



Olive Press Quarterly

**HAS GOD ABANDONED ISRAEL FOR GOOD?
Replacement Theology Examined**

by

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The Editor

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Introduction

In Strasbourg cathedral stand a pair of skilfully carved stone figures. Both are beautiful women with flowing locks. One with one hand holds on to a cross for support; in her other hand she holds a chalice, containing the blood of Christ. On her head there is a crown, and she looks out to one side into the distance, hopeful and expectant. This lady is Ecclesia, the Church. The other woman is dignified but forlorn. Her head bears no crown; her eyes are blindfolded, signifying darkness and ignorance. She is clutching a staff that has been broken. Her face is downcast, and from her left hand drops the book of the Law. She is Synagoga, the synagogue or the Jewish people who have not recognised Jesus to be their Messiah.

There are such pairs of figures in five other European cathedrals, including Notre Dame in Paris. They all date back to the 13th century. These allegorical figures express the conviction that the Church has now replaced Israel as the people of God, a view that has been predominant throughout the course of church history even until today. In recent years this view has been given the name ‘replacement theology’ or, in more scholarly writing, the less emotive term ‘supersessionism’. To what extent does this view reflect, or conversely distort, biblical truths about the church of Christ and the Jewish people? And what about poor Synagoga? Has God really abandoned her for good?

This booklet seeks to answer these questions. It is intended as a simple guide for the non-expert. Some off-putting technical terms will have to be used along the way, but they will be defined as they occur, and I begin with the term ‘supersessionism’ itself.

Supersessionism: a word with several meanings

R. Kendall Soulen is one of the first to tackle the issue as to how far ‘supersessionism’ has penetrated and shaped the thinking of some of the most important theologians from the Early Church until recently. Because God’s dealings with the Jews in history have been neglected, as likewise his future plans for them, the resulting theologies, Soulen argues, are lopsided.¹ He calls this theological bias ‘structural supersessionism.’ We are in this booklet more concerned with the two other kinds of supersessionism that Soulen has identified:²

1. *Punitive supersessionism*

Put simply, this view states that because the Jews in the main failed to recognise their Messiah and refused to believe the Gospel, God has his withdrawn from the covenant he made with them and rejected them as his chosen people. As will be readily appreciated, this view is hostile to Jews and readily lends itself to anti-Semitism.

2. *Economic supersessionism*

Here the Jews or rather the ancient Israelites serve a historical role in God’s purposes that has now reached completion. It was to this nation that God revealed himself and made promises that have now been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus. Now the Jews have no further role unless they accept and follow Jesus, their promised Messiah and so become absorbed into the Church, the body in which all national and cultural differences melt away. This view is not as such hostile to the Jews, but they are now regarded as obsolete so far as God’s dealing with humankind is concerned. In some writers economic supersessionism may be combined with punitive supersessionism; the two categories

¹ R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

² Soulen, *God of Israel*, pp. 29-32.

easily run into each other. But the distinction should nevertheless be made so that the issues can be argued clearly.

I will return to these two forms of supersessionism shortly. But first we must clear the decks by briefly looking at a further meaning of the word.

Supersessionism in a wider sense?

Taken in either of the meanings given above, supersessionism concerns the place of the Jewish people within the Christian way of looking at things, that is, it concerns a question *within* the Christian religion, albeit one that will have important consequences, depending on how it is answered, for the attitude Christians have towards the Jews. But in the context of Jewish Christian dialogue the word ‘supersessionism’ is often used (negatively) to refer to claims that Christians have traditionally made which if accepted, it is argued, would mean that Judaism as a religion has been superseded by Christianity. In reality, Jews who recognise Jesus to be their Messiah and see him as the fulfilment of the Law do not discard their traditional faith but regard it as brought to completion.

