

## THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL AS A THEOLOGICAL QUESTION

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My topic for this address is “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question.”<sup>1</sup> We may rephrase the topic in the form of a question: Are there theological reasons to believe that Israel has a future? And if so, what does it mean theologically to speak of a future for Israel? That is, what are the theological implications of Israel having a future in the plan of God? Or, how does the affirmation of a future for Israel affect other beliefs in an evangelical systematic theology?

I need to clarify at the outset what I mean by “Israel.” I am using the term Israel in its primary sense, which designates the descendants of Jacob as an ethnic, cultural, and national entity. So, the question about the future of Israel is a question about the national future of the descendants of Jacob. Let me also clarify that I am not asking about the future prospects of the present state of Israel or of any of the main forms of Judaism. I am asking the deeper question, whether in Christian theology there is a future for any ethnic, national Israel at all. From a theological standpoint, does such an Israel have a future, and if so, what is it?

### I. SUPERSESSIONISM

The traditional answer through the history of the Christian Church has been, no. If you mean by Israel the actual descendants of Jacob and if you are asking about their ethnic, cultural, and political future, then, no, they do not have a future except to linger on earth like refugees until the end of time as a witness to divine judgment. Why? Because God has disinherited them as a punishment for their rejection of Jesus, and he has replaced them with a new Israel, the Gentile Church.

This traditional answer to the question of Israel’s future is what is known as supersessionism. Israel has been replaced or superseded by the Gentile Church. Supersessionism first arose after the suppression of the Bar Kochba revolt in AD 135. It was expressed in the writings of second-century Christians, such as Justin Martyr and Melito of Sardis, and also in the Letter of Barnabas.<sup>2</sup> It quickly spread to become the prevailing viewpoint of the Christian Church.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 19, 2000, in Nashville, TN.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen G. Wilson, ed., *Anti-Judaism in Early Christianity*, vol. 2, *Separation and Polemic* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 2; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1986).

R. K. Soulen, in his work *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, suggests that we understand supersessionism in three types.<sup>3</sup> First, there is punitive supersessionism, which says that God has rejected the Jews because of their rejection of Christ. The catastrophes of AD 70 and AD 135 were the political expressions of a fundamental divine abandonment of Israel in punishment for her rejection of Christ. As a result, God has turned his back on the Jews and has embraced the Gentile Church in their place. More potent and far-reaching than punitive supersessionism, however, is economic supersessionism, which argues that the entire economy (or dispensation) of Israel from Sinai to Christ was designed by God as a transitory symbol or type of an eternal, spiritual religion revealed by Christ and embodied in Christianity. The nationalist, ethnic, physical defining features of Judaism are all, like the entire story of OT Israel, a carnal symbol divinely intended to pass away when God brought the eternal spiritual antitype, the Church, into being. Finally, Soulen notes, we pass on to the most deeply embedded form of supersessionism—structural supersessionism—in which Scripture is habitually read with the distinctly Jewish or Israelite elements of Scripture as a mere background to the Biblical story, which moves primarily from universal creation to universal consummation by way of universal sin and universal redemption. Israel *per se* is not really even in the main story of the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

Because of the fact that supersessionism is traditionally structured deeply into Christian thought, the question of a future for Israel is traditionally met with automatic rejection if not incomprehension. However, supersessionism lives in Christian theology today purely on the momentum of its own tradition. Developments in the twentieth century have undercut its supposed historical and Biblical bases.

Supersessionists believed that the catastrophes of AD 70 and 135 signaled God's intention to make a complete end of Israel as a political, national entity. The dramatic establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 under God's providence has belied that notion. Supersessionists developed ways of reading the Bible that not only eliminated Israel from the main story, but turned it into a symbol of the Gentile Church and the spiritual realities that characterized the Church's supposed future. They believed that the NT clearly set forth the spiritual religion of Christianity to which the OT covenants, promises, and narrative related as a symbol. Revisions to this supersessionist way of reading Scripture, however, began to appear as early as the seventeenth century as newly emerging millennial views began to argue for a future for ethnic, national Israel in the coming kingdom of Christ.<sup>5</sup> In the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth

<sup>3</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 30–34, 181 n. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 12–56.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Toon, *Puritans, The Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600 to 1660* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 1970) 23–26; Christopher Hill, “Till the Conversion of the Jews,” in *Millenarianism and Messianism in English Literature and Thought 1650–1800* (ed. Richard H. Popkin; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988) 12–36.

century, belief in a future for Israel based on a literal rather than symbolic fulfillment of OT prophecy became more widespread through the impact of premillennialism.<sup>6</sup> Finally, after the awful tragedy of the Holocaust, many Biblical scholars have reassessed the anti-Jewish bias by which Scripture has been read, with the consequences being a major shift of opinion on the NT expectation of a future for Israel. Key to this has been the development of a consensus regarding Paul's teaching in Romans 9–11 that there is indeed a future in the plan of God for Israel—not a redefined Israel, but ethnic-national Israel.<sup>7</sup>

