

# ISRAEL *matters*

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Why Christians Must Think Differently  
about the People and the Land

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Gerald R. McDermott



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To Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn, scholar, leader, and friend,  
who suggested this book over coffee in Jerusalem

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# Introduction

Some months back, a young Christian leader wrote to me about Israel. She is an intellectually curious, committed Christian who attended an elite Christian college.

“I was raised in a conservative church,” she wrote, “and naively supported whatever Israel did. We were led to believe that God had given the land of Israel to his people, the Jews, and their fight for their land in 1948 was a religious act by a religious people looking to their God.

“But then in college I read *The Promise* by Chaim Potok. As I read the novel, it seemed that Israel reclaimed the land not as a faith-filled people finding their God-given inheritance but as a people who, crushed and disillusioned by the Holocaust, decided they could not and would not wait any longer for a messiah. They felt they had to take the land for themselves, and they did it by violence.

“So I have questioned whether that was right. Should the Jews have waited for the Messiah to return them to the land? Was their fight for the land perhaps turning their backs on God?”

## Problems with Christian Zionism

There was a time when I had similar questions. I had serious misgivings about what was called Christian Zionism. This was a

term used for the belief that today's State of Israel was prophesied by the Bible and would play a major role in events at the end of the world, which was said to be coming very soon. I knew it was not the Jewish Zionism that some in the West unfairly associated with the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946. (I say "unfairly" because there have been Jewish Zionists for thousands of years who denounce terrorist acts.) The Christian Zionism that I heard about in the 1970s and 1980s was inspired by a kind of dispensationalist theology that I did not share. I knew that in one sense all Christian theologies are dispensationalist insofar as they believe God works differently with his people in different eras or dispensations. But one kind of dispensationalism in particular held that Israel and the gentile nations were running on two separate tracks, and that God dealt with each track separately.

I could not buy that. In the Bible, Israel's history always intersected with the rest of the world. And in the early Church, Jews and gentiles usually fellowshipped together in the same churches.

There were other reasons I could not accept that kind of dispensationalism. Some proponents seemed to think the State of Israel was beyond reproach. For example, I wondered if Israel was breaking international law by its continued occupation of the West Bank.

I knew that the Palestinians claimed that it was their land too. Many of them said they were being cruelly oppressed by their Israeli occupiers. Was that true? If so, how could the modern State of Israel be a God-thing, a fulfillment of his promises?

## The New Israel

Another reason I could not accept this sort of dispensationalist approach to Israel had to do with the confidence of some dispen-

sationalists that they knew what was going to happen, event by event, in the end times. I knew of other kinds of dispensationalism that rejected these projections. But this more popular sort proposed elaborate schedules and date setting that seemed to be nothing more than fanciful speculation.

I had been convinced that the Church is the New Israel. This meant that after Jesus died and rose again, the covenant that God had made with Israel was transferred to those who believed in Jesus. The vast majority of Jews, who had refused Jesus' claim to be Messiah, were no longer the apple of God's eye. They were no different in God's eyes from any other people who had heard the gospel and had rejected it. The old Israel was no longer the true Israel. The Church of believers in Jesus Christ had now become the New Israel.

Or so I thought. This was the Christian interpretation that I had learned from Reformed theologians such as John Calvin and that was now embraced by many Christian churches—mainline Protestant, Catholic, and a growing number of evangelical churches.

So it was difficult for me to believe that modern Israel was a fulfillment of biblical prophecy. The fact that most Jews in Israel were either secular or religious-but-non-messianic seemed to preclude any connection between their land and the biblical prophecies. I thought that might change if one day most Jews in Israel were to accept Jesus. But in the meantime, modern Israel did not seem related to the Bible.

### **Didn't Christ End Distinctions between Jews and Greeks?**

There were still other reasons for not accepting dispensationalist or Zionist claims about Israel. I was struck by Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek." This seemed to be saying that distinctions between Jews and gentiles, even between Jewish believers in Jesus and gentile believers in

Jesus, no longer have relevance. In other words, nothing distinctly Jewish, unless it were to find its fulfillment in Jesus, is of relevance or interest to Christians.

This included the land and people of Israel today. They seemed to be of merely historical importance. I knew their history could help us appreciate Jesus' context thousands of years ago, but I did not understand their relevance for Christians today.

### Startling Discoveries

But then I began to come across some startling discoveries. One of the first was that the New Testament never calls the Church the New Israel. That made me wonder what the relationship between the Israel of the Old Testament and the Church really was.

Then I looked further into Galatians 3:28. Paul did indeed say that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. But he also said there is “no male and female,” for all are “one in Christ Jesus.” I realized that there are still differences between male and female and that Paul himself referred to different roles for men and women in marriage.

