

OpenTheo

Q&A#158 Supersessionism

November 21, 2019



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "I have just read your very intelligent contribution to the series of Articles at Theopolis on the relation of Israel to the Church. I would describe myself as supersessionist, but in the sense that Israel and the Church are one, because the Church, rather than a newly created covenant people in parallel with ethnic Israel, is the crucified and resurrected people of the covenant established in the calling of Abraham, which has been brought to a greater level of glory and maturity in Christ. In this way of thinking, the only supersession, or replacement, which has taken place, is the substitution of believing Gentiles for unbelieving Jews in the olive tree of Israel.

I nevertheless believe that Romans 8-11 speaks of a national conversion of the Jewish people at the end of this age. It is also quite apparent that in spite of their rejection of Christ, Paul believes that they are loved of God and retain their uniqueness as the appointed messengers of his salvation for the sake of the nations.

But insofar as they have rejected Christ, who is the yes of the Father unto all the promises made unto Israel, how are we to understand Paul's assertion about the "gifts and callings of God" to them being "irrevocable"? It is difficult, for example, to comprehend how their "callings", if we are to understand that as a reference to their priestly vocation as a light to the nations, is capable of being realized so long as they reject Christ.

Any light you can shed for me on this mystery would be greatly appreciated."

If you have any questions or feedback, please send them to me on Curious Cat: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I have just read your contribution to the series of articles at Theopolis on the relation of Israel to the Church. I would describe myself as a supersessionist, but in the sense that Israel and the Church are one, because the Church, rather than a newly created covenant people in parallel with ethnic Israel, is the crucified and resurrected people of the covenant established in the calling of Abraham, which has been brought to a greater level of glory and maturity in Christ.

In this way of thinking, the only supersession or replacement which has taken place is the substitution of believing Gentiles for unbelieving Jews in the olive tree of Israel. I nevertheless believe that Romans 8-11 speaks of a national conversion of the Jewish people at the end of this age. It is also quite apparent that in spite of their rejection of Christ, Paul believes that they are loved of God and retain their uniqueness as the appointed messengers of his salvation for the sake of the nations.

But insofar as they have rejected Christ, who is the yes of the Father to all the promises made to Israel, how are we to understand Paul's assertion about the gifts and callings of God to them being irrevocable? It is difficult, for example, to comprehend how their callings, if we are to understand that as a reference to their priestly vocation as a light to the nations, is capable of being realized so long as they reject Christ. Any light you can shed on this mystery for me would be greatly appreciated. This is in reference to a series of essays that were written for the Theopolis website in response to Gerald McDermott's piece on the future of Israel.

I wrote arguing that Israel does have a future, that Romans 11 is still to be fulfilled and that Israel's significance has not ceased following AD 70. There's a lot more that can be argued on that front, but for now I want to give just a few thoughts in response to this question, which is an important one. I think one of the struggles that we have on this particular question is conceptual frameworks.

And if we have the right analogies, maybe we can move beyond some of the impasses. One difficulty that I think people have is that they think that there is a continuity, very clearly within the scripture, between the Old Testament covenant people of Israel and the New Covenant people of the Church. There seems to be that continuity.

And so the question is, how can that continuity exist and yet Israel still be a part of the picture? Because it would seem that they, by the existence of this New Testament covenant people, which is Jew and Gentile, in which that distinction between Jew and

Gentile is no longer operative in the same way, if that is the case, then how are we to understand the continuing place of Israel? It would seem that Israel has been displaced by this new body of people. And that really is a problem. If we think about the analogies that we have, often they're thinking in terms of a single people and there's an Old Covenant single people in Israel, they are the covenant people, and then in the New Covenant there's another set of people.

There's the Church. Now in the Old Covenant, clearly, Israel is not the only group of people that are saved. There are people outside of Israel who are God-fearing people who will be saved.

People who we expect to see in the new heavens and the new earth. But yet Israel's place is clearly distinct. They are the only nation that has God dwelling in their midst.

The only nation that is claimed by God for his own. All the other nations are separate from that. The other nations are formed in the scattering of the peoples at Babel.

But Israel is formed in the calling of Abraham as a blessing. And so there's a contrast between these two sets of people. Between the Gentiles, their nations being formed through judgment, and Israel, their nation being formed through a blessing and a call in order that they might be a blessing to other people.

Now the New Testament speaks about the calling of Abraham as something that has ramifications for all peoples. That the calling of Abraham is ultimately not just about God salvaging one single people from among the other nations. But God calling this particular person so that all the nations might be blessed through him.

That all the nations might be included ultimately within the covenant people. Now the problem that we have is understanding the unity of the covenant people. In a situation where there is a plurality of different nations involved.