## II. ROMANS 9–11

It is worth emphasizing here the key features of Paul's argument. C. E. B. Cranfield expressed twenty-one years ago what is now broadly affirmed in NT studies when he wrote: "These three chapters [Rom. 9–11] emphatically forbid us to speak of the Church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people."<sup>8</sup> The key hermeneutical points are the following: Paul states at the outset in Romans 9 that his concern is for his "brethren," his "kinsmen according to the flesh," "Israelites" (9:3–5). *Israel* has failed to obtain the righteousness that is by faith (9:30–32; 10:2–21). They are enemies of the Gospel (11:28). Paul nevertheless prays for them that they might be saved (10:1). He claims that God's Word concerning Israel will be fulfilled (9:6, 27–29; 11:1–5, 26–29), but in a twofold way. At the present time, God is fulfilling the word that promised the salvation of a remnant as opposed to the whole of Israel (9:27–29; 11:1–7, 25). And so, Paul notes that in his day, there is a remnant according to God's gracious election which includes "Israelites" such as himself (11:1–2, 5). The hardening of the majority of Israel in the present time is the way God has chosen to extend the riches of salvation to the Gentiles (11:25). This is a mystery in that whereas one might have expected Israel to be blessed in full prior to blessing being extended to Gentiles, in actual fact God will bring in the fullness of the Gentiles first while Israel is for the most part hardened. So, the

<sup>6</sup> See Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 128–57; also, David A. Rausch, *Zionism within Early American Fundamentalism, 1878–1918: A Convergence of Two Traditions* (Texts and Studies in Religion 4; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Karl Barth, *CD 2/2.195–305*; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:445–592; Markus Barth, *The People of God* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. Scott J. Hafemann; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 142–84; David E. Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 147–76; J. Lanier Burns, "The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (ed. C. Blaising and D. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 188–229; S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Evidence for Romans 9–11," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus* (ed. D. K. Campbell and J. L. Townsend; Chicago: Moody, 1992) 199–223; Harold W. Hoehner, "Israel in Romans 9–11," in *Israel, The Land and The People* (ed. H. Wayne House; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 145–67. Also see the collection of articles on the theme "The Church and Israel (Romans 9–11)" in *Ex Auditu* 4 (1988).

<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, *Romans* 2:448.

first part of the fulfillment of God's word about Israel concerns the present time, and that is the fulfillment of the word that only a remnant would be saved (9:4, 6–12, 27–29; 11:5). But the second part of the fulfillment of God's word concerning Israel is what those who knew the Scriptures rightly expected—the glorious blessing upon Israel nationally. Israel has stumbled (9:32b–33; 11:9–11), and in that state of stumbling God is fulfilling his word about saving a remnant. Yet, Paul says, they have not stumbled so as to fall (11:11). If their failure has meant riches for the Gentiles, how much more will the *fullness* of Israel bring riches of blessing upon the world (11:12)? The fullness here is contrasted to the part, the remnant, which is being saved in the present time (11:7–26). Whereas Israel's rejection in the present time means the reconciliation of the Gentiles to God, their future acceptance will mean life from the dead (11:15). This is the language of reversal. Israel, which is now “an enemy of God as regards the gospel” (11:28), Israel of which now only a remnant is being saved (9:27–29; 11:5), Israel for whom Paul is praying and for whom he wishes himself to be accursed that they might be saved (9:1–3; 10:1), Israel which has missed the righteousness of God by stumbling over the stumbling stone (9:32b–33, 11:9), Israel is nevertheless beloved for the sake of the forefathers (11:28). The lump is holy because of the first bit of dough; the branches are holy because of the root (11:16), and even if God has broken them out, he is able and will in fact graft them in again (11:23–24). According to the word of the Lord, the redeemer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob. He will fulfill his covenant with them and all Israel will be saved (11:26–27).<sup>9</sup>

Now this teaching by Paul of a twofold bearing of the word of God on the status of Israel—a present time of hardening in which only a remnant from Israel is saved and then an eschatological salvation of Israel as a whole which will mean even greater riches for the world—this understanding of Paul's teaching which is now widespread among many interpreters of Paul accords well with the consensus that is developing concerning the focus of Jesus' ministry on Israel.

### III. JESUS AND THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

Many Biblical scholars working in historical Jesus research share the view that the teaching and mission of Jesus can only be understood in terms of Jesus' vision for the restoration of Israel.<sup>10</sup> Jesus proclaimed the

<sup>9</sup> Paul bases his argument for the salvation of all Israel on the promise of Isa 59:20–21. It should be noted that Isaiah follows this promise with an oracle on the return of divine favor to Zion which concludes with the promise, “Then all your people will be righteous; they will possess the land forever . . . That I may be glorified . . . I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time” (cf. Isa 45:25).

