

Transcript 179

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. In the last episode we discussed what's going on in Israel, whether it's a sign of the end times, and even more broadly, what is God's plan for the Nation of Israel, and why did God choose Israel? So we invite you to watch that episode if you have not already, because it kind of lays the foundation for a lot of what we're going to talk about today. Today, we're going to be talking about what is known as replacement theology or also supersessionism. That's the idea that the church has replaced Israel in God's plan. The view that all the promises to National Israel were essentially revoked when they rejected Christ and now God's attention is solely on the church, which comprised of all Jews and Gentiles who received Christ as savior. But God no longer has a plan for national Israel. We strongly disagree with this viewpoint, known as replacement theology. So we're going to be discussing that. It's applicable to what's going on in Israel today because there's large number of our brothers and sisters in Christ who do not think that national Israel has any significance in God's plans. So that is important as a big impact on how we view what is taking place in Israel today. So joining me today is Jeff the administrator of bibleref.com, and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. Jeff, why don't you start us off with the sort of a quick definition of what exactly is replacement theology?

Jeff Laird

Basically the the way you described it is pretty accurate. It's the idea that the church, meaning the the New Testament Christ focused church, has replaced Israel in God's plan. The idea being that God has removed Israel from some position and in that position has put the church. So you would think of it sort of like, you know, Indiana Jones and the the the movie where he's got the little golden head and he puts the bag of sand on it. It's replacing something. Not necessarily that it's taking precedence or that it's just now more important, but that it's actually replacing Israel. And there's some risks and dangers behind that. A lot of those come out in sort of benign ways. A lot of people who have some level of replacement theology in their thinking are not being necessarily anti Israel or negative towards something, but there's still some concerns that come along with that.

Jeff Laird

Basically, there's this idea that Israel, the Jewish nation, the chosen people, somehow because they didn't do what they were supposed to or they didn't fulfill what they were meant to fulfill, that God decided to say, OK, I'm moving on from you and I'm going to do something different. Some people who hold to this idea don't necessarily think that that was a punishment necessarily. They look at how God promised a new covenant in places like Jeremiah and they just say, well, it was God's plan always to use Israel for a little while and then move on to the church. And we see this reflected in a couple of things that people say and do. Sometimes you'll hear people use promises given to Israel in the Old Testament and they apply them as though they are meant as one to one parallels and promises to Christian believers or to the Christian church. You will have people say things like, well, you know we are Israel now or we are the new Israel and spiritual Israel. And there are some ways when some of those phrases have some use and some value but really what we see in Scripture is that yes, there is a new covenant, and yes, God intends all people, including the nation of Israel, to to follow that new covenant, but that

old covenant is not completely abrogated or destroyed or gotten rid of. God still has plans for Israel and things he wants to do. So anytime we have this sort of sense or this discussion where we talk as though when the Old Testament talks about Israel, that really means the church. And everything that God promised about Israel doesn't apply to Israel anymore, it just applies to the church, that is this replacement theology, which is not actually biblical.

Kevin Stone

Right. And I might I might also add that replacement theology as a term is often considered kind of derogatory and and the the people that hold to that don't usually use that term. They usually use like supersessionism or they'll use fulfillment theology, something that something along those lines. But the end result is the same that in some sense Israel has been replaced by the church. And all the promises that were given to Israel are now being applied to the church. And Jeff, you mentioned the 2 views of replacement theology that go to the the reasons for the replacement. So within replacement theology, there are those that hold to what is sometimes called economic supersessionism. That is Israel's role as the people of God was completed when the Messiah came to Earth 2000 years ago. That God's whole plan for Israel was simply to bring the Christ into the world, and once that happened, Israel's job was done. And so there was there's no sense of Israel being disciplined or nothing punitive happening. But it's simply their job was done, and so God moved on. Israel has fulfilled its its purpose.

Kevin Stone

The other view for the reason for the replacement is what you also mentioned Jeff, and that is punitive supersessionism. That is Israel rejected their Messiah 2000 years ago and as a result of that rejection, God basically said fine, then I'm going to be replacing you with the church. And I'm going to have a new people of God, I'm gonna have a new Israel. And so I'm going to start blessing this, this other group of people instead of you. And so that would be more of a a disciplinary action in that view.