Or people from different nations. And here I've found maybe one way to think about it is to reflect upon the way that a country like the UK includes various nations within it. It's a single kingdom but with multiple nations.

So we have England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. And all of these are part of the United Kingdom. And it's one kingdom, a number of different nations.

In the same way, Israel and the nations of the Gentiles are part of this new body of the church. There are people from all nations, all different peoples involved. And God is saving people from all the pagan nations that were formerly outside of the covenant.

Who may have had a relationship in terms of as God-fearers. They may have believed in the true God of the universe, the creator God. And worshipped him in some manner.

But now they are brought into his people. They're brought into his family. They're named by his name.

They're children of Abraham. And the question then is how are we to understand any distinction between Jew and Gentile within this context? And to make matters worse, how are we to understand a relationship between believing Gentiles and unbelieving Jews in that context? Because the new covenant people would seem to be defined by belief. Now I think that's the case in many respects.

That it's not as if Israel in its unbelieving state has an independent covenant identity over against all these other nations. And all the people that come to believe in Christ. Christ is the Messiah.

He's the one who fulfills all the promises to Israel. And so outside of Christ, the promises aren't being fulfilled. That doesn't mean that Israel has no distinct identity.

Israel retains something of its identity even in the trials of exile. When they were far away from God's presence in the land, God was not dwelling in their midst in the same way. They were not present in his land.

They did not have a king over them of their own. And so in many ways they lacked distinctive features of their political identity. They were attenuated in their identity as a nation.

That doesn't mean that their identity ceased to exist. Especially in a situation where there was no sacrifices, they were in rebellion against God. And all these other things were the case.

Their identity was hanging by a thread. But it was still there. And in a similar way, I think we can understand the present period of time.

When Israel has a very clear identity, it's very clear that Israel is, that there are the people of the Jews. This isn't something that has to be argued on some obscure theological basis. It is empirically obvious.

There is a people that is descended from the Jewish people of the first century. The first century people that were after the destruction of AD 70. They have not just been destroyed.

They haven't disappeared off the face of the map. They're still around. Now how are we to understand them in a situation where they're rebelling against God? They're rebelling against, more particularly, the Messiah.

The one who's supposed to be the fulfilment of all God's promises to them. And can he be the fulfilment of all God's promises for them? If they're in that position of exile from

him. Now to understand that, I think it might be worth playing with that analogy that I gave earlier.

Between a single kingdom with multiple nations. There could be a situation where one particular nation has a more immediate connection with the kingdom. A more primary, originary connection with the kingdom.

Than the other nations. But yet, there can arise a situation within those nations where the originary nation can be in rebellion against the king. And so the kingdom can be something that is in some sense alienated from.

Now think about the situation in the UK. The Queen is primarily, the line of royalty is primarily associated with England. And historically.

And then it becomes something that includes the wider kingdom of the United Kingdom. And putting those different nations together as one within a single kingdom. They're all under the monarch.

But yet that monarch traced things back. And the monarchy finds its roots primarily within England. Now if England were in rebellion against the monarchy.

And there have been situations in the civil war for instance. Where the monarchy was primarily rooted of finding its support outside of England. And you can think about that as perhaps an analogy for what's taking place here.

That Israel as the place from whom the Messiah comes. Israel is the one that gives us the Messiah, the king of the Jews. Christ is the king of Israel.

For them to reject Christ is for them to reject something that is far more immediate and fundamental to them. That they are the natural branches as Paul can talk about it. There's something that is this most basic connection between them and the Messiah.

And they reject him in a way that cuts them off from something that's crucial to their identity. You can think about other periods in Israel's history. Where for instance during the divided kingdom.

Israel's identity was bound up or the Jewish people's identity was bound up. With the Davidic king and the dynasty. And yet the Davidic dynasty was rooted in the south.

And the northern tribes were in rebellion against the Davidic king. For Israel to realise its identity it had to be united with the Davidic king again. But when they were in exile or separated from the Davidic king.

There was something of their identity was not fully being realised. Likewise Judah's identity and the Davidic king's identity was not fully realised. As long as a significant part of the nation was in rebellion.

And there's something similar to that I think within the new covenant. Where Christ is the king of the Jews. He's the one that has come to fulfil all the promises of God to the Jewish people.

And to bless a kingdom that includes nations from all over the world. Peoples from all over the world. People of every tribe, tongue, people and nation.

And yet the fundamental people from whom he came. He came to his own and his own did not receive him. And that failure to receive Christ means that they are not included within the covenant.

They are not included within the life of the kingdom. In the blessings of the kingdom. That doesn't mean that they are not natural heirs of it.

They are natural heirs but they are turning their back on their inheritance. Now hopefully this helps to explain why there is a distinction between Israel and the nations within the new covenant. But a distinction that does not mean that one party is more part of the kingdom than the other.