<sup>10</sup> For example, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (ABRL; 3 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1991–); Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979); Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and Darrell L. Bock, *Jesus according to Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

nearness of the kingdom of God to Israel, a kingdom that was as much political as it was spiritual, a kingdom that in accord with the expectation of the Hebrew prophets saw God's favor coming upon Israel nationally as much as upon Jews personally. The universal extent of the kingdom to Gentile nations, rather than contradicting the particularist focus on Israel, was its expected complement in the traditional way in which the prophets predicted a messianic empire. The striking feature of this new consensus on Jesus is not only the nationalist particularity of Jesus' focus on Israel, but the consistency of that focus from the beginning of his ministry to the cross and resurrection. As Jim Scott has put it, "Jesus lived and died for the vision of the restoration of Israel."<sup>11</sup>

Scot McKnight, in his book, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teaching of Jesus in National Context*, notes that Jesus proclaimed this vision at a crucial moment in Israel's history. Even as the eschatological kingdom was breaking forth in the ministry of Jesus, a severe judgment from God was imminent over the nation.<sup>12</sup> The rejection of Jesus and his message by the leaders of Israel made that judgment certain. Jesus himself warned Israel of the catastrophe that lay ahead. But he also set forth clearly and most certainly that God would bring the promised kingdom to a future fulfillment.<sup>13</sup> His apostles would rule the twelve tribes of Israel; they would inherit lands, cities and houses in the age to come. The restoration of the kingdom to Israel was indeed certain. Its time was fixed by the Father in heaven but would not be revealed in advance.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, the remnant of Israel whose faith was in Jesus would take the good news of the kingdom to the Gentiles. And in their fellowship, the inaugurated kingdom would manifest a presence until that time when, as Peter put it, God would bring in the *apokatastasis*, "the restoration of all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (Acts 3:19–21; cf. 1:3, 6–8).

As Biblical scholarship makes ever more clear that Jesus and Paul taught a future for national Israel in the eschatological plan of God, the legitimacy of a supersessionist reading of Scripture grows ever more dim to the point of vanishing altogether. A new unified way of reading the Bible becomes possible taking the OT covenant promises to Israel in a literal rather than symbolic manner. And with the reconstitution of Israel as a political reality after more than 1800 years, the providential-historical argument for the end of Israel nationally has been thrown into question as well.

Are there theological reasons for believing that Israel has a future? Yes, because God is faithful to his word. Yes, because, "For I, the Lord, do not

<sup>11</sup> James Scott, "Jesus' Vision for the Restoration of Israel as the Basis for a Biblical Theology of the New Testament" (paper presented at the 9th annual meeting of the Wheaton Theology Conference, Wheaton, IL, 6 April 2000).

<sup>12</sup> McKnight, *New Vision for Israel* 12–13, 39. On the presence of the kingdom, see pp. 70–119.

<sup>13</sup> On the future coming of the kingdom, see *ibid.* 120–55.

<sup>14</sup> I develop the themes of the present inauguration and future coming of the kingdom of God and its focus on Israel in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles in C. Blaising and D. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993) 232–83.

change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed" (Mal 3:10). Yes, because, "The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29).

#### IV. TWO-COVENANT THEOLOGY

But we need to note that there is another "yes" being promoted in some corners of Christian theology. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, since the awful tragedy of the Holocaust, a number of Catholic and mainline Protestant theologians have proposed an alternative to supersessionism that is known generally as two-covenant theology.<sup>15</sup> The key feature is the belief that Jews and Christians are related to God separately by distinct covenants. Christianity offers a covenant relationship to God for Gentiles through Jesus Christ. Judaism offers a covenant relationship to God for Jews through Torah. These covenants are distinct yet divinely sanctioned ways for their constituents to relate to God. It would be categorically wrong to deny the legitimacy of a favorable relationship to God for Jews or Christians on the basis of one covenant or the other. So, even though most Jews do not believe in Christ, according to two-covenant theology, Christians should not deny that the Jews have a favorable relationship to God. Rather, they should affirm that Jews are in a favorable relationship to God precisely on the basis of Torah. Quite consistent with this, those who take this dual-covenant view of Judaism and Christianity have repudiated Christian evangelism and mission to Jews not just as an affront, but as a theological violation of God's covenant with Israel.

Now from an evangelical standpoint, there are many problems with the dual-covenant theory. A number of these have been addressed in various publications, and I can only mention some within the scope of this paper.<sup>16</sup> Let us focus first of all upon the claim concerning the covenant relationships of Israel and of the Church to God. Does it make sense to say within the frameworks of the Tannach and of the Old and New Testaments that we could have two different God-approved religions, each with their own cove-