Rosemary Ruether, for example, argues that ‘the foundations of anti-Judaic thought were laid in the New Testament itself.’³ For her the Christian claim that Jesus is the promised Messiah is the root of the problem because such a belief implies that Jews ought now to recognise Jesus as their Messiah. ‘Is it possible’, she asks, ‘to say “Jesus is Messiah” without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time “and the Jews be damned”?’⁴ Likewise she sees the same problem over the Christian claim that ‘there is salvation in no one else’ [than Jesus] (Acts 4.12).⁵ But, as Ruether recognises, these claims are central to the Christian faith; take them away and what is left?⁶

Although Ruether proposes ‘a certain relativization’ of Christian thinking to accept ‘an independent salvific validity’ of the Jewish way of ‘appropriating the biblical heritage’,⁷ it really is not possible for Christians to negotiate away the convictions for which the martyrs have given their lives down the centuries and are still doing so today in many parts of the world. It shows no love to the Jews or to anyone else to deny the Christian conviction that Jesus is the promised Messiah or to silence the requirement placed on all people to have faith in him. If Christianity is supersessionist in this sense, so be it; the charge has to stick.

Punitive supersessionism

I return now to the kinds of supersessionism that Christians should look at critically and where necessary reject. Foremost among these is the case of punitive supersessionism: the view that God has rejected his chosen people, the Jews, because they rejected Jesus Christ, indeed because they were instrumental in having him crucified. On this view the Jews deserve to be a despised and downtrodden people. Needless to say this view has encouraged shameful and horrendous Christian repression and persecution of the Jews down the centuries. For example, at the beginning of the First Crusade (1096 CE), those

³ Rosemary R. Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), p. 227.

⁴ Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 246.

⁵ Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 238.

⁶ Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 228. See her comment, ‘Possibly anti-Judaism is too deeply embedded in the foundations of Christianity to be rooted out entirely without destroying the whole structure.’

⁷ Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 260.

Crusaders led by Count Emich, when about to massacre the Jewish communities they encountered when travelling through the Rhineland, declared,

Behold, we journey a long way to seek the idolatrous shrine and to take vengeance upon the Muslims. But here are the Jews dwelling among us, whose ancestors killed him and crucified him groundlessly. Let us take vengeance first upon them. 'Let us wipe them out as a nation; Israel's name will be mentioned no more' [Psalm 83.4].⁸

This view, however, appears at first sight to derive some support from the New Testament itself, especially from Matthew's gospel. When Pilate tried to disclaim responsibility for authorising Jesus' crucifixion, he said to the people, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Matthew then relates, 'Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"' (Matt. 27.24-25). Again, in Matthew's version of the parable of the wicked tenants, after the tenants of the vineyard have killed the owner's son, Jesus interrupts the story and turns to his audience, asking, 'Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' The people reply, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time' (Matt. 21.40-41).

Do these stark predictions really justify the tragic use that has been made of them in the course of Christian history? Something must first be said about the context of Matthew's gospel. There is a fairly broad consensus that Matthew's gospel was written some time after 70 CE for a community of predominantly Jewish believers who were under severe pressure from hostile mainstream, now mainly Pharisaic Jewry.⁹ In such passages Matthew is telling his first readers that all the horrors of the First Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE) including the burning of the Temple, are the retribution that Jesus foretold would fall on that generation of Jews who in the main had failed to recognise Jesus as Messiah and whose leaders had caused him to die like one of the prophets and martyrs. In applying Jesus' words in this way, Matthew is simply echoing Jesus' exclamation before going to the Cross, 'If they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?' (Luke 23.31). So for Matthew it is one particular generation of Jews that come under God's judgement, not the Jewish people for perpetuity.

We must also ask: Who is the parable of the wicked tenants aimed at? At the close, Matthew relates, 'When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking *about* them' (Matt. 21.45). The parable of the wicked tenants is clearly about stewardship and it seems right to take it as targeted specifically at the Jewish leaders entrusted with the responsibility for teaching God's people, not the Jews in general. While many commentators regard the 'people' (ethnos) to whom the kingdom of God will be transferred as the Church as opposed to Israel,¹⁰ in fact, as

⁸ From *Hebrew First Crusade Chronicle* L trans. Robert Chazan and reproduced in his *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 243-44.