Kevin Stone

Also there there are a couple different views as to the extent of the replacement, again within replacement theology, there are those that believe that there's been a total scrapping of the covenant. That the Abrahamic covenant has been totally done away with. It's just been removed. And the it's been annulled. The the promise that God gave to Abraham has been removed entirely and that Israel's only hope today is to join the church, to be part of the church. Because that's the means of God's blessing today. The other view is that the Abrahamic covenant and the other covenants of the of the Old Testament made to Israel have been reconstituted. They've been dismantled and then reconstructed in favor of the church, which of course includes Jew and Gentile. So the promises that were made to Israel that involved the land and other physical blessings are now spiritual promises that are made to the church and applied to the church. And so there's a spiritualization of all of those particular passages.

Kevin Stone

The problem is that words mean what words mean, and in the places in the Bible where God says Israel, we believe he means Israel. Just for example, read through Romans Chapters 9 through 11. Read those three chapters and every time you come across the word Israel try replacing it with the church. Those chapters just won't make sense. There's no way you can make it make sense if you are replacing Israel with the church. The fact is that the Bible never refers to the church as Israel. Never calls it new Israel.

Never calls it anything like that. So there are some terms that God applies to both Israel and the Church, you know, the people of God and things like that. But the the promise of salvation is completely different from the covenants that God gave to Abraham and other of the Jewish people.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, I like your focus on the promises of God. And to me this is the my biggest struggle with embracing a replacement theology or super sessions and whatever we want to call it is that God specifically promised to Abraham that his descendants, as in his physical descendants, would inherit the land of promise forever. That promise has not been fulfilled. God promised David and the Davidic covenant that one of his descendants would sit on the throne of David forever, that promise has not been fulfilled. And you can go on and on and on. There are many more promises that God has not yet fulfilled through Israel. So to say that the church has permanently taken the spot of Israel in God's plan is to say that God is essentially invalidating his promises. That God is not fulfilling his promises. And then you look in Romans Chapter 9 through 11 and it goes through this, that Paul's whole point and he's talking about salvation and justification and glorification and redemption. And then he takes this little excursus on Israel in chapters 9 through 11. Because if you believe that God has abandoned his promises to Israel, well, what assurance do we have that God is not going to abandon his promises to us? So 9 to 11 is the whole point of no God has not forsaken his people. God still has a plan for Israel. And while God is temporarily grafted to the church in his plan, that does not mean that Israel is permanently ungrafted or that God will not eventually redraft in Israel and refocus his attention on fulfilling his promises to Israel.

Shea Houdmann

So to me, it's the promises of God throughout the Old Testament to the nation of Israel that makes it impossible for me to embrace supersessionism. Yes, right now, God seems to be focusing his attention more on the church than on Israel, but at the same time, God does not have a problem focusing his attention on the church and Israel at the same time. In no sense his God ignoring Israel and has no sense is God not working in and through Israel for the past 2000 years, even though the church has been the primary focus of his attention in terms of fulfilling His plan for the ages. So yeah, the the promises of God for me are the primary reason why I reject supersessionism.

Kevin Stone

Shea, you mentioned the promise to David that he would have a descendant on his throne forever. And that to me, that line of reasoning is really the the foundation for for my rejection of replacement theology. Because every time that the Bible talks about Messiah sitting on David's throne, such as in Luke chapter one and Gabriel's words to Mary. The promise was repeated there that the the son of God would be sitting on David's throne. That does it for me right there, because David's throne was not a Heavenly throne, never was. It was an earthly throne. And so if the Messiah is going to sit on David's throne, then he's going to have to be sitting on a physical object, in a certain location, ruling over a certain geographical region. David's throne was an earthly throne, and so we believe that that promise will be fulfilled, that the Messiah is gonna sit on an earthly throne, the throne of David. David's throne, again, never a heavenly throne. Was always an earthly throne.