<sup>15</sup> Two-covenant theology is a general label for the consensus that has developed among the participants in and successors to the post-Holocaust Christian-Jewish dialogue. It should be noted, however, that not all the participants in the dialogue make use of the notion of "covenant" when setting forth their view of Judaism as a divinely sanctioned religion distinct from Christianity. Helpful overviews of this theological development can be found in Abraham J. Peck, ed., *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); John T. Pawlikowski, *Christ in Light of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue* (Studies in Judaism and Christianity; New York: Paulist, 1982); Peter von der Osten-Sacken, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: Theological Foundations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); James H. Charlesworth, Frank X. Blisard, and Jeffrey S. Siker, eds., *Jews and Christians: Exploring the Past, Present, and Future*, Shared Ground Among Jews and Christians: A Series of Explorations, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1990); Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Jewish-Christian Encounters over the Centuries: Symbiosis, Prejudice, Holocaust, Dialogue*, American University Studies, series 9: History, vol. 136 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994); and Eugene J. Fisher, ed., *Visions of the Other: Jewish and Christian Theologians Assess the Dialogue* (Studies in Judaism and Christianity; New York: Paulist, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of the Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984); and Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel, One Covenant or Two?*

nant relationships to God, existing side-by-side, separate but equal? Both Israel in the Tannach and the Church in the NT see themselves related to God through the covenant with Abraham. And consequently, both see their covenant relationship with God as in some way entailing all peoples as that covenant promised to bless Abraham and his seed and in him, or in his seed, all peoples. The eschatological vision of Israel in the Tannach is the mediation of that blessing with which she is herself blessed to the Gentiles—for example the *shalom* of Israel extending to the Gentiles in Isaiah 2/Micah 4 and the Isaiah oracles concerning Yahweh the Savior of all nations (Isa 42:1–6, 10–12; 45:22–25; 49:6–7, 22–26; 60:1–3). The latter is prefaced with the command to proclaim the good news of the Lord's favor to Zion and to all the nations (Isa 40:9–11; 45:22–25). This vision is universal; it leaves no room for a people related to God by some other covenantal means. The Church in the NT sees itself proclaiming new covenant blessings that flow from the covenant made with Abraham (Gal 3:6–14). The NT sees both Jew and Gentile in Christ united in this new covenant blessing (Gal 2:6–9). The NT does see Jewish and Gentile Christians in different relationships to the Law of Moses. We think of Acts 15, where the Jerusalem Council rejected the argument that Gentile believers had to be circumcised and had to observe the Law of Moses. Jewish believers, however, continued to do so. James says that the Jewish believers in Christ were zealous for the Torah (Acts 21:20). Paul himself practiced the law (Acts 12:21–26; 23:6; 24:13–21; 25:19; 28:17) but rejected the Pharisaic restrictions on table fellowship with Gentiles (Gal 2:11–21; 1 Cor 9:19–23), just as Jesus rejected those same restrictions used to discriminate among Jews (Matt 9:10–13 et al.). But even though the NT does see Jewish and Gentile Christians with different relationships to the Law of Moses, it does not see this as a distinction between Judaism and the Church. Rather, the Church contains within its unity of new covenant blessing both Mosaic and Gentilic orders. The point is this: neither the vision in the Tannach of Israel's covenant relationship to God and God's plan to bless Gentiles, nor the NT view of Jews and Gentiles in the Church presents a view of dual, unrelated covenants, one for Jews as Jews and the other for Gentiles as Gentiles. What is more, both require evangelistic proclamation of covenant blessing to all peoples. Consequently, dual covenant theology is fundamentally incompatible with the Biblical foundations of Israel's and the Church's identities and missions.

Actually, dual-covenant theology takes its primary orientation not from the Bible but from modern pluralism. It proposes that Christianity and Judaism see each other as legitimately distinct religions and this creates further incoherence at the Biblical level. Why? Because both Israel in the Tannach and the Church of the NT were profoundly exclusive—not of other peoples, but of other religions. There are no other religions sanctioned by God. To suggest that Christianity and Judaism see each other as validly separate religions insults both Christianity and Judaism at their fundamental, that is Biblical, levels.

But the biggest problem with two-covenant theology is its claim that Israel is related to God by covenant apart from Jesus Christ. Rosemary

Ruether, in her book *Faith and Fratricide*, argues that Christology is the problem in Jewish-Christian relations, and consequently Christology must be revised.<sup>17</sup> Many of those who endorse two-covenant theology affirm the point that Jesus was not the Messiah of the Jews for the simple reason that he did not bring in the messianic age. He may become that Messiah in the future, but he is not at present, and consequently Jews cannot be said to be saved through faith in Jesus. Rather, they have their own covenant relationship with God apart from Christ, more or less like the covenantal nomism that E. P. Sanders says characterized the Jewish relationship to God in the first century quite apart from the religion of Jesus advocated by the apostle Paul.<sup>18</sup>