⁹ See further Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992), pp. 113-45. Such a setting also explains inclusion of the bitter invective against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. It is not, however, my purpose to deal with all the New Testament texts that can be used in a thoroughly anti-Semitic way. This booklet covers only the main texts relevant to supersessionism.

¹⁰ So Hagner: 'The setting aside of the privilege of Israel as the unique people of God in favour of another people, namely the church, is of course nothing short of revolutionary' (Douglas A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* (WBC 33B; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), p. 623).

Saldarini points out, the term *ethnos* was sometimes used to refer to specialised groups such as guilds and trade associations. So Matthew here ‘almost certainly refers to his own group of *Jews* [my emphasis] who follow Jesus as the *ethnos* which produces the fruit of the kingdom.’¹¹ In that case the parable is teaching that this group, and by implication others like it who hold to the apostolic teaching, are from that time on the custodians of the truths about the kingdom of God, not the official Jewish religious teachers at that time or their successors.

Accordingly, properly understood, these passages in Matthew do not support the view that the Jews as a whole and for all time have been rejected by God as a punishment for the part the Jewish leaders and the crowd in Jerusalem played in having Jesus crucified.

Economic Supersessionism

The discussion of the parable of the wicked tenants has already raised the question: Has the Church, comprising all who put their faith in Jesus as Messiah, both Jews and gentiles, now taken the place of Israel, the nation chosen by God to be his special people by his covenant with Abraham? Answering this question ‘Yes’ is the essence of ‘economic supersessionism’. This position, however, is not blatantly anti-Jewish and indeed a reasonable case can be made for it based on some very precious truths proclaimed in the New Testament.

One in Christ; the One New Man

Foremost among these must be the truth that for those who belong to the body of Christ all ethnic, cultural and gender differences are ‘transcended’, that is to say, that as regards mutual relationships between believers and also their standing before God, such differences (though still real and in some cases valid in their proper sphere) are overcome through the relationship that all believers share in being in Christ: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal. 3.28). Similarly Paul stresses that becoming a ‘new creation’ (receiving the new life given by the Holy Spirit and becoming incorporated into the body of Christ) is vital, whereas the hallmark of being a Jew or conversely a gentile (circumcision or its absence) is by comparison of no importance (Gal. 6.15). Moreover, Paul, himself a Jew with an impeccable pedigree and faultless as regards law observance, counts such things not as advantages but as liabilities, in fact as excrement, as he subjects his self life to the Cross, and longs to experience more fully the death and resurrection life of Christ (Phil. 3.7-11).

This Pauline teaching comes to full expression in Ephesians where the hostility between Jew and gentile (a fact of life in the ancient world and persistent ever since) is addressed. Paul boldly proclaims, ‘But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off [gentile believers] have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who made both groups [Jewish and gentile believers] into one and broke down the

¹¹ Anthony J. Saldarini, ‘Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism’ in David E. Aune (ed.), *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp 172-73. Stanton too had earlier argued that Matthew regarded the ‘ethnos’ in 21.43 as his own community which he saw as a special, truly faithful, group among the Jews (*A Gospel for a New People*, p. 152).

barrier of the dividing wall ... so that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace' (Eph. 2.13-15 NASB).

It is clear from such passages that the people of God, in the wake of what Jesus has accomplished on the Cross, now comprises all people, both Jew and gentile, who have put their faith in Jesus and have been incorporated into the 'body of Christ'. Does this then mean that this 'new man', the church now composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers, has replaced the constituent elements, Jews on the one side and gentiles on the other, or that those Jews who do not become believers in Jesus can no longer be called God's chosen people in any meaningful sense?

