

# **BOAST NOT AGAINST THE BRANCHES**

The Church today is in danger - not only from materialism, unbelief and the challenge of Islam - but from God's displeasure at arrogance against Israel.

There is a widespread teaching that the Church has replaced Israel, and that God has therefore finished with the Jewish people as the focus of His redemptive plan.

Known as replacement theology, this states that all the promises made to the Jews as a nation, including the promise of the land, have now been transferred to the Church in a spiritual sense. In this view, the Church is a completely new body having no continuity with the Jewish people and God's covenant with them, and the New Covenant (celebrated in the Lord's supper) was made with the Church, completely replacing God's covenant with Israel. In this scheme “the land” no longer belongs to Israel: instead she is seen as an alien invader on lands which rightfully belong to the Arab people.

Indeed, the “land of Israel” no longer refers to a literal land, but to “Christ”, “the kingdom of God” or the Church's “spiritual inheritance”. Thus, when the Old Testament speaks of the Jews returning to Jerusalem, the New Testament, according to replacement theologians, now reinterprets this as Christians coming to the New (heavenly) Jerusalem. Similarly, building up the ruined cities means that the kingdom of God is being built up; and the desert blossoming refers to the heavenly kingdom etc. In particular,

the covenant people of God are now no longer a physical people, but exclusively a spiritual entity, the Church.

A particularly dangerous style of replacement theology is that being proclaimed by the Kingdom Now or Dominion or Reconstructionist teachers, which is affecting the charismatic/pentecostal branch of the evangelical Christian community in the U.S.A. Some of this teaching contains dangerous elements of anti-Semitism.

“Modern apostate Jews have absolutely no theological, and therefore no historical right to the land of Palestine.” “Israel is now a sacrificial corpse.” (Matthew 24:28; Rev.19:17-18). “God's people must not seek to reform Israel, with its new religion of Judaism, but abandon her to her fate.” (Days of Vengeance by David Chilton).

As the conflict in the Middle East increases, with Israel seemingly obstinate, unbending and aggressive, this theology seems easier to accept. Perhaps Israel should not be in the Middle East, perhaps peace might come to the Middle East if Christians withdrew their support from Israel and backed the Palestinian cause?

As the conflict in and around Israel continues and even worsens, there is the danger that an increasing number of Christians will turn against the clear simple meaning of the Scripture concerning the return of the Jews to their land, and accept replacement theology. Not only will this cause the Church to abandon the Jews as a nation (Israel), but will, according to the plain teaching of the New Testament, expose her to the displeasure and judgement of God, resulting in unspeakable loss.

“I am speaking to you who are Gentiles... do not be arrogant toward the branches, but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ Quite right they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you God’s kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.” (Romans 11:13, 18-22).

If God has transferred Israel's promises exclusively to the Christian Church, this can only mean that He has once and for all rejected Israel as a nation. But if God intended to take away Israel's inheritance, why did Jesus say: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law, until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18)

If God has turned away from Israel and exchanged her for a new nation, why did Paul say: “God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!”, and then quote Old Testament scripture to prove it? (Romans 11:1, 26-27)

If God has forever taken away the land of Israel from the Jewish people, why then did He say: “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My Holy Name, which you profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great Name. . For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land.” (Ezekiel 36:22-24)

Moreover, replacement theology makes nonsense of Biblical exegesis in that sometimes verses must be split in two halves, applying one half to the Jewish people and the other half to the Church. “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel; behold they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is perished. We are completely cut off.’ (Obviously the Jews). Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I will open your graves. My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.’” (Presumably the Church). (Ezekiel 37:11-12)

A similar examination of passages such as Ezekiel 39:23, 27; Jeremiah 32:37,42-44 will emphasise this point. Although it is sometimes claimed that these passages refer to the first return from Babylon in the third century B.C., it is clear from a number of scriptures that a second and final restoration out of all the lands is promised by God (Isaiah 11:11; Jeremiah 16:14-15; Ezekiel 39:28; Amos 9:14-15).

The grave mistake of replacement theologians is that they break the fundamental law of the harmony of the Old and New Testament. The New Testament does not repeat all the promises of the Old Testament because its writers and central characters presupposed the authenticity and accuracy of Moses and the Prophets.