Paul said wives should submit to husbands as the Church submits to Christ. He also wrote that the husband is the head of the wife. He never taught that the wife is the head of the husband. I knew that interpreters disputed the meaning of those words—whether marriage should be egalitarian or complementarian. But the fact remained that for Paul, male and female are one in Christ *while remaining distinct* and the two seem to have different roles.

If male and female distinctions persist, what about Jewish-gentile differences? Does that distinction also remain in the Church, where all are one in Christ Jesus? And if the Jew-gentile distinction is not obliterated by their unity in Christ, what about Israel's distinction from the nations?

## Still Beloved of God

I will never forget the day that I stumbled upon Paul's insistence that Jews who rejected Jesus were still beloved by God and that God kept his covenant with them as a people. He told the church in Rome that "they are enemies of the gospel for your sake," but they "are still beloved of God because of their forefathers" and "because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28–29 AT).

I had always assumed that Paul was talking only about Jews in the past, before Jesus came. But as I looked more closely, it became clear that Paul was talking about Jews in his own day who had heard his preaching of Jesus and rejected it.

These Jesus-rejecting Jews "are beloved" of God, he said. Not "*were* beloved" but "*are* beloved." Not past but present tense. Even though they chose not to believe the gospel, they *are* still beloved of God. God still loves them. And not in the way that God loves all people, but with a special kind of love. That is clear from Paul's long discussion of Jews in Romans 9–11.

Their "gifts and calling" were still in place. Their "calling" was their covenant, enacted when God called Abraham into a special relationship with himself, so that Abraham and his descendants would be God's chosen people.

Paul used the word "covenants" explicitly in this passage where he discusses the majority-Jewish rejection of the gospel: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart . . . [for] my kinsmen according to the flesh . . . [because] to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, . . . and the promises" (Rom. 9:2–4).

At first I was confused by Paul's reference to (plural) covenants. Then I saw that Jesus spoke of the "blood of *the* covenant" (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), suggesting there was one fundamental (Abrahamic) covenant and that the other covenants, such as the Mosaic and Davidic covenants, were aspects of that one basic covenant with Abraham.

## A Future for Israel

This new understanding—that God continued to honor his covenant with Jews, even those Jews who rejected Jesus—opened my eyes to other things.

For example, I came to see more clearly that most of the major biblical prophets predicted a future return of Jews to their ancestral land. For a time I thought that must refer to the return from Babylon after the exile. But then I saw that both Jesus and the apostles said there would be a restoration of Jerusalem and Israel in *their* future, and that this restoration would affect the rest of the world.

Jesus said that sometime in the future all the Jewish tribes “of the land” would mourn him and that his apostles would judge those tribes (Rev. 1:7; Matt. 19:28). That did not happen in his own day and has not happened since. It can only mean, it seems, a future coming by Jesus to the land of Israel when the Jewish tribes will still exist.

It also means that at that future time, things will happen in Israel that do not happen in the rest of the world. That means there will be a distinction between Israel and the world—the very kind of distinction that I previously thought was impossible after AD 33.

Peter said in Acts 3:21 that a future restoration of all things was yet to come. For “restoration” he used the same Greek word for the return of the Jews from all over the world to the land of Israel that was used in the Bible of his day. So Peter was saying that after the resurrection of Christ there would be another return of Jews to their land.

That never happened until 1948 when the modern State of Israel was established. Could, then, the modern State of Israel have some connection to biblical prophecy?

When I started reexamining this question, I looked more closely at recent history. I discovered, among other things, that the founding of modern Israel was both secular and religious. There were

secular Jews and religious Jews among the first Zionists. It was not a purely secular affair.

### **What about the Palestinians?**

I also learned that while there are Palestinians who are unhappy with Israel and its occupation of the West Bank, there are two million Arab citizens of Israel, and most of them are thankful to be living in the only state in the Middle East with religious freedom. They are grateful to be able to participate in the most vibrant economy in the region, and one of the strongest in the world. Some of them even believe that Israel was chosen by God to have the land.<sup>1</sup>

When my son and I hiked through Galilee on the Jesus Trail in 2009,<sup>2</sup> Arab Christians told us privately that their real enemy was not the Israeli government but their “Muslim cousins.” They could not say this publicly because they feared retaliation from Arab Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

By then I had learned more about the charge that Israel was breaking international law. The principal charge concerned, as it still does today, UN Resolution 242. I discovered that this resolution, passed just after the 1967 war, ordered withdrawal from “territories,” not all “the territories,” and stipulated that withdrawal should take place only after Israel’s neighbors recognized its right to exist and agreed with it on firm boundaries. Those who wrote the resolution knew that Israel would need to stay in some territories to protect itself. They probably suspected that its neighbors might neither recognize it nor agree on borders. They were right.