We are all on equal footing within the kingdom of God. But yet there are distinctions between the natural and the grafted on branches of the olive tree. There are distinctions between Jews and Gentiles that still exist.

We are different peoples. We are different nations. And we are children of Abraham but in a slightly different sense from the way that Israel are children of Abraham.

They are part of his family in a more basic biological or a sense of actually being part of this people that is defined by a more physical natural ancestry. And we are not. That doesn't mean that we are not truly the children of Abraham.

But we are adopted in a different sense. Now putting all this together I think it helps to explain how certain things can be true of Israel in the old covenant. And be retained as distinct to Israel in the new.

And other things that are particular to Israel in the old covenant can be shared by all people who are part of the body of Christ within the new. Think about it again within the example of a kingdom. You have the nation of England would in the past have been coterminous with the kingdom.

The king of England was the king of the nation of England and to be in the nation of England was to be part of the kingdom. Those two things were far more interchangeable. And then with Wales becoming part of the kingdom of England and then Scotland and the act of union and all these sorts of developments in history.

We have a different situation arising where it's no longer the kingdom of England and the

nation of England. And the kingdom and the nation being coterminous. There is a distinction because the kingdom stretches wider and includes more people than just the people within the nation.

But the nation retains its identity. It retains certain aspects of its identity over against other nations that are part of the kingdom. I think that's true within the new covenant as well.

The distinction is not in terms of membership of the kingdom. Whereas in the past it would have been membership of the covenant people was a defining feature of Israel as opposed to the nations around about. In the new covenant people from the surrounding nations can be part of the covenant people even if they're not part of Israel.

But Israel is still a distinct entity over against those. And within the new covenant what we're seeing is the knitting together of a number of different peoples that retain their distinctions on certain levels. But in a greater level are brought together on an equal footing within this kingdom that crosses national boundaries.

And there I think we can understand part of what is superseded and what is not. There are ways in which that identity of Israel perseveres. That there is something of Israel's relationship to the kingdom that continues.

They are rejecting and rebelling against the Messiah. But yet they still have a natural connection to it. A natural connection that the gentile nations did not because they were never part of the covenant people in the same way.

And there are other ways in which the distinct identity of Israel over against the nations insofar as it was defined by covenant membership is no longer the case. They are no longer distinct in being uniquely members of the covenant because gentiles are now members of the covenant too. Hopefully this helps you to understand how those two things can be the case.

That there can be continuity but also distinctions and there can be ways in which certain aspects of Israel's identity have been superseded by this new international kingdom of the church and certain other parts not. Now how does this relate to the irrevocable character of the identity of Israel? I think that it helps to give us a framework within which to think about it. Let's step back and think of another analogy.

Let's think of an analogy of a family where there is a firstborn son that's born to two parents. And then they adopt a number of other children. And the firstborn son rebels against the parents and leaves the family and refuses to identify with them.

What is the relationship between the members of the family that have been adopted and that son that is in rebellion? I think that helps us to understand something of Israel's status. Israel is still connected with the family in some sense. They are natural children,

natural heirs of Abraham.

But yet they've excluded themselves because of unbelief. It's not as if God has turned his back on them though. It's not as if God has lost all interest in them and just cut them out of the story completely.

Rather, they are in a sort of self-imposed exile and the desire is that they would be restored back. Now as long as they are away, there is a sense in which we know that even though they are enemies of us, they reject us, they reject the family, all that the family stands for, at the same time, there is a knowledge that they are deeply loved. And our father would love to see them restored to himself, to membership in the family.

Again, you could think about this in terms of the analogy of the kingdom. Putting all of this together then, what Israel's future involves is a recalling to their original status, that they will become members once again of the family of God. No longer unique in that status, they will be among other covenant members, but they will be, as it were, the firstborn among this family.

Those that represent, in some sense, a particular connection with the Messiah because he came from them. And there I think we'll see many of these things within the New Testament itself. That Israel has 144,000 who have a particular connection with Christ.

That the church is built upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets. That there is a connection between the 12 tribes of Israel and the church. Putting all of this together then, I think what we're seeing is an equal footing of the nations and Israel within the New Covenant people.

A continuity of Israel's identity, but an expanding of the aspect of their covenant identity to include other peoples on an equal footing. As they have removed themselves from the Messiah and rejected the Messiah, they are cutting themselves off and alienating themselves from the fulfilment of the promises that belong to them, that are proper to them. But yet God wishes to see them restored out of his love for them.

And in the future, I believe, that's what we'll see. I hope this has been of some help. If you have any further questions on this or any other topics, please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you would have found this helpful, please share it with your friends. And if you'd like to support this and other podcasts and videos, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal accounts. God bless and thank you for listening.