Thus, in particular, the reason Jesus did not spend time teaching that physical Israel would be living in the physical promised land in the last days was that He presupposed that all the Old Testament prophetic scriptures were valid and literally true. Unlike Jesus, replacement theologians cannot accept the literal truth of the Old Testament. Replacement theologians also misunderstand the way the New Testament refers to the Old Testament. The New Testament makes a wider application of the same principles enunciated in the Old Testament, but never at the expense of the

original meaning. The “spiritual” meaning is dependent on the “natural” because it flows from it. The New Testament speaks in terms of “even as, so also” rather than “instead of, now this”.

Thus with regard to Israel and the Church, the New Testament teaches “even as” Israel, “so also” the Church, not “instead of” Israel, “now the Church”. For example, “even as” God promised to deal with Israel in blessing and discipline, “so also” will He bless and discipline the Church. Spiritual fulfilment does not replace the natural, but hangs upon it, flows from it, and completes it. This is the meaning of the term “fulfil” when used by the New Testament in relation to the Old Testament.

An example of this principle is seen in 1 Peter 2:9 where Paul is not saying that the Church has replaced Israel as the chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, but that “even as” Israel in the Old Testament was (and still is) chosen and called as God's special people to declare His glory (Exodus 19:5-6 etc), “so also” does the body of believers, the Church have a similar calling. (Although replacement theologians use this passage to support their view, it should be noted anyway that Peter is addressing his letter to Jewish believers in the Diaspora, and contrasts them with the Gentiles.)

The view that God has rejected Israel also raises serious difficulties as regards the character of God. To picture God as having rejected the people of Israel because of their sin seems inconsistent with the meaning of passages such as Jeremiah 31:35-37. We need to remember that grace, and not human merit, is the ground of all salvation be it personal or national, and despite Israel's recognised failings today as a nation, she will be delivered and restored on the ground of God's grace and faithfulness, never her merit.

We read concerning the individual that none of those given by the Father to the Son can ever be taken out of His hand - nothing can obstruct His eternal plans for them (John 10:28; Romans 8:28-29). There is however no such explicit statement concerning the Church. God's faithfulness to the Church is inferred from and follows His promises of faithfulness to Israel.

Thus if God can be thought of terminating His covenant with Israel and replacing her with another body (the Church) because of unfaithfulness or any other reason, then He can equally and for similar reasons forsake the Church as a whole.

In view of the Church's sad history over the past 1900 years, including today, failings, which are at least as great as those of ancient Israel, this is dangerous ground to tread.

It is hardly likely that anyone would wish to claim that the Church has proven herself more worthy of God's goodness than Israel, especially in view of the greater spiritual light the Church claims to enjoy in the New Covenant.

We must say categorically that if, after all the clear, unequivocal promises of God to Israel, God has rejected the Jews, and replaced her with another body, Gentile Christians have no guarantee whatsoever that God will not change His plans for the Church, take away the everlasting covenant, and replace the Church with some other people and with some other plan.

God requires the Church, which is predominantly Gentile, to show mercy to the Jewish people in recognition of the mercy she has received from Him, in that although once “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world”, Gentiles have been brought into the good of the New

Covenant initially made with the house of Israel and which has not been rescinded (Ephesians 2:11-13; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Over the past nineteen centuries the Church has signally failed to do this, but has rather rejected the Jewish people, persecuted them, and claimed all the promises made to them exclusively for herself. In these last days God is giving the Church what may be the last chance to show mercy, compassion and support for Israel, before the final day of judgement on both Church and nations.

Yet in this present day of world antagonism to and misunderstanding of Israel, many in the Church are joining the chorus of condemnation - and are thus exposing her to the danger of God's judgement. Replacement theology in all its forms, be it for the glory of the Church, under a cloak of concern for Israel's morality, or with aggressive anti-Semitism, is a grievous error to be exposed.

“Be not arrogant towards the branches, but if you are arrogant, remember it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. . . Do not be conceited but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. . . Behold then the kindness and severity of God . . . to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.”  
(Romans 11:13-22)

As God pushes Israel towards her final destiny, world hostility, ignorance and self-righteous hypocrisy will grow ever more strongly even in the Church. It is not going to be easy to stand by the Word of God - but in the end it will be the only place worth standing.

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