### **The Rest of This Book**

Let me sketch the rest of this book for you. The first chapter explains how Christians have thought about Israel for most of

the last two thousand years. Basically, they have thought the way I did before I started my investigations. This chapter will show *why* Christians have thought in these ways.

Then in chapter 2 we will see that the authors of the New Testament did *not* think in these ways. When they spoke of Israel, they always meant the Jews and any gentiles who wanted to join Jewish Israel. The term “New Israel” is absent from the New Testament. So is the content of the term—the idea that there could be an Israel that does not have Jewish Israel at its foundation.

Chapter 3 surveys the history of Christian Zionism in the Church. It shows that in the last two thousand years a minority of Christians have resisted the majority view. This chapter shows why they have believed, especially since the Reformation, that the people and land of Israel are still important to God.

In chapters 4 and 5 we will go to the Bible directly. We will look at the Old Testament in chapter 4 to examine in detail God’s covenant with Israel. There we will see that the land of Israel was at the *heart* of the covenant.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the most surprising chapter. We will see there that the New Testament has many references to the land of Israel and to the future of the people of Israel, the Jews. I say “surprising” because most Christians have thought that the New Testament is silent on both of these topics. But this chapter will demonstrate that the New Testament authors were Zionists. They believed that there would be a restoration of the *people* of Israel to the *land* of Israel at some point in the future.

Chapters 6 and 7 address the most common objections to this view, both political and theological. Chapter 6 focuses on the Palestinians. Did Jews steal their land? Does Israel now violate international law by occupying parts of the West Bank? Is Zionism racist? Am I saying we should support the current State of Israel no matter what it does?

Chapter 7 moves to theological stumbling blocks such as the book of Hebrews’ statement that the old covenant is obsolete.

Other problems are confronted, such as whether Christ brought the end of the law, whether this new view that distinguishes Jews and gentiles undermines unity in Christ, and whether this implies that every Jew will be saved.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of this new understanding of Israel—for how we read and interpret the Bible, how we think about the history of Christianity, and how we understand the history of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also discusses how we as Christians should relate to our Jewish friends.

Chapter 9 draws some final conclusions: that Israel shows who God is and who we are; that sacred history is not over; that the future is hidden as well as revealed; that we have not reached the end time yet; that Israel and the Church are inseparably linked; and that the history of the Jews shows us the mystery of iniquity.

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This book is meant to be an introduction for those who have never heard a serious presentation of these matters. I cover many issues, but because of space limitations I do not address any one issue in depth. If you would like a deeper and more academic approach to many of these issues, see *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (IVP Academic, 2016).

# 1

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## Getting the Big Story Wrong

Most Christians for most of Christian history have been wrong about Israel. They have believed in what scholars call “supersessionism.” This is the view that the Church has superseded Israel. According to this view, after most of Israel rejected Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah, God revoked his covenant with biblical Israel and transferred the covenant to those who believed in Jesus. The Church thus became the New Israel.

As I said in the introduction, it seemed quite logical to me that the Church would be the New Israel. After all, Jesus opened the kingdom to all the world, after Israel had been restricted to the Jews. If Israel had anything to do with God’s kingdom—and I believed that it did—it seemed plausible that Jesus was simply extending the kingdom’s boundaries. It was now enlarged to include the whole world.

But then I met a learned Christian named Baruch who had lived in Israel for many years. He pointed out to me that God’s intention from the beginning was to use Israel to reach the world. When God first came to Abraham, the father of Israel, God said, “Through your seed, *all the peoples of the earth* will be

blessed” (Gen. 22:18 AT). Then throughout the history of Israel, Baruch told me, people from outside Israel came to join the Jewish people. Ruth was one example of many who made this move. “But even with these foreigners joining Israel,” he explained, “Israel was still Israel—a Jewish people. They included foreigners, sometimes as Jews and sometimes not, but it was still a Jewish people.”

But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me unpack the logic of supersessionism a bit more.

### **Supersessionism, or Replacement Theology**

Supersessionism holds that all the promises that God made to Old Testament Israel are now (since the resurrection of Jesus) applied to the Christian Church. The promises were contingent on obedience to the covenant. Biblical Jews broke the terms of that covenant—both before Jesus came, by breaking God’s laws, and then after Jesus came, by refusing to accept him as their messiah. But since Jesus obeyed all of God’s law, and all believers in him are joined to him, his obedience is credited to them. So by virtue of his obedience and their inclusion in him, Christians receive the blessings of the covenant. They are members of the New Israel, which is his body, the Church.