Now the obvious problem with this for evangelical theology is that it is entirely contrary to the teaching of the NT. The Gospels uniformly present Jesus as the Messiah of Israel from the angelic announcement to Mary and Joseph to the sign that was nailed to his cross (Matt 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:28). After his ascension, the apostles proclaimed in Jerusalem that Israel should know that God had made Jesus Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36) and that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:10, 12). As Peter declared to the Council of Israel: "He is the one whom God exalted to his right hand as a Prince and a Savior to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). Furthermore, the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel is presented in the NT in terms of the fulfillment of Israel's covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants) in the twofold manner that we commonly recognize as the present and future fulfillment of the messianic kingdom. The Israel of the future is the Israel of the kingdom of the Son of God, the Messiah, the Prince. To claim that Israel can be related to God by covenant apart from Jesus Christ is nothing less than a repudiation of NT Christianity.<sup>19</sup>

#### V. THEOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS

Up to this point, I have addressed myself to the question of whether there are theological reasons for asserting a future for Israel. The answer is, contrary to supersessionism, yes. But it is not the "yes" of dual covenant theology. The "yes" to Israel's future is the "yes" spoken by the Scripture, both Tannach and Christian Bible, both Old and New Testament alike. But that "yes" cannot be heard as the answer to an isolated question. The problem that we face here is the structural nature of supersessionism, the deep set tradition of excluding ethnic, national Israel from the theological reading of Scripture. To put Israel back into the picture does not involve a slight

<sup>17</sup> Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 246–51. See also *idem*, "Christology and Jewish-Christian Relations," in Peck, ed., *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust* 25–38.

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 75.

<sup>19</sup> See "The Fulfillment of the Biblical Covenants through Jesus Christ," in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 174–211.

change of interpretation on a few passages, but the prospect of an overall adjustment of the way Scripture is to be read.

We need to observe here that a heightened hermeneutical awareness *per se* does not automatically solve this problem. One must not underestimate the power of longstanding tradition in shaping the hermeneutical pre-understanding by which individual texts as well as whole portions of biblical literature are read—preunderstandings which are reinforced by the expositional commentary traditions in evangelical preaching and by traditional forms of theological catechesis in evangelical teaching.

We as evangelicals affirm the consistent application of a grammatical-historical-literary hermeneutic. And we have produced excellent works on hermeneutics from, for example, Osborne to Vanhoozer.<sup>20</sup> Also, we as evangelicals participate in the work of developing a canonical theology as can be seen, for example, in works from Dumbrell to Sailhamer.<sup>21</sup>

However, although we are rich in hermeneutical theory, we are poor in its theological implementation. Our tendency in evangelicalism is to rest confessionally on the theological work of predecessors rather than drawing the faith afresh and ever richer out of Scripture by the hermeneutical methodologies which we spend so much time developing.

In short, to take the future of Israel seriously as a theological question encumbers evangelical theology foundationally in the work of drawing out a canonical theology that is faithful to verbal revelation. And as we do that, as we draw that theology out of the canon with Israel left in the story, what might we expect theologically?

#### VI. ASPECTS OF A NON-SUPERSESSIONIST EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

Here we can only sketch some of the possible implications that I think we can see in the doctrine of God, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

1. *Doctrine of God.* With respect to our understanding of God, I think we would have to put foremost in our thinking that our God is the God of Israel. He is the God of Israel, and also of the Gentiles. God created us all alike, but among this human creation, God chose Abraham and his descendants after him to bless him and them and to bless us who are Gentiles in him. Our relationship to God is therefore not that of an undifferentiated mass, or even simply by the distinction of the election of salvation, but by

<sup>20</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991); Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Walter Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (London: Paternoster, 1997); John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); *idem*, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

another election which adds complexity to the picture, the election of Israel among the peoples of the world.

When we talk about the attributes of God, first priority should be put, not on apophatic or cataphatic methods, but on how he described himself to Moses on Sinai: "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." Note the emphasis on *lovingkindness and truth*. This is good news for a people to whom he has given promises of everlasting blessing. As a God who abounds in lovingkindness and truth, he can be relied upon to keep his word. It is this God who became incarnate in the house of David 2000 years ago, revealing ever more fully his *grace and truth*. And it is he who has been receiving us Gentiles to a table of fellowship with the remnant of Israel.

When we read the Bible, taking Israel and God's relationship to her seriously, I think we find in the matter of divine providence, both a general providence—in which God works all things according to the council of his will—and a special providence overlaid upon the general in which he orders the ways of Israel in a special rather than general manner. We also find a personal engagement and relational reciprocity between God and Israel that goes beyond either this general or special providence and which cannot be simply dismissed as anthropomorphism but which finds its culminating expression in the revelation of this very God of Israel *in* and *to* Jesus the Messiah—a revelation of an even greater complexity, the revelation of the Triune God.