Jeff Laird

I do understand why there's a lean towards or an appeal towards replacement theology. And like you said, Kevin, the term is somewhat derogatory. Most people who believe it wouldn't use that phrase, but I can understand why people would maybe have some of those ideas. We talked about the idea that in Jeremiah God promises a new covenant. And there's a verse in Hebrews that is meaningful to me, Hebrews 8:13, where he brings up the writer, brings up the idea of saying when we're talking about a new covenant, God is making the old one obsolete. What's becoming obsolete and growing old is getting ready to vanish away. And in 70 AD, the entire sacrificial and temple system that Judaism, the Old Covenant had basically, was eliminated. So God introduces Christ, the fulfillment of all these things, and then shortly after that, the world, in essence takes away all of the things that Israel was using to cooperate with those. And I can understand a person looking at that and saying, yeah, see that means that this is what God is intending is he wants this to be completely gone and this new thing to come in. But I also think that's a little bit overly simplified because God's not erasing Israel, he's not removing Israel, he's still calling Israel to all the promises and all the things that he's given to them.

Jeff Laird

So for me, I come down in the same place that you guys are. I see a lot of things in prophecy and in end times and you guys know for me with, with the end times it makes your head spin. There's so many different ways to understand things and interpret everything. But I see those things being there and I say it doesn't make sense for those to be promises to the church. It's talking about specific things that God promised to certain tribes and certain lands in certain places. And that to me speaks of God still having a plan still having a purpose for Israel. Maybe most of that is going to come in an end times context, but it's not something that we can take as non Israeli non Jewish believers and say well that's that's not for them anymore, that's just for us.

Kevin Stone

That same passage, Jeff, that you just mentioned in Jeremiah Chapter 31, where God promises to Israel the new covenant, just keep reading in that context. God makes his promises to Israel so sure. Yeah, he's first of all says there's going to be a regathering of Israel, versus 23 and following. There's going to be a new covenant, verse 31. There's gonna be a true knowledge of and fellowship with God is between Israel and God versus 33 and 34. Then in verse 35 we read this. This is what the Lord says. He who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night. Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar? The Lord Almighty is his name. Only if these decrees vanish from my sight, declares the Lord, will Israel ever cease from being a nation before me. So, I ask, is the sun still shining? Is the moon still up there? Then if so, then God's plan for Israel is still remaining. Israel has not ceased being a nation before God.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin of the three of us, you are the most qualified to talk about stuff related to farming, so, oh, this is not even technically a farming question, but last week you discussed the Romans eleven passage, especially how truly there's some verses in there that are probably the most difficult for those who hold to a replacement theology to answer. So for Jeff and I, and also for our listeners, help us to understand what's what is it talking about in terms of the church being grafted and Israel being temporarily removed from the grafting and then eventually re grafted in? How does all of that play into what we're discussing today and talking about replacement theology?

Kevin Stone

Well, grafting is a common practice, and people raising orchards and things like that so that they can use one root system. They can put like a stem on there that's going to produce better fruit, more plentiful apples or whatever. And so they will make a cut. They'll they'll replace the the the branch or the stem from the original tree with with another whatever they want on there, and then they'll be producing their their crop that way. And so in Romans 11, Paul uses that particular practice. It says that Israel is the the natural tree. It's the natural branch, and God has pruned that out. He's he's cut that out and put in a wild branch which is representation of the the Gentiles or the the church. And so we have become partakers of some of the the blessings that God had been given to Israel. But God then says in the same passage, he he he warns that wild branch that's been grafted in not to get proud, not to start thinking that they were all that, because God is able to graft in again the original branch, the natural branch that he had grafted out. So the whole picture is that the setting aside of God's promise to Israel concerning the Kingdom has been temporarily set aside. But it has. But those promises are going to come back.

Kevin Stone

So just like when Israel was coming up to the promised land, they were being led by Moses to the promised land. They got all the way to the edge of it, and they were offered the land. Here it is. It's yours for the taking. And Israel rejected the offer. And so God said, OK, you're going to wander for 40 years, but then the offer still stands. You will be eventually brought into the promised land. And I think in the same way we see the offer of the Kingdom being made to national Israel by the Messiah, the Lord Jesus. They rejected that offer by putting the Messiah on the cross. That was a rejection. He came into his own and his own received him not, John one says. And so the offer still stands, but it has been delayed. Right now there's a wandering in the wilderness, but eventually God will be bringing Israel to the place where he's always designed them to be. That place of of fellowship with him and knowledge of him. And we have yet to see that fulfilled.