It is important to appreciate that the act of creating a new person, the 'one new man', more than simply brings the two groups together. 'The two elements which were used in the creation have become totally transformed in the process.' So comments Andrew Lincoln, who helpfully illustrates the Jewish background to the 'new creation' language, especially in the context of gentile proselytes becoming full Jews.¹² However, he then equates the 'new man' with 'the third race'.¹³ This is the idea developed in the Second Century CE that Christians are 'the third race', that is, as opposed to unbelieving Jews on the one hand and unbelieving gentiles on the other. So, in the *Epistle of Barnabas* the writer says that Christ suffered in order 'to establish a *new people* for himself' (5.7),¹⁴ and Aristeides in his *Apology* describes the Jews and Christians as separate races, the former tracing their origin to Abraham and the latter to Jesus Christ (chapters 2 and 15).

This idea might seem to gain further support from 1 Peter 2.4-10, in particular where the writer, taking up Hosea 1.8-9 and 2.23, addresses the readers – they appear to include both Jewish and gentile believers – thus: 'Once you were not a people but now you are God's people' (v. 10). Does this make the Church the new people of God? Paul Achtemeier takes this to be so:

We now learn the result of God's call from darkness to light: it is the creation of a people that before did not exist. The Christian community is thus the wondrous light that had not previously existed, but that, like creation itself, had been summoned by God's call out of darkness.¹⁵

Further, one possible way of reading the 'the Israel of God' in Paul's blessing at the end of Galatians (in 6.16) is to take it as referring to all believers in Christ whether Jew or gentile. In that case the term 'Israel' has now become a name for the Church, the new Israel.¹⁶

¹² Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, (WBC 42; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), p. 144.

¹³ Lincoln here refers to 1 Cor. 10. 32. Paul in this verse is urging his Christian readers to avoid giving unnecessary offence (over food offered to idols) either to Jews or Greeks outside the church or to any within the church who might also take offence. To take 'or to the church of God' as endorsing the third race concept seems to me to be reading too much into the verse.

¹⁴ The translation of Maxwell Staniforth in *Early Christian Writings* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 164. See also *Epistle of Barnabas* 13.14 for full expression of the idea that the Church has replaced ancient Israel.

¹⁵ Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), p. 167.

¹⁶ The other, in my view more likely interpretations, are: 1. Non-Judaising Jewish Christians are meant, or 2. It is a phrase coined by the Judaisers troubling the gentile Christians in Galatia who were saying, 'If you get circumcised, you will truly become "the Israel of God".' In that case Paul in applying the term to the gentile believers is again asserting that their status in Christ (children of promise, offspring of a free woman

No contradiction

What are we to make of these passages? At the outset it must be stressed that the image of the ‘one new man’, as presented in Ephesians, is a very precious one, full of rich meaning, which should not in any way be undervalued. It is as of much importance as the image of the olive tree given in Romans 11. Yet the two pictures can be held together; they are not incompatible. In Ephesians 2.12 Paul reminds the gentiles that they were once ‘aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise.’ As Markus Barth (son of Karl Barth) puts it, ‘the Gentiles are reminded that they are *received into* the house of God, the community of Israel’ (my emphasis).¹⁷ This is quite consistent with what Paul says in Romans 11.17-24 about gentile Christians being grafted into the olive tree, the pre-existing people of God, the root that that now supports them and not the other way round.