2. *Anthropology*. In the area of anthropology, having Israel truly in the divine plan confronts us, I think, with the myth of an undifferentiated humanity. Truly, we are all descended from Adam, but God thinks of us in the differentiated manner of the Abrahamic covenant. What happened to us in Christianity was not the universalizing of the particular. Rather, we are experiencing the fulfillment of the plan to bless the various kinds of peoples through the particular mediation of Abraham's seed. Perhaps this means that we need to give more attention to ethnic and racial distinction as a variety intended by God for the enriching of the whole human race. Paul says that when the redeemer comes, he will remove ungodliness from Jacob and all Israel will be saved and this will mean riches for the world. Note: the riches for the world are not simply a direct gift from God to individuals, but a mediated result from the fullness of Israel. We may need to give more serious attention to the role of Israel as a people now in the way God sovereignly blesses human life—not only the extension of salvation to Gentiles during Israel's hardening, but the regulation of the whole of Gentile life on the earth. Somehow, Israel and the Jewish people are taken up into God's ways of blessing human life on this side of the parousia—a point which might be seen in Thomas Cahill's recent work *The Gifts of the Jews*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

3. *Christology.* We come to the matter of Christology. One of the most obvious effects of supersessionism in traditional Christology is the effacement of the Jewishness of Jesus from Christian confession. It is remarkable that the great creeds and confessions of the faith are silent on this point, being satisfied simply with the affirmation of Christ's humanity. However, in Scripture, not only the Jewishness of Jesus, but his Davidic lineage are central features of the gospel. For example, Paul, in Romans 1, summarizes the gospel in this way:

The gospel of God which He promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the gospel which he says in Rom 1:16 is to the Jew first and also to the Greek. In 2 Tim 2:8, he writes, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David, according to my gospel." Of course, Matthew and Luke also emphasize from the beginning of their Gospel accounts the Davidic lineage of Jesus. In Luke 1:32, Gabriel tells Mary that her son "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."

The Davidic lineage is crucial for understanding the NT reference to Christ as the Son of God, recalling the promise to David in 2 Sam 7:14 concerning his descendant whom the Lord would raise up and whose kingdom the Lord would establish: "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me." In other words, "Son of God" is first of all a covenantal term designating the fulfillment of the promise to David. The remarkable message of the NT is that in and through this sonship a greater sonship is revealed. Whereas Psalm 72 says that "in him" all the nations will be blessed, applying the Abrahamic promise to the Davidic King, indicating that it would be through the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant that the Abrahamic promise of mediated blessing would itself be fulfilled, Colossians 1 says that "in him" all things were created. The "in him" is the formula of mediated promise. But here it indicates a "him" who is greater than any descendant of David. The point is that the incarnation is not just the union of God and humanity; it is the incarnation of the Son of God in the house of David as the Son of covenant promise. From a human standpoint, Jesus is not just a man, or generic man; he is that man—that descendant of David who has a great inheritance and a future set forth in the eschatological fulfillment of God's plan for Israel. But as God the Son incarnate, those promises are ever more sure and certain, and they also receive a cosmic addition to the inheritance beyond, but not instead of, the initial scope of the promise. Paul goes on to say in Col 1:16 that all things were not only created "in him" but "for him." For him—the Son of God, God the Son incarnate as the covenant Son, the Son of David—as a gift from God the Father. If God the Father has given all things to his covenant Son, the Son of David, precisely because he is none other than God the Son, how could Israel's future be any more secure?

When we think of Jesus Christ, then, we must think of him clearly as the Messiah of Israel. Israel's promises are guaranteed now not only by the word and the oath, as Hebrews 6 says, but by the union of Davidic sonship and divine sonship, the inclusion of the covenanted Davidic inheritance in the inter-trinitarian gift of all creation from the Father to the Son. This is why Jesus is the only way, the only way to partaking of the glorious inheritance of the kingdom for either Israel or the Gentiles, for one can only be blessed by God "in him."

Post-Holocaust theology is correct in calling Christianity to recognize the Jewishness of Jesus, but it has completely missed the NT message of which Jew he is. What about the charge that Jesus could not be the Messiah since he did not bring in the kingdom? Once again, post-Holocaust theology is unable to answer this question and stumbles over it because of its inadequate Biblical foundation. The NT proclaims the inauguration of the kingdom in the pre-ascension and ascension ministries of Jesus with the fullness of the kingdom yet to come. Those who believe in Jesus participate in the inaugural blessings of the kingdom.

Israel today, however, Israel that is mostly in unbelief, needs to see Jesus as the one who prophesied the destruction of the temple and the visitation of judgment on Jerusalem and the people. The temple has been in ruins since AD 70, and for over 1800 years, Israel was without any political presence in the land. The stark fact of the fulfillment of that prophecy as recorded in the NT needs to be given serious attention. This same NT witnesses to the revelation of kingdom power and *shalom* in the ministry of Jesus and sets forth Jesus' teaching that the kingdom will indeed come for Israel, although the time is not revealed. It is, as Jesus said, known only to the Father (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7). But it will come, and as a sign, Jesus gave his own death and resurrection, his own enactment of the sign of Jonah (Matt 12:38–50; Luke 11:29–32). Israel needs to consider this sign in light of the prophesy of Hos 6:1–3:

Come, let us return to the Lord, for he has torn us, but he will heal us; he has wounded us, but he will bandage us; he will revive us after two days; he will raise us up on the third day that we may live before him. So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; and he will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain watering the earth.