Shea Houdmann

With this next thing I want to be extremely careful with my wording. In the past, I mean, I think Jeff mentioned or Kevin mentioned the the punitive supersessionism concept that God punished Israel by rejecting all of his previous promises and covenants. I'm not saying that replacement theology or fulfillment theology or whatever we call it leads to anti-Semitism but at the same time that has been a pattern that has occurred repeatedly throughout church history. Those who believe that God has completely rejected Israel, that Israel has no place to Jews. Descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have no special connection to God's plan at all. That has often led to an anti-Semitism. You see it somewhat in the Crusades. You see it in various parts of church history. That when you fail to see that got us a special plan for Israel, and his promises will one day be fulfilled through national Israel. It can lead to hostility towards the Jews. It can lead to anger at them in the sense of you rejected the the Messiah, sort of like a a bitterness or a even like a searching for the right word here, but just a hostility towards him in the sense of you rejected your Messiah, therefore God has rejected you. Therefore I reject you, that sort of attitude. And again, I'm not saying that everyone who believes in Supersessionism holds that. That is absolutely not true. But I'm saying in church history that has been a pattern that has occurred over and over again that replacement theology rejecting the idea that God will still fulfill his promises to Israel sometimes leads to anti-Semitism and hostility towards Jews. Which is absolutely unbiblical in every sense of the word.

Jeff Laird

Maybe one way to think of it would be to say that if a person is inclined to anti-Semitism, they could lean towards replacement theology as a way of helping to justify that attitude. Because you're right, there's there's a lot of ways in which that idea of replacement theology does not necessarily mean that you think there's something wrong with Jewish persons. You're just believing that that's no longer the primary means by which God does this, that or the other. So one of the things that I see in my experience, I think, is is sort of the flip side of that where it it can have a tendency to make people expect too much from the Bible or God beyond what he's actually given or promised. So if you believe that we as the church now are Israel, then that means that when you read messages to Israel, promises to Israel, prophecies about Israel, you're trying to read those in the context of that being a promise to the church. And we, we talk about this very often at Got Questions, is the idea that there's a lot of things in Scripture where there are promises, there are guarantees made that are made to specific persons or people and those are real promises. God makes those promises, he will keep them. But just because he makes a promise to somebody in the Bible doesn't mean that he promises that to everybody who reads the Bible. And we can still get principles out of those. But when we read things like I know the plans that I have for you in Jeremiah, or we read something like when my people who are called by my name pray to heal their land. Those are not promises given to the church. God is not saying that I have a positive plan and a happy plan for the life of every believer. He's not saying as long as Christians pray, then I will make their government the way they want it to be. There's still principles behind those. We can still learn to say yes. God knows what's happening. God is in control. God is in charge. Prayer is meaningful. Prayer works. But that replacement theology mode can sometimes make us look at those things and without necessarily knowing anything about the theology of the replacement theology, we start assuming that things are meant for Israel are meant for us, and then that leads to all sorts of confusions, misinterpretations and other problems.

Kevin Stone

I can almost understand people having holding some type of replacement theology in the early part of the 20th century because after all, there was no nation of Israel at that time. In fact, Israel had not been a nation since really the time of the Babylonian invasion. They had not been an autonomous independent state since the fall of Jerusalem at when Babylon took over. But then 1948 happened and Israel became an independent state again for the first time in thousands of years. And I think 1948 is a game changer. And it certainly in in my mind, has everything to do with the fulfillment of prophecy. We have the the dry bones prophecy in in Ezekiel and where where God says God shows Ezekiel sorry the this valley of dry Bones says. Can these bones live? Ezekiel says well, Lord, you know. And then God brings together, there's this rattling sound. God brings together all these bones. Covers them with with sinew and muscle and flesh. But they're not living. So Ezekiel sees this, this valley of dead bodies now. Then God says, can these bodies live? Ezekiel says, Lord, you know. And then God sends a wind and these bodies are filled with breath, and they stand up a great army. And God's point was that this is what he was going to do with Israel as he revives the nation of Israel. And personally I believe that 1948 was the fulfillment of the first stage of Ezekiel's vision that the the dry bones came together against all odds. Very miraculously, they came back together and were covered with skin and all of that, but not living yet, they don't have the breadth of God yet. They are not in the at the place of receiving Christ. They don't recognize their Messiah. They are still spiritually dead, but they're there and they are ready for the next step in Ezekiel's vision to be fulfilled.