This is also called “replacement theology.” The Church replaced biblical Israel as the apple of God’s eye. God’s covenant with ancient Israel was replaced by Jesus’ new covenant, which is made with all those who believe in him. The Church has replaced the Jews as the inheritors of all the biblical promises concerning Israel. When Christians read the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of the people of Israel to the land of Israel, they should interpret those prophecies as referring to the Christian Church. The true meaning, according to this view, is that the Church will inherit the whole world in the age to come. All of those in the

Church will be blessed, not just Jews. There will no longer be a distinction between Jews and gentiles among those who believe in Jesus, and there will be no land of Israel separate from the rest of the world. For the Church has replaced the ethnic people of Israel. And the little land of Israel has been replaced by a whole world. The Jews are no longer God's people in any special way, and the land of Israel is like the land of any other country in the world—say, Uganda or Thailand.

These are the views of supersessionism. This has been the belief of most Christians ever since the second century AD. As we will see in the next chapter and the rest of this book, Christians had a very different view during the first century in the New Testament churches. But after AD 135, when Jews revolted for a second time against Rome and were driven out of Jerusalem completely, things changed. More than ever before in the history of the Roman Empire, it became dangerous to be a Jew. Since Christians until this time had been thought by the Romans—for good reason—to be Jews, many Christians believed it was time to change that perception. They started to dissociate themselves and their reputation from all things Jewish.<sup>1</sup>

### Justin Martyr: The “New Israel”

Justin Martyr (100–ca. 165) was one of the first prominent Christian thinkers to say publicly that Christianity was fundamentally different from Judaism. He suggested that Jesus was starting a new religion, breaking decisively with his Jewish past. To be sure, Justin was not the first to suggest this break. The *Epistle of Barnabas* (written at some point between 70 and 131) had argued in detail that all the ceremonial laws of the Pentateuch were simply pointers to Christ and that Jewish sins disqualified them from possessing the covenant any longer. But most historians agree that Justin was the first to say that the Church was the “true Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

His explanation of this new term became popular and became the new Big Story.

The old Big Story was narrated principally by the apostle Paul. He had told gentile believers that their union with Messiah Jesus by faith enabled them to become “fellow citizens” in the “commonwealth of Israel” (Eph. 2:12, 19). By “Israel” Paul meant the family of Abraham, who was the first Jew: “If you belong to Messiah [both “Messiah” and “Christ” mean “Anointed One”], then you are Abraham’s offspring” (Gal. 3:29 AT). Paul said this because, as he explained it, the offspring or “seed” was Christ (Gal. 3:16). By becoming one with Christ through faith, gentiles could become the offspring or seed of Abraham. Therefore the gospel was the good news that gentiles could now become part of Israel: it was “the blessing of Abraham . . . com[ing] to the Gentiles” because of “the promises . . . made to Abraham and to his offspring” (Gal. 3:14, 16). So the good news was that gentiles could now, through faith in Jesus, become members of Abraham’s family. This was great news because all of God’s promises had been made to this man and his family—the father of Jews and all of his Jewish descendants. Gentiles could become sons or daughters of Abraham by faith (Rom. 4:11), and this meant connecting to Jewish Israel, not getting away from it.

### **Paul’s Commonwealth of Israel Made Up of Jews and “Associates”**

For Paul, then, Israel meant the family of (Jewish) Abraham and all of his Jewish descendants, plus those gentiles who had joined this family by marriage or faith. This had happened many times in Old Testament history when gentile people like Ruth and Rahab and the Gibeonites became part of Israel and were accepted. They and their children eventually became Jews, members of Israel. God told Isaiah that these gentile foreigners were to be

fully accepted by God and Jewish Israel if they came with faith in the God of Israel:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD

say,

“The LORD will surely separate me from his people.”

.....

“The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,

to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,

and to be his servants,

everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,

and holds fast my covenant—

these I will bring to my holy mountain,

and make them joyful in my house of prayer;

their burnt offerings and their sacrifices

will be accepted on my altar;

for my house shall be called a house of prayer

for all peoples.” (Isa. 56:3, 6–7)

For both Paul and Isaiah, Israel was the *commonwealth* of Israel, which non-Jews could join. Though gentile, they could become members of the Jewish family if they put their trust in the God of Israel—even if they did not actually become Jews. The rabbis in the first centuries BC and AD taught that if gentiles chose not to convert to Judaism but nevertheless believed in the God of Israel, attended synagogue worship where Moses “is read every Sabbath” (Acts 15:21), and obeyed the Noachian commandments (similar to the Ten Commandments), they would be “righteous gentiles” who would have a share in the world to come. They would be *associated* with Israel (associate members, if you will) even if they were not Jews, and so would enjoy the blessings of the new world that would come to all those *in* or *associated with* Israel. The key point here is that Israel still meant the family of Jews descended from biblical Abraham. Israel included both Jews and those who believed in the Jewish God but did not formally convert to Judaism.

