

משיח MASHIACH

Apostolic
Writings
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There are two classic models for describing the relationship between the *ecclesia* (church) and Israel. Supersessionism, a view advocated by many of the early church fathers, maintains that the *ecclesia* is the new spiritual Israel and replaces carnal Israel, the Jewish nation, as the people of God. For centuries, the negative justification for this displacement was that, by rejecting Yeshua, the Jewish people violated their covenant with God, which was conditioned on faithfulness. Texts in Scripture that refer to God's promises to Israel and Israel's eschatological role are, therefore, now to

be interpreted allegorically in reference to the *ecclesia*. This ecclesiological perspective has been termed "punitive supersessionism."

In recent years, a less negative justification for supersessionism has become widespread in New Testament studies: All the promises to the Jewish people are fulfilled exclusively in Israel's representative, the Messiah Jesus, the quintessential Jew. As N. T. Wright states, "Paul explicitly and consciously transfers blessings from Israel according to the flesh to the Messiah, and thence to the church . . . Gal. 2–4 argues precisely that the worldwide believing church is the true family of Abraham, and that those who remain as 'Israel according to the flesh' are in fact the theological descendants of Hagar and Ishmael, with no title to the promises." This outlook has been termed "economic supersessionism."

Ironically, because Wright's variation emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus, many Christian scholars regard it as positive toward Jews and

Judaism. The implications of this perspective, however, are largely the same as in punitive supersessionism—the role of the Jewish nation in salvation history has expired, its blessings have been transferred to the *ecclesia*. Jews may continue to exist as an ethnic group, like any other ethnic group, but they are no longer God's firstborn, his chosen people, his treasured possession (Exod 4:22–23; 19:5–6; Deut 7:6–8; 14:2). The Jew-Gentile (Israel-nations) distinction is no longer valid.

Dispensationalism, a less commonly held view, represents the opposite end of the continuity-discontinuity spectrum and maintains that the *ecclesia* and Israel are two separate and distinct entities. God will keep his promises to the Jewish people. Israel's role as a priestly nation is not allegorized but understood in light of God's involvement in the affairs of nations. The *ecclesia* consists of the heavenly people of God with its distinct gifts and calling. In short, there is no overlap between the *ecclesia* and Israel; each has its respective function and destiny in the will of God.

While attempts have been made to arrive at a *tertium datur* (a third option), a view somewhere between the poles of supersessionism and dispensationalism (e.g. progressive dispensationalism), few models in my view adequately account for Paul's description of the *ecclesia* as identified with Israel (1 Cor 10:1; Rom 11:17; Eph 2:11–19) without displacing the Jewish nation as heir of the gifts and calling of God (Rom 3:1–4; 9:4–5; 11:28). As Messianic Jews, it is incumbent on us to think about how the pieces of this puzzle fit together since the various configurations have implications for the legitimacy and significance of our movement. We will continue this discussion in next month's column.



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- 1 R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 30–31, 181 n. 6.
- 2 N. T. Wright, "The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans" (D. Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1980), 193.
- 3 Soulen, *The God of Israel*, 29–30, 181 n. 6.