of mankind.

In singling out the Jews for committing deicide, punitive supersessionists overlook the theological implications of Christ having died for the sins of the world; for all those created in the image of God (Isa. 53:5f; 1 Pet. 2:22-25). *Every person* therefore bears responsibility for Christ’s agonising death on the cross. By holding the Jews in a state of perpetual contempt, punitive supersessionists overlook the fact that Christ died for *our* sins. Rather than expressing disdain towards the Jews, punitive supersessionists should instead exude sorrow and thankfulness: sorrow that the Jews rejected the One who came to save them, and thankfulness for the salvation freely available to all that God in Christ Jesus accomplished at Calvary.

CONCLUSION

Jewish and Gentile believers are equal recipients of God’s grace and forgiveness. It is fallacious, however, to insist that the original stipulations of the biblical covenants are now either rescinded, typologised or spiritually appropriated by the Church. This article has demonstrated that supersessionism – essentially covenant/reformed theology – is an eisegetical

69 In God’s permissive will, evil is allowed to function, but God’s perfect plan triumphs every time (see Lk. 22:53).

interpretive framework that operates contra the laws of sound biblical interpretation. Historical specifics (such as original covenant addressees) are reinterpreted/spiritualised to complement a grand, overarching de-Judaised metanarrative that is exegetically flawed and theologically problematic (Diprose, 2004, 96). To quote Pickering, “[Covenant Theology’s] exegesis is faulty. Its premises are artificial. Its conclusions are seriously at odds with plain New Testament teaching. As such it cannot lay claim to being a Biblical system of thought” (1960, 8).

In their desire to emphasise spiritual equality in the church age, supersessionists gratuitously dispossess Israel of her unique covenantal promises. This is unfortunate, for nothing is more damaging to Christian – Jewish relations than a supersessionist hermeneutic that robs ethnic Jews and the Jewish nation of their covenantal, eschatological, missiological and soteriological significance (cf. Rom. 11:14).⁷⁰ Salvific unity in the ‘one new man’ does not erase ethnic or functional distinctives between Jew and Gentile/Israel and the Church. Gentile believers are partakers in Israel’s covenants, not appropriators, and God’s covenant faithfulness ensures Israel’s future restoration, salvation, and role amongst the nations.

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