These latter “associates” of Israel did not get circumcised, which was required of men for conversion, but nevertheless considered themselves part of the Jewish people called Israel. To use a term that became important for Paul, they were “adopted” members of the Jewish family.

But for Justin, Israel was the Church, disconnected from Jews and biblical Israel. Theoretically, it was possible for Justin’s New Israel to have few Jews or even no Jews, with no real connection to Jews or Judaism and thus to Abraham’s family. Thus Justin’s New Israel was very different from what Paul had meant by Israel.

Justin could think this way because, for him, the gentiles were more important than the Jews. The story of salvation was not about Jesus’ fulfilling the promises made to the Jewish patriarchs, as Mary had exclaimed in her Magnificat and Paul had told the church at Rome,<sup>3</sup> but about the different ways the eternal Word—the Logos—speaks to different cultures. The Logos spoke one way to the Jews but in other ways to other peoples, especially the Greeks. The Jews had their prophets, but so did the Greeks: Socrates and Plato. The important thing was that Christ “was and is the Logos who is in every man” and inspires whatever truth we find in the world.<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament was important not because it revealed the God of Israel as the true God but because it predicted the true Logos.

According to Justin, the law given at Sinai was already “old” and belonged to Jews alone. The new law from Christ had made the old one cease, and now the new one belonged to everyone. God’s relationship to Israel therefore was physical and temporary, but his new relationship to the Church was spiritual and permanent. The old Israel of Jews was no longer Israel in any permanent sense. Now the Church, which in Justin’s day was being filled with more and more gentiles, had taken over the term “Israel.” Israel was no longer something that was essentially Jewish. It had become a people that was more gentile than Jewish, and one day would become overwhelmingly gentile. Since this was a new thing that

God was doing, and God had left behind the old Israel, the New Israel was good and the old Israel bad.

### Boasting over the Branches

As Oskar Skarsaune observes, Justin fell prey to exactly what Paul had warned his gentile readers against: “Do not boast over the branches” (Rom. 11:18 NRSV).<sup>5</sup> In Romans 11 Paul said the gentiles were like “a wild olive shoot” that was grafted onto the olive tree of Israel, some of whose “natural branches” (Jews) were broken off “because of their unbelief” (vv. 17, 20, 21). He cautioned the gentile followers of Jesus against the arrogance that forgets that “it is not you who support the root [Jewish Israel], but the root that supports you” (v. 18). Justin seems to have forgotten.

Now don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that everything that Justin said and stood for was mistaken. Not at all. Justin was a brave and brilliant Father of the Church in most ways.<sup>6</sup> He helped the early Church understand how to relate Jesus to the non-Christian religions of their day, especially Greek and Roman philosophies. (In the ancient world, philosophy was about God and ultimate reality, and hence was religious, not merely what we call “philosophy” today.) He provided deep insight into how God works in people who have not heard the gospel. And he courageously gave his life for the faith—that’s why he is called Justin Martyr. But regarding Israel and Jesus’ Jewishness, he set the Church on the wrong path.

### Irenaeus: Unnecessary Israel

Another Father who steered the Church astray on Israel was Irenaeus (ca. 145–202). He was an excellent teacher in other ways. His book *Against Heresies* was a powerful response to the heresy of Christian gnosticism, which talked about a Jesus who did not

have real flesh and did not suffer. Gnostics were persuaded by Greek philosophy that God is perfect and therefore never changes, and so could never become a real man with flesh that changes in the vicissitudes of history. Some gnostics held that since suffering involves change, Jesus must have been adopted as the Christ at his baptism since he could not have gone through the suffering of being born and growing into adulthood. And, they reasoned, God must have lifted his Christhood from him before the crucifixion because God would never have endured such horrible suffering.

Irenaeus argued eloquently that Jesus was the Christ at birth and to his death, and that he had real human flesh and really suffered. In fact, he *had* to suffer because it was prophesied that the Messiah's sufferings would save human beings from their sins. And more importantly, Jesus' role was to undo the damage that Adam had done to humanity by his sin. Jesus had to "recapitulate" all of human life by living through every stage, so that the human nature that had been fatally marred by sin could be remade by the Second Adam (Jesus Christ). Now human beings could attach themselves by faith to this Second Adam and receive from him a new humanity that was healed of the disease with which the first Adam had infected it.