Similarly, the correct way to read 1 Peter 4.10 is surely with Ernest Best: ‘The Christians who come from many races and nations are now one people *in continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament*; the history of Israel is now their history’ (emphasis mine).¹⁸ The main argument in favour of this way of reading the passage is that the promise in Hosea 2.23 concerns the future restoration of the people of God, historic Israel, not the creation of a new people of God. 1 Peter is thus saying that, following repentance and turning to Christ, gentiles as well as Jews now participate in this restoration.¹⁹

How can the two pictures of the one new man on the one hand and the olive tree on the other be held together in a manner that does full justice to the teaching of the New Testament as a whole? I suggest that the key is to say that when the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost the Jewish believers received what the prophets had long before promised, ‘my spirit poured out on all flesh’ (Joel 2.28, 29), ‘a new heart and a new spirit’ (Ezek. 18.31), ‘a heart of flesh’ not of stone (Ezek. 36.26), and ‘a new covenant with the house of Israel’ whereby God’s law is put within them, written on their hearts (Jer. 31.31-34). When, on the other hand, Cornelius and other gentiles receive the Holy Spirit, they receive the same blessing, though outsiders, but are thereby ‘naturalised’, that is, given full citizenship within the people of God (Ephesians 2.19). Both groups are transformed, the existing people of God through receiving what was promised by the prophets, the gentiles by being naturalised or grafted into the people of God while at the same time being transformed through the gift of the Spirit.

not a bondservant, children not slaves, ‘justified’, etc.) needs no supplementation by circumcision. The problem is that the expression ‘Israel of God’ occurs nowhere else in Paul’s letters nor in any of the Second Temple period literature nor in the Rabbinic literature. See further the discussions in Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 320-23; James D.G. Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1995), pp. 343-46; Richard. N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), pp. 297-99.

¹⁷ Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 314.

¹⁸ Ernest Best, *1 Peter* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 108.

¹⁹ So similarly argues Ronald E. Diprose in *Israel and the Church: the Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Waynesboro GA and Milton Keynes, England: Authentic Media, 2000), pp. 50-51.

The New Covenant

This continuity of the people of God, embracing both those who had faith under the covenants made with Abraham and Moses and those who, whether Jew or gentile, have faith in Christ, is the key to another New Testament text which many hold supports the idea that the Church has now replaced Israel as the people of God. This is Hebrews 8.13. The writer has just argued that the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 has been fulfilled through the mediation of Jesus, the true high priest foreshadowed by the Old Testament regulations. Then he declares, 'In speaking of a new covenant, he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear.'

Does this mean that with the coming of Christ the 'old covenant', God's choosing of Israel as his people, his revelation of himself to them through acts of history and through the inspired scriptures, is now at an end? Not at all! The first point to note is that the Letter to the Hebrews is written to Jewish believers; they are not being urged to give up their ancient faith in favour of a new Christianity, but rather to remain faithful in following Jesus Christ who is the fulfilment of all that the Old Testament has promised. How else can one explain the fact that the heroes (and heroines) of the faith whom they are being urged to emulate (in Chapter 11) all lived under the Old Testament order? Second, the writer takes the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 as a promise made to the Israelites of old which the readers who are likewise Jews have entered into and should not cast aside. William Lane perceptively comments,

The quality of newness intrinsic to the new covenant consists in the new manner of presenting God's law [that is, as part of a renewal of the heart] not in newness of content ... The new covenant thus *brings to its consummation* the relationship between God and his people which is at the heart of all covenant disclosure from Abraham onward [emphasis mine].²⁰

In short, properly understood, neither the concept of the 'one new man' nor that of the 'new covenant' means that the Church replaces Israel as the people of God; rather, because of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross, the Israelites can now enter into all that has been promised for them, while gentiles can likewise share these blessings through being grafted or naturalised into that people.

Romans 9-11

At this point it is time to examine the one part of the New Testament that does specifically address the question we have been considering: Has the Church replaced Israel as the chosen people of God who in consequence now have no further place in his plans? This part is Romans 9-11.