The resurrection of the Son of David from the dead on the third day is the guarantee to Israel that after a season of being wounded and torn, the Lord will indeed raise them up to fully realize the kingdom promises. And when he does this for Israel, what will it mean for Gentiles? As Paul says, in Romans 11, it means "life from the dead" (cf. Ezek 37:1–28).

4. *Ecclesiology*. What about the Church? Obviously, when we realize that Israel does indeed have a future in the plan of God, we must lay aside the ecclesiology of supersessionism. While we recognize that the NT makes comparisons between OT Israel and the NT Church, and articulates the Church's relationship to God covenantally through the covenants of Israel, we need to avoid the supersessionist reductionism which simply identifies the Church as the replacement of Israel. Such a view not only falls to the

unwarranted arrogance of which Paul warned Gentile Christians (Rom 11:17–18), but it has two other serious effects: (1) it impoverishes the Church's understanding of the plan of God as revealed in Scripture, and (2) it distorts the Church's true identity. The Church is not an essentially Gentile construct, even though since the second century, the majority of Christians have been Gentiles. Thinking of itself as Gentile and seeing itself as the replacement of Israel has been the source of political misconstruals of the nature and mission of the Church. It is most important for an ecclesiology that keeps in view God's future for Israel to recover the meaning of the Church as a fellowship anticipating the coming establishment of the kingdom in all its fullness for Israel and Gentiles. Consequently, it is a table fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers. It is a table fellowship of one kind of Gentile believers with other kinds of Gentile believers, and of all kinds of Gentile believers with Jewish believers—all of whom have received the inaugural blessings of Christ's kingdom and who await that fullness. The vision of Jesus and the apostles was that in the Church, Jewish believers and Gentile believers would sit down together in peace without Jews requiring Gentiles to become Jews. But in order to truly understand the vision today, we have to add: without Gentiles requiring Jews to become Gentiles.

Michael Wyschogrod, not a believer in Yeshúa, has suggested that the key test of the Church's overcoming of supersessionism will be its attitude toward Jewish Christians.<sup>23</sup> I believe this is correct. But there is more at stake here than the problem of prejudice, the overcoming of cultural differences, or even the problem of anti-Semitism. The big question is, what is authentic Judaism? If we recognize that there is an Israel distinct from Gentiles in the plan of God, then what does it mean to be that kind of a Jew, a Jew of the kingdom, in relation to Gentiles of the kingdom and in comparison to the various Judaisms of today? We need to remember that Jesus and the early disciples promoted an alternative vision of being Jewish to the various options of first-century Judaism. Jesus was not promoting Gentilism as opposed to Judaism but a different kind of Judaism that belonged to the kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup> We know that he was engaged in disputes with Pharisees, Sadducees, and others over Torah and proper customs for observing Torah. The book of Acts clearly indicates that the Jewish believers including the apostles practiced Torah, and it recognizes some tension over how their practice differed from that taught by the Pharisees. As a consequence of the destructions of AD 70 and 135, many of the Palestinian Jewish sects disappeared, and with them the sense that there are different ways of being Jewish.<sup>25</sup> Rabbinic Judaism arose out of the surviving Pharisaic sect and asserted itself as the only authentic way of being Jewish. And although the

<sup>23</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, "Israel, Church, and Election," in *Brothers in Hope* (ed. John Oesterreicher; New York: Herder & Herder, 1970) 83; *idem*, "Letter to a Friend," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995) 171.

<sup>24</sup> A consensus exists on this point among many engaged in historical Jesus research. See the works cited in n. 8 above.

<sup>25</sup> On the disappearance of the variety of Judaisms after the crises of AD 70 and 135 and the rise of rabbinic Judaism vis-à-vis Christianity, see Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire, AD 135–425* (trans. H. McKeating;

Jewishness of Jewish Christians was not encouraged by the Church and even suppressed for many years, Jesus' vision for authentic Jewishness, his way of observing Torah consistent with the *shalom* and fellowship of peoples in the kingdom of God, still remains. It stands as an alternative to the variety of Judaisms today as it was to the variety of Judaisms in the first century. The key point about ecclesiology is that the post-supersessionist Church needs to encourage, assist, and defend Jewish Christians in their attempt to realize that vision that Jesus, the Son of David, set forth for authentic Jewishness in anticipation of the coming kingdom of God. And it needs to do this while at the same time promoting the table fellowship of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ.

Someone might object to this that Paul says there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (Rom 3:23), that there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal 3:28), and that he broke down the dividing wall, abolishing the enmity so as to make the two into a new man (Eph 2:14–18). But Paul is speaking of sin, atonement, and the promised blessing of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, the blessings of the cross, the resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit are given without distinction, just as they are to males and females without distinction. But soteriological equality does not lead to androgyny. Neither is it true that because we as persons are saved with the same salvation, as a consequence our personalities have now become indistinguishable. So, I do not think we should see any contradiction between Paul's teachings on grace without distinction on the one hand and his expectation of an *eschaton* in which Israel is distinctively present on the other. And if we can grasp how those two fit together, then we also have the basis for grasping how this occurs in the Church. Jews as *Jews* and Gentiles as *Gentiles* can truly fellowship together in the blessings of salvation and the sanctification by the Holy Spirit which they share without distinction.