This made sense to believers then and ever since. Yet by going straight from Adam's sin to the Second Adam's recreation of human nature, Irenaeus suggested that the history of Israel was an unnecessary distraction from the history of salvation. In fact, Israel became for him an example of the wrong way to approach God. The history of Judaism was only one of many "dispensations" in the history of salvation, and a rather sad one at that. Jews were "headstrong," and their religion was "carnal" and "earthly." The law that God gave them was only "temporary."<sup>7</sup>

So, while Irenaeus helped Christians to break free from Greek philosophical assumptions about God, he helped perpetuate new presumptions of a Christianity dissociated from its Jewish roots and the Jewish law. Like Justin, Irenaeus wrote that God had ended

his covenant with Israel because he was punishing them for rejecting the Messiah. Jews were “disinherited from the grace of God.”<sup>8</sup>

### Origen: Spiritualizing the Promises

Later Fathers of the Church perpetuated this pattern. Origen (ca. 184–254) reasoned that if the Messiah had come with a new covenant, then the covenant with the Jews had ended. And if Jesus came to bring spiritual salvation, then all the promises about a future land must be interpreted spiritually. Why? Because both could not be true at the same time. If Jesus’ salvation is spiritual, then it must not be earthly. For, according to Origen, true Israel is the *spiritual* band that follows Jesus as Messiah.<sup>9</sup> Readers should know that Origen was strongly influenced by the teachings of Plato and his interpreters. Plato had famously taught that “the body is the prison of the soul.” There is no doubt that this negative view of bodies and matter played a strong role in Origen’s decision to spiritualize all biblical prophecies about land and (Jewish) bodies.

Although many Christians today have never heard of Origen, he was enormously influential after the third century. He wrote hundreds of books, and they were used as textbooks for many later teachers and theologians. As a result, most Christian leaders in later centuries adopted his interpretation of Israel.

Until the fourth century, Christian writings about Jews were more theological and not particularly emotional. Justin, for example, had written about the Jew Trypho as his “friend.”<sup>10</sup> But then a new tone entered with John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407), the “Golden-tongued” orator in Constantinople, who told his congregation that Jews sacrificed their children to the devil, and declared, “I hate the Jews.”<sup>11</sup> (Again, I am not condemning everything else Chrysostom said and did, for otherwise he was a great Church Father and preacher who led the Church into deeper understanding and worship of the Triune God. But because of Origen’s influence

and because some Christians were apparently tempted to convert to Judaism, he tragically demonized the Jewish people.) Augustine (354–430), perhaps the greatest of the Fathers, did not have Chrysostom’s vitriol. He said the Church should leave the official name of Israel to the Jews, but at the same time argued theologically that the Church is the New Israel.<sup>12</sup> Because Augustine set the agenda for Western Christian theology, most Christians in the West during the Middle Ages adopted replacement or supersessionist theology.

### Luther and Calvin: Repudiating the Jews

In his early career Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote a number of essays that showed appreciation for Christianity’s Jewish roots. His most famous one was entitled “That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew” (1523). But later in his life he wrote hateful things about the Jews. Because they refused to accept what he thought to be obvious—that Jesus was their Messiah—he said it might motivate them to change if their homes were broken into and their synagogues were set on fire.<sup>13</sup> Luther scholars think he said these things because he believed that the world would end in his lifetime and that the devil was near at hand, deceiving everyone who did not accept the gospel. These writings by Luther were disturbing indeed, but we should add that he said similar things about Muslim Turks, peasants who revolted, and the papacy.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin (1509–64) was less violent in his language, but he too was a supersessionist. Like some of the Fathers, he taught that God was punishing the Jews by taking the covenant away from them. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he wrote that “while the Jews seemed to be God’s people, they not only rejected the teaching of the gospel but also persecuted it.” So “God denies that he is bound to [their] wicked priests by the fact that he covenanted with their father Levi to be His angel or interpreter. . . . God willingly admits this and disputes with them on the ground that he is ready

to keep the covenant, but that when they do not reciprocate, they deserve to be repudiated.”<sup>15</sup> For Calvin and many of the Fathers before him, God put an end to his covenant with Israel because its leaders rejected Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

### Deists: Fraudulent Miracles and Superstitious Prophecies

Whatever Christian momentum was building against Jews was accelerated by the deists, English thinkers at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century. They are typically thought to have rejected divine providence, which is the idea that God intervenes in human nature. Yet some deists accepted divine intervention from time to time. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was deeply influenced by English deists and wrote that “I must own I have so much faith in the general Government of the world by *Providence*, that I can hardly conceive a Transaction of such importance [as the Constitutional Convention] . . . [as] should be suffered to pass without being influenc’d, guided, and governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior Spirits live, and move, and have their Being.”<sup>17</sup> What united deists was something else—their rejection of special revelation. They were convinced that a just God would not restrict his revelation to certain times or places in the history of the world. The only true revelation from God was therefore through reason, which all human beings have always and everywhere shared. The idea that God chose a special tribe to be his chosen people was anathema to them. A just God would not do that!