Romans as a whole – that includes these chapters – is not an easy read. One reason for this stems from a later controversy that Paul could hardly have anticipated. This controversy arose in the Reformation when the Reformers attacked the late Mediaeval Church for having lost sight of the gospel truths regarding God's grace, his undeserved mercy shown towards helpless sinners. In particular they attacked the teaching that God's favour could be obtained by performing good works, such as fasting, penances and, of course, buying indulgences. As a consequence, the faith versus works issue which

²⁰ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47a; Dallas: Word Books, 1991), p. 209.

features prominently in Paul's letters was then read in the light of this 16th century controversy, and in the process Judaism at the time of the New Testament was taken as a religion based on merit, that is, one where God's favour is gained through obedience to the many commandments of the Old Testament. This way of looking at the Judaism portrayed in the New Testament has persisted until very recently, especially in the pulpit. But as Jewish scholars have long pointed out – by and large this has now been accepted in mainstream scholarship²¹ – Judaism is just not like that and never has been. Jews believe that they are a people chosen by God through his undeserved favour and they obey his commandments out of gratitude and because God asks them to do so. The faith versus works debate in Paul must therefore be about something different. James Dunn emphasises that the works which Paul opposes to faith are those aspects of the Law of Moses that serve as identity-markers (especially circumcision, the food laws and Sabbath observance) to distinguish the Jews from other people.²² What is condemned is observance of these rules as a means of resting on national privilege (being members of God's chosen people) as opposed to having faith in Christ, who for Paul is the sole source of 'justification', that is, of our being reconciled to God and having access to him (Rom. 5.1-2). As John Ziesler pithily puts it, 'faith in Jesus Christ, for Jews and gentiles equally, is the crux of what God wants.'²³

So what is the issue that Paul is addressing in Romans 9-11? It is essentially that, despite the success of the proclamation of the gospel among gentiles, the Jews in the main did not accept this message and so put their faith in Christ. For Paul this raised the disturbing question: What has happened to the promises made to Abraham concerning his offspring, the people Israel (Gen.12.1-3), and to the 'everlasting covenant' that God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17.3-7)? Can God still be relied upon? 'Has God rejected his people?' (Rom. 11.1) Has he abandoned them for ever?

It is only possible here to review these three chapters briefly,²⁴ but the answer Paul gives may be summarised thus. First, belonging to God's people is not simply a question of physical descent from Abraham; it is also a question of God's election.²⁵ That always was the case, as witness the fact that though Jacob and Esau were both twins in Rebecca's womb it was Jacob (standing for the people Israel) who was chosen, not Esau (representing Edom) (9.6-15). God chooses peoples to accomplish his purposes, as instanced by Pharaoh (Egypt) of whom God says, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you so that my name may be praised in all the earth' (9.17). Now coming to the Jews of his day, Paul says, the majority have not obtained

²¹ This has been the result of a general acceptance of the conclusions reached in E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977). Some writers, however, have entered substantial qualifications, and the question is not yet closed. For a brief summary of the issue, see Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 20-21.

²² James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38a; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp. lxiii-lxxii.

²³ John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (TPI Commentaries; London: SCM; Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1989), p. 50.

²⁴ The commentaries by Dunn and Ziesler are recommended in particular, because they reflect the 'new perspective' on Paul. For an excellent shorter treatment see David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Leicester: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 147-176. See also Steve Motyer, *Israel and the Plan of God: Light on Today's Debate* (Leicester: IVP, 1989), and an older but still valuable book, H.L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 3rd edn, 1976).

²⁵ This point is made more fully in John 8.31-47.

what they were looking for, a right standing with God, but there is a remnant, chosen by grace, that have obtained it: those Jews who have responded to the gospel and do have faith in Christ. For the rest Christ has proved a stumbling block in the way, making them go off on a false track (9.30 – 10. 13). But they have been rejected for the good of the gentiles to whom salvation has now come; in this sense they have indeed been abandoned *for good* (11.7-10). Moreover, the unbelieving Jews when they see how God has blessed those gentiles who have faith in Christ will one day be made jealous and will themselves come to such faith (11.11-12), and the nation (a major part, that is)²⁶ will be saved (11.26).