5. *Eschatology*. What about eschatology? To put Israel in the *eschaton* on the basis of a historical-grammatical-literary reading of Scripture is to put the *context* of future Israel there as well. And what that means is a new creation rather than a spiritual-vision eschatology.<sup>26</sup> In the history of the Church, supersessionism and spiritual-vision eschatology fit hand in hand. What do I mean by spiritual-vision eschatology? I mean that traditional eschatology which sees eternal life as a timeless, changeless, spiritual existence consisting primarily in the human soul's full knowledge of God. This knowledge is understood to be like a direct view, vision, or beholding of God. This is the sum total of what eternal life is and it defines what is meant by heaven. The resurrected body is expected to be a spiritual

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reprint ed.; London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986). Also see H. Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> I develop the contrast between spiritual-vision eschatology and new creation eschatology along with implications for the question of millennialism in my essay, "Premillennialism," in *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond* (ed. Darrell L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 160–81.

body in the sense that the body is composed of spiritual substance or has been transformed into spirit. The emphasis is on the individual's unchanging visionary-like epistemic experience of God. This spiritual-vision eschatology traditionally has seen earthly life as a symbol of spiritual realities. Supersessionism fits well with this view in denying a future for Israel since a future for Israel literally has no place in a spiritual-vision eschatology. A future for Israel would demand a national and political reality in the *eschaton* with all its context of land and fruitfulness. This is all thought to be carnal by spiritual-vision ideology. It is simply not possible. As a result, Israel can only be a *symbol* of a spiritual people headed for a spiritual destiny.

To take the future of Israel seriously would demand that this spiritual-vision eschatology be modified at best or, at the most, replaced entirely with a different eschatological concept. We are not talking here about that alternative which spiritual-vision eschatology has thought was the only alternative, that is one that is carnal in every sense of the word carnal, in the manner, say, of Muslim eschatology. Rather, we are talking about the alternative most Biblical theologians see expressed in Scripture, that is, new creation eschatology. New creation eschatology emphasizes the liberation of the cosmos from sin, the bodily resurrection and glorification of the righteous, and the liberation of the cosmos to share in the liberty of the children of God. It does not see the *eschaton* as simply a continuation of the past but does emphasize its continuity with the past as seen in the resurrection of the body. New Creation does not see the *eschaton* as a timeless, changeless or essentially visionary-like epistemic state. It is not eternal in the classic timeless sense, but everlasting. New creation has a place for the earth, the cosmos, the fullness of created life, but especially for resurrected human life living under the lordship of the resurrected Jesus Christ in fellowship with the triune God. It would see human life in created wholeness—not as undifferentiated individuals but as differentiated individuals. But neither would it see them just as differentiated individuals, but rather as differentiated in ethnic and communal dimensions as well, since these form an essential aspect of our identities. And what will we find here except Israel and the Gentiles who are together blessed by God, living under the lordship of Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

Some evangelicals have tried to adopt elements of new creation eschatology within a spiritual vision eschatology by positing a future for Israel that will be completely fulfilled in the millennium before the final judgment and the commencement of eternity—an eternity which they see in spiritual-vision terms. In my opinion, a limited duration kingdom alone does not do full justice to the Biblical vision for Israel and the Gentiles. But that form of premillennialism has been a necessary step for some on the way to a full new creation eschatology. Does the adoption of new creation eschatology mean the end of premillennialism? *Mē genoito!* Rather, I believe the same hermeneutics by which we come to embrace new creation eschatology leads to the inescapable conclusion that the vision Jesus gave to John recorded in Revelation 20 was precisely that of a millennial kingdom between the parousia and the final judgment. Today while many premillennialists are coming to

adopt a more consistent new creationist eschatology, many amillennialists who have come to a new creationist eschatology are re-examining the traditional objections to a premillennialist reading of Revelation 20, many of which were forged within a precommitted framework of supersessionist, spiritual-vision eschatology.

In conclusion, does Israel have a future in the plan of God? Yes—a “yes” that needs to be worked through our theological thinking, removing the “no” that was deeply embedded in traditional theology by supersessionism. What are the theological implications of a future for Israel? We have only touched upon some of the implications—implications for our understanding of God, of humankind, of Christ, of the Church, and of the nature of the *eschaton*. Much more could be said. But I will close with Paul: “O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” Perhaps we will find that just as the future fullness of Israel is the occasion for riches to the world, so even now our theological knowledge stands to be enriched when we consider that *all* of the promises of God concerning Israel are “yes” and “amen” in Christ Jesus.