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This paper addresses the topic of Christian supersessionism or replacement theology, the concept that the Christian church has replaced the Jewish people as God's people under a new covenant that replaces the old. It presents arguments by three scholars with different backgrounds and views. Two male and one female professor. A native of Sweden (Svartvik), an orthodox Jew (Levine), and one scholar from South Africa (Du Toit). They all define supersessionism similarly as coming in different versions, ranging from soft to hard supersessionism. They agree that all these forms suggest some form of replacement and discontinuity with the old. At the more extreme "hard" supersessionism end, which most scholars do not follow, supersessionism is the claim that God punished Israel for their sin by revoking and transferring the covenant promises to the church.

The three scholars differ in their views on whether supersessionism can be found in the New Testament. They all acknowledge that this remains debated among scholars. Levine and Du Toit affirm it in the New Testament text. They both claim that it is inevitable with how the New Testament authors present the gospel in that it is something fundamentally new that replaces what existed before. In contrast, Svartvik absolves it from the New Testament text and warns about misappropriation of the text or too narrow a reading. He argues that fulfillment should never be understood as coming at the expense of the promises to the Jewish people and that any repudiation of the ancient covenant promises would ultimately point to a capricious God. He views supersessionist interpretations as a formative sin of Christian theology rooted in Christian triumphalism.

Svartvik and Levine emphasize the hidden dangers of supersessionism and urge their readers to be attentive to its ethical implications. They point out that it not only precluded a deeper dialogue between Judaism and Christianity but also played a role in promoting negative bias towards Jewish people. Both scholars ultimately correlate it to antisemitism and persecution of Jewish people through the ages and the Holocaust. Du Toit takes a fundamentally different approach to its ethical implications by appealing to his readers not to be caught up in antisemitic replacement discussions but instead focusing on the essence of what is being replaced. He argues that what lies at the heart of the newness promulgated by the New Testament authors is the criteria for covenant membership and identity that rests not on external markers, like ethnicity or race, but the internal spiritual markers of faith and Spirit that become available to all people without any favoritism and thus cannot be antisemitic in interpretation and application.

In conclusion, all three authors highlight essential points regarding supersessionism or replacement theology. While they differ in their approaches and purpose and come to different conclusions, taken together, they call us to reflect more humbly about the role supersessionism played in promoting negative bias towards Jewish people that Christians cannot ignore. Importantly, they also call us not to lose sight of God's purpose for his people, which includes no favoritism.

Biblical scholar Jesper Svartvik, a native of Sweden and professor at the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, in his article titled “I Have Come Not to Abolish but to Fulfill: Reflections on Understanding Christianity as Fulfillment without Presupposing Supersessionism” (February 7, 2022), challenges the reader to articulate a Christian theology which is fulfillment without supersessionism. He argues that supersessionism, the idea that the Christian church has replaced the Jewish people, is a formative sin of Christian theology that has plagued Jewish-Christian relations for over two thousand years.

Svartvik supports his view by pointing to the fifteenth chapter in Romans. He argues that the chapter confirms both the promises given to the Jewish people and the inclusion of the gentiles into the covenant with the God of Israel. He stresses that the text recognizes and appreciates the relationship between the God of Israel and Israel. He argues that a Christian theology that repudiates the ancient covenantal promises would present a capricious God and thus cannot live up to the standard. He asserts that Christians can easily fall prey to triumphalism without a sense of humbleness and thankfulness for God’s mercy of being grafted into the covenant at the eleventh hour. He encourages Christians to articulate their belief in a way that reminds Jews and Christians alike that God is trustworthy according to both faiths. Svartvik cautions the reader about misappropriating Romans chapters nine through eleven, which he acknowledges have been foundational in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. For one, he stresses that Biblical scholars remain divided on what Paul meant. Further, he warns that a narrow reading of these chapters can easily reduce Judaism to a prologue in history or relegate Judaism to the future as it is merely tolerated, not because of what it is today, but because of what it will become. Svartvik concludes that fulfillment in Christianity needs to be correctly understood as gentile inclusion into the covenant with the God of Israel. And it is the realization that the kingdom of God has arrived, albeit not yet fully, and the embodiment of the Word of God in Jesus. He asserts that fulfillment should never be understood as coming at the expense of the promise given to the Jewish people.

Svartnik’s purpose is to call attention to the dangers of the Christian theological construct of supersessionism that he considers rooted in theological triumphalism. He points to its utterly destructive influence on Jewish-Christian relations through the ages. He wants to show his readers a more appropriate application of Pauline theology that focuses on including gentiles without coming at the expense of the promises to the Jewish people.

He appeals to future generations of Christians to avoid repeating the mistake of supersessionist interpretations. He reminds them how the first generations of Christ believers devoted themselves to de-eschatologizing their message to be able to hand it over to future generations. He asks future generations to prevail against the generational curse of supersessionism similarly and instead focus on the unity of their covenant blessings.