This meant that the Jewish sacred books were suspect. Deists considered Old Testament miracles to be made up and Jewish prophecies to be figments of the imagination. Jewish sacrifices for sin were “pagan.” Jewish law had nothing to do with the simple teachings of Jesus. Therefore Old Testament law was completely unrelated to New Testament gospel. The gods of the two

Testaments were wholly different: the one was a god of wrath and the other a God of love. The Jewish presumption that they were God's "chosen people" was "egotistical" and "arbitrary." Arbitrariness was especially detestable to deists. They thought it was the opposite of "reasonable," and God must be a Being of reason. Everything in classic Christian doctrine that they thought to be "unreasonable"—such as Trinity, blood atonement, and Christ's deity—must have come from the arbitrary and pagan irrationality of the Jews.<sup>18</sup>

The deist attack on Judaism was the modern age's first challenge to what is called the "scandal of particularity." This is the idea that a God who reveals himself only in particular times and particular places is unfair. The story of the Jews as a particular people in a particular land, both of which are said by the Bible to be objects of God's love, was galling to deists.

It was also repulsive to the French philosophes of the eighteenth century, who learned anti-Semitism from the English deists. Voltaire wrote more than once about "the execrable Jews," and one time wrote that a Jew is someone who ought to have inscribed on his forehead "Fit to be hanged."<sup>19</sup>

### Schleiermacher: Barring the Old Testament from Worship

Shortly after the French philosophes were deciding that Israel had nothing to do with Christianity, liberal Christianity's greatest early theologian developed this idea even further. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) concluded that the Old Testament should gradually be eased out of use in Sunday worship. Why? It was fundamentally different, he thought, in message and spirit. The only reason it had been used up to that time was its "historical connexions" to early Christianity. But if Christians were to stop "deluding" themselves, they would realize that the Old Testament lacked the dignity and inspiration of the New Testament.

Therefore no Christian teaching could or should appeal to Hebrew teachings. Christians were wrong to think that the Psalms and the Prophets were similar in outlook to that of the early church.<sup>20</sup>

Notice Schleiermacher's distinction between the Jewish spirit and the Christian spirit. This was light-years from Jesus' declaration that he had come not to abolish but to fulfill Jewish law, and that not one iota (the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet) or "horn" (the smallest stroke of the pen in the Hebrew scrolls) would pass out of the law until it all had been accomplished (Matt. 5:17–18).

It was less than a century between Schleiermacher's death and the rise of the German Christian churches that took the Old Testament out of their Bibles, declaring that the Jewish religion was antithetical to Christianity. The Hebrew Scriptures were no longer read or preached on Sunday morning. The God of Israel was believed to be radically different from the Father of Jesus Christ. It was now clear that the chickens of Schleiermacher's supersessionism had come home to roost.

### **Waking Up after the Holocaust**

Most Christians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not follow in Schleiermacher's radically supersessionist path. They held on to the Old Testament in Sunday worship and continued to believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the Jewish psalmists and prophets to predict the coming of Jesus. But after the Holocaust, Christian scholars asked themselves how in the world Nazism could have arisen in Germany, perhaps the most Christianized country in history.

Scholars who studied Paul suddenly realized that they had missed some very important things in Paul's Letter to the Romans. Paul wrote that "God did not reject his [Jewish] people whom he foreknew" (11:2 AT), and he seemed to look forward to

a future time when they would have a very different relationship with the Church and its gospel. Their “casting away” resulted in the “reconciliation of the world,” so what would their “re-acceptance” mean but “life from the dead” (11:15)? God’s “gifts” to the Jews and their special “calling” had been given “without regret” (11:29). Just as the gentiles had “received mercy” from God through Jewish witness, so too the day was coming when Jews would “receive mercy” through the mercy that God was now giving to the gentiles (11:31).