So for Paul God's rejection of Israel is only partial – there remains a faithful remnant – and temporary, for when the full number of gentiles have come to faith in Christ, the Jews as a whole (that is, no longer a remnant) will again be included in the people of God. Moreover, just as the exclusion of the Jews brought great blessing to the gentiles, so their full inclusion will result in even greater riches (11.12), even 'life from the dead' (11.15); by many this is taken to be a spiritual revival world-wide.²⁷

There are certain important points to note as Paul proceeds with his argument. First, Paul is in deep personal anguish over the present situation and like Moses before him would prefer to be accursed himself rather than for his people to be cut off from God's mercy (Exodus 32.32; Romans 9.3). The cause of his grief is that so long as Jews do not have faith in Christ they are not saved. That is something Paul longs for (10.1), for only through faith in Jesus and public confession that he is Lord can anyone be saved; here there is no distinction between Jew and gentile (10.9-13). Secondly, while there can be no doubt that individual Jews without faith in Christ are outside the people of God and are under God's judgement, the Jews taken as a whole, a people chosen by God, remain his people: 'they are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants ...' (9.4). 'As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; *for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable*' (11.28-29). Thirdly, Paul in these chapters is challenging precisely that boastfulness on the part of gentile believers that would later come to expression in the idea of Christians being the third race, the new people of God that has replaced historic Israel. To the gentile believers, Paul writes, 'Do not vaunt yourself ... do not become proud, but stand in awe' (11.18-20)

Paul sums up his teaching in the allegory of the olive tree (11.17-24). The olive tree represents the chosen people of God, originally simply Israel. Following the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel most of the Jews took offence and did not believe: these are the branches which have been cut off. But branches from a wild olive were then grafted in: these are the gentile believers who not having received the promises had no claim to belong to the people of God. But in the end the branches of the true olive tree that have been cut off will be grafted in again: these are the now unbelieving Jewish people.

²⁶ Most commentators now take 'all Israel' in this way. Holwerda, for example, argues that Paul is contrasting two concepts: full inclusion against a remnant. Fullness is reached when the believing Jews cease to be a remnant. See *Jesus and Israel*, p.169.

²⁷ Beginning with Calvin: 'The restoration of the Jews unto God's favour will occasion the revival and spread of true religion through the whole Gentile world' (*Epistle to the Romans*, the translation of Henry Beveridge reprinted by the Calvin Translation Society (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 425, n. 1.)

Conclusion

Some six centuries before Paul asked, 'Has God rejected his people?' (Romans 11.1), the Jewish exiles in Babylon had asked the same question, and Isaiah had replied:

For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit ...
 For a brief moment I abandoned you but with great compassion I will gather you.
 In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,
 But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD your redeemer.
 Isaiah 54.6-8.

Paul's answer to the question is essentially the same. The LORD their redeemer has not changed. Though for the present many Jews may be enemies of the gospel, they remain the people God has chosen; they have stumbled but not so as to fall permanently, and the time will come when they will be restored and will be used by God to bring great blessing to the whole world. Rather than the Jews being rejected for ever and replaced by the Church, it is the gentile believers in Christ who have been admitted into the continuing people of God, and one day, when the full number of the gentiles has come in, the unbelieving Jews will also come to faith in Christ and resume their rightful place among God's people.

Such a reply does not simply deal with our questions. It stirs the heart and requires a response from us. If we are gentile believers, are we rebuked for boasting? Do we accept with humility our undeserved inclusion among God's people? And how do we view the Jews who have not yet recognised their Messiah? With respect, knowing that they are still God's elect? With great anguish like Paul, because we know that as individual human beings they are not saved? With earnest determination to receive more and more of all that Christ has made available to us through the Cross, for how else will they become jealous?

*Father of faithful Abraham, hear
 Our earnest suit for Abraham's seed.
 Justly they claim the softest prayer
 From us, adopted in their stead,
 Who mercy through their fall obtain,
 And Christ by their rejection gain.*

Charles Wesley (Wesley's Hymns No. 451)

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