University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, Amy-Jill Levine, an Orthodox Jew, in her article titled “Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate or Deny” (February 10, 2022), challenges the reader to acknowledge that supersessionism is intrinsic to Jewish and Christian identity. Instead of absolving it from the New Testament text, we should move towards a more helpful dialogue of its theological and ethical implications. She points to the dangers of supersessionism for minorized groups, exemplified by the role that Christian supersessionism has played in promoting negative bias against Jews and contributing to their persecution through history that Christians cannot ignore.

Levine supports her view that the New Testament participates in supersessionist moves by pointing to several texts in the Gospels of Matthew and John, as well as Hebrews and the Pauline letters. For example, she points to Matthew’s parable of the Wicked Tenant as exemplifying punitive supersessionism, the claim that God punishes Israel for their sin by revoking and transferring the covenant promises. She points to several verses where, either explicitly or implicitly, the covenant tasks and blessings move from the Jews to Jesus’s followers and rendering the old one obsolete (for example, Matthew 5:14, Hebrews 8:13, Ephesians 2:16 or Colossians 1:22). She further highlights verses that have promoted anti-Judaism and hatred towards Jews such as for example John 8:44 where Jews are presented as the “children of the devil” and 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 where Jews are described as “having killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets with wrath coming upon them at last.” Levine acknowledges that scholars remain divided about whether supersessionism can be found in the New Testament and that the text nowhere explicitly revokes the ancient covenant. She also acknowledges that historical-critical analysis has presented mitigating arguments against supersessionism such as for example, the claim that the text reflects intra-Jewish debates. However, she asserts that ultimately all religions are inherently supersessionist as they advocate new truths that are superior to what existed before. If their claims are correct, the old would not be complete or be obsolete by extension. She views soft supersessionist views as less harmful and acknowledges that they can even be beneficial as they promote identity. But she warns about the dangers of hard supersessionist views that in her view not only preclude dialogue but promulgate negative bias. She draws the connection to crusades, ghettoization, pogroms, and death camps.

Levine's purpose is to persuade us not to get distracted in exegetical gymnastics when it comes to the problem of supersessionism but to acknowledge that it exists and to be attentive to its ethical implications. She points out that the interest in supersessionism is shifting because of prevailing cultural topics rooted in identity politics, and she calls us to keep top of mind Christian's complicity in the human tragedy of the Shoah.

She appeals to Christians not to get blind-sighted by their good intentions. She gives the example of two United Methodist church leaders who, despite their best intentions, exemplified replacement theology contrary to formal church statements. In her view, it further demonstrates how ingrained supersessionist views are in Christian church culture.

Biblical scholar Philip La Grange Du Toit, Professor in New Testament at North-West University, South Africa, in his article titled “Is replacement theology anti-Semitic?” (March 11, 2020), argues that biblical replacement theology or supersessionism cannot be anti-Semitic because neither race nor ethnicity is part of what is being replaced. Instead, what is replaced is the criteria for covenant membership and identity that rests on the spiritual markers of faith and Spirit available to all people irrespective of race, heritage, or ethnicity.

Du Toit supports his claim by first defining antisemitism and replacement theology and then exploring what exactly is replaced based on replacement theology. Du Toit argues that antisemitism can be broadly defined as prejudice or hatred against Jewish people as a race or ethnic identity. Concerning the concept of replacement theology, he points out that scholars have offered different versions. Still, he argues that all these approaches highlight some form of discontinuity with the Israel of the Old Testament. He views this discontinuity inherent to how the New Testament writers present the gospel message, rooted in the eschatologically new era inaugurated by the Christ event, that, while it stands in continuity with the old, it fulfills, transforms, and replaces the old order. He points to the gospel of Matthew as most prominently presenting the fulfillment of Scripture around the ministry and person of Christ (for example, Jesus’s saying about the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets in Matthew 5:17). Du Toit further points to the concept of newness that stands out in the New Testament exemplified by references to a new covenant, new temple, new age, new creation and new humanity or new heaven and earth, all replacing the old (for example 1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:13 and Revelation 21:2). He argues that what lies at the heart of the newness is not the racial or ethnic composition of God’s people. He points to Galatians 3:28-29 (“there is neither Jew nor Greek...for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) to prove his point. Instead, what is replaced are the criteria for covenant membership and identity that is now based on the internal, spiritual markers of Spirit (Galatians 3:21) and faith (Romans 3:21-22, 26). Therefore, it gives no ground for antisemitism as the covenant is equally available to all people without favoritism.

Du Toit’s purpose is to correct the contention that biblical replacement theology is anti-Semitic. He calls attention to the flaws in the anti-replacement approaches that, ironically, in their attempt to avert antisemitism, remain deeply rooted in ethnicity within their interpretative approach. He wants to show us that a replacement approach is biblical and renders external markers such as race, ethnicity, or customs, all connotations of antisemitism, irrelevant for inclusion in the new covenant with God and thus cannot be antisemitic.

He appeals to Jews and Christians alike and to everyone for that matter not to get caught up in antisemitic replacement discussions but to find commonality and beauty in the Christ event that has inaugurated a new era in which God accomplishes in believers, under the lordship of Christ and the guidance of the Spirit, what they could not achieve on their own.

Bibliography

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