A leading scholar of Paul concluded in the 1970s that Romans 9–11 forbids us from speaking “of the church as having once and for all taken the place of the Jewish people.”<sup>21</sup> Another prominent scholar in Pauline studies observed that Paul never called the Church the “New Israel” and never referred to the Jews as the “Old Israel.”<sup>22</sup>

Scholars working on Jesus were coming to similar conclusions.<sup>23</sup> Jesus, they were coming to see, was far more Jewish than had previously been imagined. Scot McKnight, for example, argued that Jesus did not come to start a new religion but intended instead to reestablish Israel’s national covenant by restoring its twelve tribes. Jesus thought that through his death all of Israel was being crucified and resurrected. That was the way that God would restore and renew Israel. Gentiles could be saved only by attaching themselves to Israel, since Jesus had proclaimed that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). This was going to be the end of Jewish exile, during which others controlled Jewish land and destiny. Through this national restoration, Israel would come out of exile and control its land once more.<sup>24</sup>

Some historians of early Christianity were solidifying these new perspectives on Paul and Jesus. Robert Wilken, for instance, showed that in the first few centuries after the New Testament, Christians were interpreting the Gospels in similar ways. They noted that the angel had told Mary that God would give Jesus “the throne of David” and that Jesus would rule “over the house

of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:32–33). They also noticed that Jesus spoke of a day to come when the inhabitants of Jerusalem would welcome him. Just after lamenting Jerusalem as a city that kills its prophets, he speaks of the time when “you” in Jerusalem will say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 13:34–35). Wilken says that early Christians interpreted these passages to point toward the “restoration and the establishment of a kingdom in Jerusalem.”<sup>25</sup>

### Supersessionism Still Prevails

So is supersessionism a thing of the past, at least among scholars? One might think that. Most scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, now agree that neither Jesus nor Paul taught that God’s covenant with Israel had ended. They are teaching more and more that God is still in covenant relationship with Israel as a people, even with those who do not accept Jesus as Messiah. But that is only half, as it were, of supersessionism. The other half still prevails. Let me explain.

In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Israel that said two things: (1) I will be your God and you will be my people, and all the nations will be blessed through you; and (2) I will give you a land. As we will see in chapter 4, the land was central to the covenant, so that the people and the land were always connected, even when the people were not living in the land. Before coming to the land, the people lived with the promise of the land, waiting for the day when God would bring them to it. When they were driven off the land into exile, they dreamed of the day when they would return. In the long two thousand years since the destruction of Jerusalem, a remnant has always lived in the land, and Jews around the world prayed for the day when they would control the land once more. People and land were seen by Scripture to be as integral to each other as soul

and body. Just as death temporarily separates soul and body, which await their eventual reunion, separation of the people of Israel from the land of Israel has always been a time of waiting for restoration.

But most Christians do not understand this. They do not see why the land of Israel might be significant to the people of Israel. They think Jesus' universal kingdom must cancel out the importance of any particular land. They mistranslate the beatitude "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the *land*" (Matt. 5:5) by rendering it "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the *earth*." I will explain this distinction in the next chapter.

At the turn of the millennium, more than two hundred Jewish leaders and intellectuals published a statement on Christians and Christianity. In this statement they tried to explain to Christians why the land of Israel is so important to Jews. For one thing, they wrote, the establishment of the State of Israel was the most important event for Jews after the Holocaust. But perhaps even more importantly, the land is central to God's covenant with his people: it is its "physical center."<sup>26</sup> Yet most Christians consider the land to be among the nonessentials in Judaism. Even when they recognize, with the scholars I have just described, that God's covenant with Jews is ongoing, they fail to see the importance of the land in the covenant.

Jewish frustration with Christian indifference to the land was expressed in a letter to the *Christian Century* some years ago. The Jewish letter writer asked how Christians would feel if a Jew asked, "Hey, what's up with the resurrection thing?" He explained that, for Jews, the covenant without land is a covenant without power. Other Jewish leaders have argued that God in the Hebrew Bible often says that he wants the nations of the world to see what he does for Israel. The recent restoration of Jews to their ancestral land, they suggest, demonstrates to the world that the God of Israel keeps his promises to Israel.<sup>27</sup>

After Baruch gently suggested that my view of the New Israel was something I had imposed on the biblical story rather than a concept I had found there, I started reading as much as I could on the subject. This chapter is part of what I found. My view represented the way most Christians have thought about Israel for most of the history of the Christian Church. In other words, the majority view has been supersessionist, believing that the Church has superseded Israel, so that the people of Israel and the land of Israel are no longer important to God.

But there always has been a minority view of Israel in the Church. There always were theologians and ordinary believers who found in their Bibles a different view from the majority supersessionist view. To this minority position—which is actually the biblical position—we now turn.