Shea Houdmann

Kevin, that's an excellent point in that passage is is powerful and how it describes people who are completely dead coming back to life. That's definitely illustrative of what happened in Israel. And one of the things that I find most fascinating, Kevin, how you said that you could understand how someone could be believe in replacement theology prior to 1948. Well, what fascinates me is that to the early dispensationalists, or even the when premillennialism started to be revived, was it like the 1800s? Some of the in the early 1800s, so we're talking hundred, 150 years before Israel became a nation again. Yet you had people who were studying Bible prophecy, interpreting it, literally coming to the conclusion, it's like at some point there has to be a nation of Israel again. And they were were mocked, they were ridiculed. You're crazy. There hasn't been a nation of Israel and nearly 2000 years. And yet 1948 happened, so here's a group of people who are trying to interpret Bible prophecy literally, coming to the conclusion that there has to be a nation of Israel in the land of Israel for God's promises to be fulfilled 150 years before it happened. Imagine their delight if they had actually seen it happen. So now here we're living, living 70 years, 70 plus years after it happened, and it's almost easier for us to reject replacement theology because we we can see the nation of Israel as a nation again. Imagine the early dispensationalists who were making these predictions, interpreting Bible prophecy literally, when there's absolutely no evidence, no, not even the inkling that Israel was going to become a nation again. And to me that's powerful, and that points to, yeah, the Bible actually does teach us if you interpret eschatology literally, there is going to be a nation of Israel that fulfills God's promises.

Jeff Laird

I think it's also interesting that that's another one of those examples of how when God provides a prophecy, there's there's a certain level in which the the the fulfillment is its own interpretation in a little bit of a way. That God tells us what's going to happen, he gives us prophecy, he gives us prediction. And there's times where we completely misunderstand what that means, but that doesn't change the truth of prophecy. You know, famously, all of Jesus's apostles, his closest group of followers, seemed like they were convinced that he was going to inaugurate this Kingdom of the Messiah right then and there. Well, they were incorrect. That's not exactly what the prophecy was bringing up. There were things that they misunderstood. So even today we look at things that happened in Israel in the Middle East, and I have to remind myself that there's a lot of different interpretations for what that means, but I agree that sometimes when you see this happen, I can imagine people who had a sort of a more replacement theology basis thinking, OK, there's going to have to be a nation of Israel someday, but that's going to be right at the end. You know, there won't be any Israel until the very, very, very end times and then all of a sudden, now there's a nation of Israel. So God is sort of constantly forcing us to change the way we interpret some of the things that he tells us about the end. What's always true is that what he said is gonna happen, happens. And what's what's changing is whether or not we can understand it.

Jeff Laird

Now that's not to say that everything we're seeing right now for all I know 10, 15, 20 years from now we'll look back at a conversation like this and say wow, look at how much things have changed. You know, maybe we need to, you know, reevaluate again exactly what some of these things mean. But we can trust that what is happening is in God's control. He knows that. He gets it. And all the things that we're saying about replacement theology come down to very important biblical concepts. So we're not basing our view of rejecting replacement theology just on one event. So 1948 is a really cool fulfillment

of prophecy. But in and of itself, it's not the reason that we would look at replacement theology and say that we don't think it's accurate. So it's why I appreciate what you're saying about how people were looking at this quite a while ago and saying no, that doesn't seem to make sense. I think God really, truly does still have a plan for Israel because of what Scripture says.

Shea Houdmann

Excellent point, Jeff and Kevin, thanks you for a great conversation about this. It was very, very relevant right now, people wondering what's happening in Israel. Is it a sign of the end times? But also some people in questioning why does it even matter? Israel is not part of God's plan at all. So hope our conversation today on what is replacement theology also known as supersessionism. So for you to understanding what's going to this and why we gotquestions.org reject supersessionism and replacement theology, whatever you call it, and believe that God still has a plan for national Israel. And he will fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, David,so forth. Literally.

Shea Houdmann

So hope our conversation has been encouraging, enlightening to you or encouraging to you. Always keep studying God's word and keep interpreting it literally. Keep them praying for the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and how you understand Scripture, especially regarding something as controversial as eschatology. This has been the Got Questions podcast on what is replacement theology. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.